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Achebe has shown in his novel *Things Fall Apart* that we tread on dangerous ground when we label whole societies as "primitive" or "uncivilized." The argument in his critique of *Heart of Darkness* seeks, among other things, to further that line of thought. This he has done quite convincingly. What Achebe has not done in his critique, however, is to argue convincingly that Conrad's attitude toward the "primitive" people he describes in his novel makes it impossible for us to consider the novel "great." The reason for this, in my view, is that Achebe fails to see in Conrad's novel the conflicts and ambiguities that make it an exceptional work of art. Achebe sees elements of racism, which are indeed there, but he seems oblivious to the novel's ambivalence toward both race and Western civilization nesting within the narrator's contempt for the exploitation and greed that he sees as endemic to Europe. In this regard, two things need to be made clear: (1) The novel's racism is not as prevalent as Achebe maintains, and it is certainly not strong enough to flaw the novel as a work of art, and (2) "greatness" in art can be present in spite of elements of racism as long as there are other mitigating factors that make alternative interpretations possible and reasonable. Let us consider each of these points in turn.

I shall begin by listing the full range of objections Achebe raises to show that Conrad is a racist and cannot *therefore* have written a great novel:

1. Conrad's [Marlow's] frequent use of the term "nigger."
2. Conrad's [that is the man's] "problem with niggers" as deduced from his own account of his first encounter with a black man (320).
3. Conrad's [Marlow's] descriptions of Africans as "just limbs or rolling eyes" and his unwillingness to let them speak.
4. Conrad's [Marlow's] treatment of the "Amazon" whom Achebe sees as "a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman with whom the story will end (317)."
5. Conrad's [Marlow's] description of the fireman.
6. Kurtz's apparent mastery over the natives "thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind (319)."
7. Finally, what Achebe perceives as "the dehumanization [of Africans] which depersonalizes a portion of the human race (319)."

Achebe is certainly correct in saying that Conrad uses the term "nigger" with reckless abandon. At least he is correct in saying that Marlow does so: Achebe never really differentiates between the author and his protagonist. The question is whether or not Marlow's language signifies anything of importance to Achebe's overall argument. I think not, because nothing whatever follows about either Conrad or Conrad's novel from the fact that his protagonist uses an offensive term in referring to the natives of the Congo.

To begin with, Marlow's usage of the term "nigger" may not imply that Marlow himself considers the term demeaning or insulting. One suspects

ACHEBE ON CONRAD: RACISM AND GREATNESS IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Chinua Achebe, whose vantage point puts him much closer to the issue than most critics, is enraged by the fact that Joseph Conrad is a "bloody racist" and concludes, as a result, that *Heart of Darkness* cannot be regarded as a great work of art. Achebe makes his claim quite clear:

... the question is whether a novel which celebrates [the dehumanization of Africa and Africans], which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. ... 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 into question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings.¹

In this paper I will submit Achebe's conclusion to close scrutiny, reject it, and in the process suggest a workable characterization of what it is that comprises greatness in literature and why it is that *Heart of Darkness* is a great work of art. Despite the long interval between the time of the first appearance of Achebe's libel against Conrad and the present, it seems especially appropriate to revisit the issue once again. To begin with, Achebe's critique of Conrad's novel has not been adequately addressed. Furthermore, in the intervening years Achebe's essay is a token of a type that is becoming increasingly popular in poststructuralist criticism. By some, the essay has come to be regarded as exemplary; it is widely anthologized; and it is required reading on many college campuses.² Accordingly, it seems appropriate to revisit the essay and reflect on it deeply in the light shed upon it by the work whose greatness it questions. As an example of a type of criticism that seeks to reduce the stature of works out of a consideration of charges leveled against their creators, it behooves us to redirect attention to the works themselves and ask the question whether this sort of criticism is really relevant.

he uses the term as he might any other, since the word certainly didn't elicit the same emotional charge in the late nineteenth century as it does today. Even if we could make the label "racist" stick to Marlow, however, it would not allow us to infer anything whatever about Conrad or attribute the term "racist" to Conrad's novel. Atlas working with Hercules could not move the argument from the premise that Marlow is a racist to the conclusion that either Conrad or Conrad's novel is racist: the gulf is too wide. It is quite possible, for example, that Conrad is holding Marlow's racism up to ridicule—just as he seems to be undermining the European preference for the color white in a number of interesting ways in the novel.³ In any event, Marlow's racism is not necessarily Conrad's. Nor need it flaw the novel as a whole. We need to turn to Achebe's other arguments.

It might be said in connection with several of Achebe's points that Conrad was simply describing what he saw and incorporating his own experience into the novel, which we know contains biographical elements. In this regard, his descriptions of the native people he saw are not intentionally denigrating: they are intended to be descriptions of people and events he saw. Despite the fact that the lenses he looks through had been ground in Europe by white craftsmen, in the novel the writer merely describes what he saw. The racist elements in this case would be, at best, inadvertent, which is to say present but hardly a "celebration" of the dehumanization of Africa.

To this argument Achebe responds that he "will not trust the evidence even of a man's very eyes when I suspect them to be as jaundiced as Conrad's (322)." Presumably, it is Conrad's "problem with niggers," as mentioned above, that Achebe has in mind here. Unfortunately, the argument is a *non sequitur*, because whatever Conrad's personal problems might be, his protagonist is not necessarily seeing the world through Conrad's eyes. The issue is whether or not Marlow is a racist, and even if this is the case (and it may be so) it might pay to listen to what he has to say: even the most jaundiced eye occasionally sees things the rest of us have overlooked.

But, more to our present point, it will not do to argue, as Achebe does, that Conrad ignores features of Africa that would conflict with the image he is determined to present. This is doubtlessly the case, but what is central to the novel is not what Conrad does not see, but what he does see and subsequently incorporates into his novel. We must bear in mind that Conrad is describing a part of Marlow's experience of the Congo. But it is just that, it is *part* of that experience, and it is Marlow's experience. I shall return to this point below.

Achebe objects to Conrad's "bestowal of human expression to [Kurtz's Intended] and the withholding of it from [Kurtz's African mistress]" (317). In fact, Achebe objects to the fact that the natives who surround Charlie Marlow are silent or speak only briefly in pidgin-English. But this might be easily explained by the fact that conversation with "the Amazon" (to use

Achebe's term) is impossible under the circumstances and, generally, Marlow does not speak the native language and cannot possibly engage in conversation with these people. In passing I would comment that expression may not be such a great thing in this novel: much of what the white people who surround Marlow have to say reveals them to be narrow, stupid, greedy, ambitious, and bigoted—and this goes for Marlow himself at times. In any event, language does *not* comprise the whole of "expression," and what the "Amazon" does not say is wonderfully eloquent. The vision of the "barbarous and superb woman [who] did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river" (69) is much more engaging than Conrad's sketchy description of Kurtz's frail and self-deluded fiancée at the end of the novel.¹⁰ Whether or not this description of Kurtz's "Intended" is strictly correct, it is certainly possible for the woman to be viewed in this light—and critics have done so—and the contrast between this woman and Kurtz's "Amazon" can easily be reversed in favor of the black woman, who is magnificent. This possible reversal is essential to the novel as we shall see. But there are other areas of uncertainty in the novel that result, one suspects, from Conrad's quite genuine revulsion over what he found once he actually visited the Congo and experienced first hand "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration."¹⁴

Achebe unfairly dismisses Conrad's revulsion as expressed through his narrator as "bleeding heart sentiments," but there are good grounds for believing that they are the real thing. Not only do we have Conrad's comments quoted above but there are numerous passages in the book that bear out Marlow's initial claim that "The conquest of the earth, which means mostly the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much (7)."¹⁵

Consider, further, the unfavorable aspect things European convey. Marlow arrives in the Congo to find upturned and rusting machinery in the midst of a verdant wilderness into which black people crawl to lick their wounds and escape their white "masters" who beat them for no reason. Marlow himself is no great shakes, self-absorbed and a bit smug; and neither are the faceless "pilgrims" who cluster, mutter, and scheme among themselves. These same people later fire their rifles stupidly into the brush to scare off the natives who attack the boat and then boast of their courage in the face of danger. But more ridiculous still are the chief accountant with his "collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair," with his books in apple-pie order, appearing for all the world "like a hairdresser's dummy;" the brick-maker who hadn't made any bricks for a year; the agent whom Marlow describes as a "papier-mache Mephistopheles"; and Kurtz's disciple, the "harlequin" who is every bit the fool, dashing off into the bush with a book on seamanship in one

pocket of his patchwork coat and cartridges in the other, despite the fact that he has neither boat nor weapon! The characters who people this book are not admirable folk—except for the cannibals, to whom I shall return in a moment.

We must first consider Achebe's point that Africa is being exploited to form a "prop for the breakup of one petty European mind." Surely, this is an over-simplification. What Conrad is doing is to use a portion of Africa, to wit, that portion that is relatively undeveloped and in the process of being raped by greedy Europeans, to provide a backdrop against which we can witness Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness. In that journey we discover Marlow's essential likeness to the corrupted Kurtz who represents the "best" that Europe can produce and who has become more savage than the most savage of the black people he manages, somehow, to control. But Kurtz's ability to lord over these people is no comment on their gullibility or simplicity. Kurtz has a hold over everyone, apparently, even some he has not met, such as Marlow. What happens to Kurtz in Africa is less a comment on the Africans than it is on the faintness of the line that separates the primitive people from the highly civilized and much touted European Kurtz whose "mother [let us recall] was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz (50)." It is simply not clear, from the novel, just who is "superior" to whom.

This same ambivalence, not only toward civilization but also toward race, shows itself in Marlow's discussions about the fireman. Achebe quotes Marlow at length, and I shall follow suit:

... between whiles I had to look at the savage who was the 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 (37).

Clearly there are racist slurs in this description of the fireman who looks "like a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on hind legs . . ." But note that this sentence is immediately followed by the sentence "A few months of training had done for that really fine chap," a comment that reflects admiration for a man who learned quickly. Later, we find another interesting attitudinal conflict when Marlow notes that "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." The fireman is like a walking dog, yet he is a "really fine chap." Then, this "savage" who was enthralled by the engine is "hard at work" and "full of improving knowledge." We know Conrad identified work and

knowledge, along with "restraint," as the positive elements of civilization, and yet we find them exhibited in the behavior of the fireman. The ideas juxtaposed in this manner suggest a struggle within the novelist's own mind. These struggles are worked over by the poetic imagination and surface in mixed messages and conflicting images.

These tensions and conflicts are central to the novel and can be found throughout: racist elements cluster beside elements of admiration, approval and, possibly, even affection. But Achebe does not see these latter elements. He is fixed on the racist elements and he therefore misses the conflicts that are fundamental to the novel. This can be shown even more clearly in light of Achebe's comments about the death of the helmsman. Achebe quotes Marlow, in part, as follows: "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 (52)."

Achebe admits that Marlow feels a "distant kinship" for the black man, but he puts backspin on this admission by saying that Marlow resents the fact that the black man "lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable." This is simply not clear from the passage, especially in light of the fact that Marlow considers that moment "supreme." There are many reasons why a memory cannot be erased, but they do not, normally, include the fact that they are "intolerable" (319). On the contrary, intolerable memories are erased as quickly as possible, or buried deep within the subconscious mind.

It is interesting in this regard that in selecting this portion of Marlow's comment, Achebe ignores several sentences that precede it. The context of these remarks is revealing. In the novel Marlow begins by telling his listeners

I missed my late helmsman awfully—I missed him while his body was still lying in the pilot house. . . . Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I was worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken (52).

These comments, again, send mixed messages. The man has "deficiencies" and yet Marlow "worried" about the man with whom he felt "a subtle bond."

Further evidence of what seems to be selective reading on Achebe's part comes earlier in his article when he makes a rather blatant change in the text. According to Achebe, Marlow says, "What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours. Ugly (316)." In fact, what Marlow says is ". . . what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with the wild and passionate uproar. Ugly." Achebe repeats his misquotation later in his essay. The change in language is significant, especially in view of the fact that Conrad

was so careful in his choice of words. In Achebe's version the idea of remote kinship is missing, despite the fact that it is central to the novel's purpose.

Achebe's strongest argument, however, is his insistence that Conrad's "bloody racism" results in a novel that cannot be considered "great" because it "sets people against people," and because "poetry should be on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement (320)." Achebe supports this contention with Marlow's description of the incident with the fireman. But, as we have seen, that incident is anything but one-sided. Marlow's feelings toward the fireman exhibit racist antipathy alongside a gradual awareness of a common human bond—"a claim of distant kinship." But this is not enough for Achebe who wants Conrad to step forward and declare himself on the side of the brotherhood of humankind. This declaration, however, would jettison the aesthetic elements that make the novel a work of art and reduce the novel to a pamphlet. If such a reduction were possible, and I would insist it is not, then the novel would, indeed, fail as a work of art—not because we do or do not agree with its message, but because it would be propaganda. Such a reduction can only occur, however, if the reader mistakes part for whole. Achebe does precisely this: he reads through pre-ground lenses that eliminate alternative ways of seeing and filter out unwanted elements of ambiguity that are essential to the novel as a work of art.

In this regard, one wonders why Achebe seems to miss Marlow's attitude toward the cannibals. Achebe barely mentions them and yet they form a most interesting contrast to the ridiculous Europeans, and Marlow's attitude toward them weakens Achebe's implicit charge that the novel is "racist." Their very silence is a strength in the midst of the silly babble spoken by the Europeans. Furthermore, Marlow admires their "restraint," especially when he tosses the body of the dead helmsman overboard. These men haven't eaten solid food for weeks. Marlow describes his own reaction at some length:

Yes, I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honor? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thoughts, its sombre and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly . . . Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling among the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me . . . (72).

What we find here is a grudging admiration on Marlow's part mixed inextricably with the contempt reflected in the image involving the hyena prowling among corpses. The thing to note, however, is precisely the mixture of these elements. This is evidence of the poetic imagination at work, and of the conflict within the poet's mind that I alluded to above. After

all, the cannibals show the very quality that Kurtz (even Kurtz!; see 52, 58) fails to exhibit. I noted earlier that one thing Marlow admires about civilization is its promotion of restraint. Self-restraint, coupled with enlightenment, is essential to balance the greed and ugliness that surround him. As Marlow puts it, "What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense, but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea. . . ." (7). And yet, in the end, it is a group of cannibals who exhibit restraint. There is no explanation for it. It makes no sense to him: it challenges all his preconceptions. But there it was "facing" Marlow stubbornly. Such ambivalence and uncertainty about civilization and about racial "superiority/inferiority" weakens Achebe's case against Conrad's novel and leads me to insist that it is, indeed, a great piece of literature.

I have touched on this point above. But it requires extended argument, because Achebe's claim, if allowed, has serious consequences for both aesthetics and literary criticism. Achebe would have us criticize art using moral precepts. However, while I do not question Achebe's moral principles and might also prefer that all written works foster those principles, the issue of whether or not Conrad's novel can be considered "great" is not a moral question; it is a question of aesthetics. This is not to say that content is irrelevant, but that it comprises only a part of the whole. In the end, the question is not one of the message and whether or not we approve of it; the question is whether the work forms a substantial whole, whether it succeeds as a work of art.

We have it on good authority that all art aspires to the condition of music. In this regard, the musicologist Leonard Meyer has told us that greatness in music is a function of what he calls "information conveyed economically."⁶ Now since music is almost totally devoid of subject matter—with the possible exception of "programmatic" music—it is clear that "information" does not refer to what the music is about. Rather, Meyer is referring to the music's ability to surprise and delight, to that which is new and unexpected, that which exhibits originality and engages our imagination. Great music exhibits superb "syntactical organization" coupled with a great many "improbabilities" so that our response is one of surprise and delight.⁷

The parallel between music and literature is not exact; nonetheless, it is informative. We reduce the novel to its subject matter at the risk of ignoring its status as a work of art. As art it is full of meanings that often conflict with one another, some more apparent than others. Like the wrathful in Dante's *Inferno*, meanings appear and disappear in the river of blood and are hard to make out in the dim light of ambiguity. This ambiguity is the strength of the work of art: it sets it apart as a work of the human imagination. Because of this ineluctable ambiguity, the novel does not have a "message"; it has many. As a result it yields multiple interpretations and invites repeated

reading. Achebe obviously doesn't understand this when he insists, as we saw above, that "poetry should be on the side of man's deliverance and not his enslavement." Qua poetry, the novel does not take sides, it remains neutral and requires that its readers grapple with complex issues as they confront real people in real time. Furthermore, a good work of art is also well-crafted, stylistically grand, and rich in texture, vocabulary and symbolism. Its language reveals a complex conceptual and imaginative framework together with high levels of emotional and ideational conflict.

A great novel is great, then, because it achieves an exceptionally high level of expression as a work of art. Thus, when we consider it as a work of art we must consider it in its totality, as subject matter informed by the creative artist into a new substantial whole. The sensitive reader engages the work fully, with imagination, emotion and thought, as an object of *aesthesis*. Reducing it to either form or content by focusing exclusively on the manner in which it was written or its subject matter, in whole or in part, is to treat it as something other than itself.

To be sure, there are limits to the number of stylistic flaws that can be permitted if the work is to be considered great. Also, the level of objectionable subject matter can be high enough to offend even the most tolerant reader. In either case it is not possible to engage the work aesthetically and the work is therefore flawed as a work of art. A poorly written novel does not reveal any of the novelist's meanings; on the other hand, if the subject matter is simply passed along to the reader without being informed by the novelist in the creative process, it will not engage the reader's imagination. In neither case is it art. If, further, the subject matter is such that it is truly offensive, that is, it cannot *possibly* be engaged aesthetically, the work will fail as art. The question can only be settled by a jury of trained, sensitive readers and must focus on evidence within the novel—bearing in mind how difficult it is to separate that which elicits a response from the response itself. It is difficult to say, as a general rule, that morally unacceptable content (such as racism) can never disable a potentially great work of art, because of the many variables acknowledged here. The issue must be raised case by case. One thinks of the flagrant sexism in the *Iliad* and in many of Shakespeare's plays, the anti-semitism in many of Dostoevsky's novels, and the misogyny in the plays of Euripedes, but these works stand by virtue of their poetic hold on the reader's imagination.

This is not to say that questions of style and objections to subject matter are not germane to criticism. To be sure they are. But a novel can achieve greatness despite stylistic flaws or morally objectionable subject matter. Even one of the spokespersons of the New Left critics has noted in this regard that

... all evaluation—including a delight in Eliot's poetry despite his reactionary politics, or a love of Zora Neale Hurston's novels despite her Republican party affiliations—is

inseparable from, *though not identical or reducible to*, social structural analyses, moral and political judgments, and the workings of a curious critical consciousness.⁸

In an extreme case, a novel that depicts graphic violence, sexism, racism, pornography, or incorporates sensationalistic effects for their own sake will fail as a work of art. Indeed, it is not art at all, it is mere document. Novels that do not merely depict but actually foster or promote hatred or violence between or among peoples—regardless of how well they are written—cannot be viewed as great because they are propaganda, not art. This is precisely Achebe's argument against *Heart of Darkness*, of course. But, if I am correct, this is not what is happening in Conrad's novel. Achebe's problem is his own and cannot be laid at the feet of Joseph Conrad.

Monroe Beardsley has said of a work of art that it is created for the purpose of generating an aesthetic response in the spectator.⁹ What Beardsley means is that works of art are *supposed* to be viewed by attentive spectators as works of art, not as decorations for the parlor, covering cracks in the plaster, background noise, or ballroom dancing; nor are they designed to convert the spectator to the artist's point of view. Thus is *Heart of Darkness* a great piece of literature, because of the novel's inherent ambiguities and the textual evidence (which is all we have to go on) that the author's intention was to generate in his readers not hatred toward black people, but, rather, involvement in a work of art. This we can infer from the complex structure and innovative stylistic devices Conrad employs in his novels, all of which demand an effort of imagination from the reader. His writing has been said to reflect a "conscientious manipulation of innovative method," which at times is dangerously close to becoming an end in itself.¹⁰ In *Heart of Darkness* the result is an impressionistic work that reflects the novelist's lack of clarity about whether civilization is such a good thing or whether the white man is superior to the black man.

In the end this book does not foster any particular message, racist or otherwise. Most assuredly it does not "call into question" the "very humanity of black people." Its descriptions of the natives are conflicting, at times favorable and at times stereotypical; it is written not to arouse hatred or suspicion between the races, but, rather, to hold the reader's attention and, perhaps, to unsettle his or her convictions and prejudices. As a work of art it requires full reader attention and imaginative involvement and effects a panoply of emotions both strong and weak, positive and negative. Clearly, Conrad, the novelist, wanted his readers to enter a world of his making, a world filled with uncertainties, and to make those uncertainties his or her own. Bits and pieces of what Conrad said are much too thickly enmeshed in the manner of their saying to be yanked out and treated on their own: too much is left behind in the process. In his criticism of this novel Achebe has reached into the patient's body, removed a vital organ, raised it in triumph, and shouted, "behold, the patient is dead!" It will not do.

Achebe may indeed be correct in saying that Joseph Conrad was a "bloody racist." But whether or not it is true—and we cannot really say—it is irrelevant to the question of whether or not he produced a great piece of literature. It is certainly the case that Marlow's narrative reflects racist attitudes—his own, his culture's and possibly even Conrad's. It is quite possible that Joseph Conrad was a racist and it is also possible that he intended to produce a racist novel. None of this is clear. What is clear, however, is that if Conrad's intention was to produce a racist novel he failed, and it is his failure together with his exceptional gifts as a writer that marks the novel as "great."

NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa," in *Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art and Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 319 and 321, hereafter cited in the text. In a later version of this paper—reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Doubleday, 1989)—Achebe refers to Conrad as a "thoroughgoing" racist.
2. See, for example, Gerald Graff's extensive discussion of Achebe's criticism of Conrad's novel and his recommendation that the critique be read along with the novel. In *Beyond The Culture Wars* (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1992), especially pp. 26-33. Note also that Achebe's essay is included in the latest edition of the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*.
3. Stewart Wilcox, "Conrad's 'Complicated Presentations' of Symbolic Imagery," in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1971), p. 191. Wilcox has convincingly shown that Marlow's repeated references to Brussels as a "white sepulchre" has its sources in Matthew, XXIII, 27-28 where Christ is venting his anger at the Pharisees who "... are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." As Wilcox notes, "In the strongest language he ever used, Christ reproved [the Christians] for the false righteousness that covered their inward wickedness." Not only is Brussels a "white sepulchre," but the ivory is gleamingly white, as are the skulls that adorn Kurtz's fence posts. In the novel, to be sure, the hypocrisy of the Europeans is readily apparent and the simplistic white = good, black = evil dichotomy is knocked off its foundations. Subsequent references to *Heart of Darkness* appear in the text.
4. From "Geography and Some Explorers," quoted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, p. 118.
5. Note also Marlow's criticism of "the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern, ... their talk, ... their government, ... their show of work" (25). "Their" refers to the Europeans.
6. Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, The Arts, and Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 37.
7. Meyer, p. 36.
8. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 24. Italics added.
9. Monroe Beardsley, "What Is Art?" in *What Is Art?* (ed) Hugh M. Currier, (New York: Haven Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 15-30.
10. Marvin Mudock, "The Originality of Joseph Conrad," reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*, p. 185.

PROMISES, LIES, AND ETHICAL AGENCY IN *UNDER WESTERN EYES*

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Martha Nussbaum, Tobin Siebers, Robert Coles, Richard Eldridge, and Wayne Booth, among others, have revitalized the field of ethics and literature by investigating how the study of narrative can uniquely enrich our understanding and teaching of ethical concepts.¹ Nussbaum has gone so far as to claim that literature is a form of moral philosophy. An Aristotelian who takes as her starting point the idea that ethics is the desire to define a good life for a human being, Nussbaum values novels as "texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice If our moral lives are 'stories' in which mystery and risk play a central and a valuable role, then it may well seem that the 'intelligent report' of those lives requires the abilities and techniques of the teller of stories."² The formal, generalizing, unemotional style traditionally adopted by moral philosophy often fails to do justice to the richness and particularity of our lives. A moral philosopher herself, though one whose writings cross disciplinary boundaries, Nussbaum does not, however, reject the philosophical for the literary, but instead seeks to combine them. Two points central to her work have informed my own thinking about Conrad's novels: first, contemporary ethical theory is as important as literary theory for those of us studying fiction; and second, narratives, through their structure, style, dialogue, and emphasis on character and choice, enact a unique form of ethical inquiry for readers attentive to their particularity. This article tests these assumptions through a discussion of one of Conrad's most ethically problematic novels.

Under Western Eyes (1911) frustrates efforts to locate its moral center because one of the novel's most insistent themes—that language itself is suspect—denies readers the comfort of a clearly communicated moral meaning. Lisa Rado represents an influential group of critics of the novel when she concludes that "if there is any moral to this tale, it is that it is dangerous to look for one."³ However, recent arguments about Conrad's linguistic pessimism actually benefit an ethical study of *Under Western Eyes*