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“His Sympathies Were
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and the Discourse
of National Character

PERICLES LEWIS

THE Englishman who tells the story of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and the four who listen to it, do not consider it a particularly English story. The primary narrator does not repeat for it what he has already said in “Youth” of another of Marlow's tales: “This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate.”¹ The action of *Heart of Darkness* takes place in “the centre of a continent”—Africa—and its main actors are employees of a European company, “a Continental concern.”² Marlow comments that “all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (p. 50), the novel's central figure, and most later critics have followed Marlow's lead in considering Kurtz's story one of European depravities, with little special reference to England. Chinua Achebe has criticized Conrad's vision of “Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recog-

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¹ Joseph Conrad, “Youth,” in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1924), p. 3.

² *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism, Third Edition*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 16, 12. All further references are to this edition.

nizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril"; while C. P. Sarvan, from the opposing camp, suggests that Conrad condemns the "representative[s] of civilized Europe" in Africa.³

Yet England has a special role to play in this story about the relations between Europe and Africa. Edward W. Said has suggested that Conrad's "two visions" allowed him to castigate "Belgian rapacity" while finding in "British rationality" the potential for a redemption of the imperialist project.⁴ Eloise Knapp Hay, however, argues that "it seems the major burden of the story to reveal what Marlow has failed to see—that England is in no way exempt" from responsibility for imperialist outrages.⁵ Yet Conrad's attitude toward English imperialism is more complex than either Said or Hay has suggested. England symbolizes both the ideal of efficient, liberal imperialism worshipped by Kurtz's "gang of virtue" (p. 28) and the sense of common purpose shared by the friends aboard the *Nellie*. The brooding gloom of Africa hovers over England too, and it is for this reason that the novel has become one of the most famous

³ Achebe, "An Image of Africa," *Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), 788; and Sarvan, "Racism and the *Heart of Darkness*," *International Fiction Review*, 7 (1980), 8.

⁴ See *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. 25, 69. In this work Said shows his own almost Conradian ambivalence about Conrad's attitudes toward empire.

⁵ *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 154. Hay defends her earlier interpretation, with more attention to the ambivalence of Marlow's attitude, in a recent article: "Rattling Talkers and Silent Sooth-Sayers: The Race for *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana*, 24 (1992), 167–78. In her short but important essay "Conrad and England" Benita Parry, after briefly tracing the multiple contradictions in Conrad's attitude toward his adoptive country, still oversimplifies the case by making an untenable distinction between Conrad's devotion to the nation as an ideal and what she considers his critical attitude toward the real, historical England: "It is true that Conrad's fictions do affirm patriotism as the noblest sentiment, racial solidarity as the ultimate loyalty, and a sense of national identity as essential to right conduct, but these are not injunctions to submit to the historically constituted British nation. Thus the panegyrics to Home are not to England but to a mystically conceived ideal, to the idea of a national culture as a spiritual realm, a moral republic" (Benita Parry, "Conrad and England," in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity. Volume III: National Fictions*, ed. Raphael Samuel [London: Routledge, 1989], p. 196). Hunt Hawkins gave an interesting talk on "Conrad's Idea of Englishness" at the Joseph Conrad Society meeting in Washington, D.C., 29 December 1996, emphasizing in particular Conrad's admiration for things English.

examples of “the ambivalence of colonial discourse.”⁶ Marlow tells his story in an effort to stave off this darkness by explaining his own behavior in Africa in ethical terms. Yet his inability to give a rational account of his attachment to Kurtz points to the power that Kurtz’s many appeals to England and Englishness have over Marlow. It suggests that Marlow’s ethical framework fails to account adequately for a mysterious “hidden something” (“Youth,” p. 29), the power of national character that works on Marlow without his realizing it.

The contemporary crisis of liberal nationalism plays itself out in Marlow’s problematic attempts to justify his actions in the Congo and especially his loyalty to Mr. Kurtz. Both Marlow and Conrad seem eager to defend the idea of England, which they associate with the values of a liberal, civilized society: “efficiency,” “liberty,” “sincerity of feeling,” “humanity, decency, and justice.”⁷ Marlow is careful to distinguish the efficient and humane English, who rule by law and get “some real work” done in their possessions (p. 13), from the other European imperialists, who plunder their dependencies purely for their own material advantage while treating the natives indiscriminately as “enemies” and “criminals” (p. 20).

In the 1890s the values of English liberalism were under attack on two fronts. On the one hand deterministic theories of national character, such as that hinted at by the Company Doctor, suggested that the values Conrad associated with the “idea” of England were the result not of shared devotion to common beliefs (of what we today would call “English culture”) but of essential physical differences among the various nationalities, of the brute fact of “Englishness.” On the other hand the growth of universalistic, democratic, and socialist politics, represented in the novel by Kurtz, threatened to level the cultural differ-

⁶ See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85–92.

⁷ See *Heart of Darkness*, p. 10; Conrad, letter to Aniela Zagórska, 25 December 1899, in *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, 5 vols. to date (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983–), II, 230; Conrad, “An Observer in Malaya” (1898), rpt. in *Joseph Conrad on Fiction*, ed. Walter F. Wright (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 51; and Conrad, letter to Roger Casement, 21 December 1903, in *Collected Letters*, III, 96.

ences—the specifically English institutions and specifically English character—that Victorian liberals had prized. The Rights of Man threatened to efface “the rights of Englishmen.”⁸ Michael Tratner and Michael Levenson have each recently explored the responses of English modernism to the threats posed by such mass movements to the values of liberal individualism.⁹ Within liberal politics the two traditional strands, Whig and Radical, had reemerged in the conflict between Unionists and supporters of Irish Home Rule in the 1880s. Among political theorists the old Whiggish defense of specifically English liberties was to give way on the one hand to the crasser forms of social Darwinism and on the other to the New Liberalism with its internationalist aspirations. *Heart of Darkness* enacts the conflict within English liberalism at the turn of the century between a traditional Whig defense of liberal values as reflections of the English national character not necessarily suitable for other nations and a growing aspiration toward a universalistic, international democracy.

Conrad shows the impasse that English liberal nationalism has reached as it confronts the results of imperialism and social Darwinism. Marlow’s perplexity suggests that English liberalism cannot offer an adequate account of the role of cultural differences in shaping political beliefs. Marlow senses the threat posed to his Victorian English liberal values, his ethos, by both the Company’s vulgar materialism and Kurtz’s unworldly idealism.¹⁰ He rejects the Doctor’s biological theory of national character, but he cannot hold out for long against Kurtz’s appeals to “moral ideas” (p. 33), laden as they are with claims on Marlow’s English sympathies. In the Congo Marlow faces a “choice of nightmares,” and he chooses Kurtz, although he cannot say why.

⁸ See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), p. 28.

⁹ See Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995); and Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Ian Watt has described the contradiction in the story’s attitude toward “the Victorian ethic” in his section “Ideological Perspectives: Kurtz and the Fate of Victorian Progress,” in his *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 147–68.

Kurtz offers Marlow a vision of internationalist politics that appeals, strangely enough, to Marlow's specifically English values. The narrative alludes to the symbolic importance of England in motivating many elements of Kurtz's savage enterprise. Kurtz, having "been educated partly in England," claims to admire English ideas: "as he was good enough to say himself—his sympathies were in the right place" (p. 50). Indeed, Marlow tells his listeners that the "wraith" of Kurtz chooses to relate his story to Marlow "because it could speak English to me." "Sympathy" with the enlightened English mode of imperialism marks Kurtz and his associates off from the Company's other employees, making them part "of the new gang—the gang of virtue," who see themselves, according to the brickmaker, as "emissar[ies] of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (p. 28). Whereas most of the other employees come from various countries in continental Europe, Kurtz and his two followers with non-African blood have strong biological or emotional connections to England: Kurtz himself has a "half-English" mother (p. 50) and his followers are "an English half-caste clerk" and a Russian who has "served some time in English ships" (pp. 34, 54). None of these Kurtzians, however, is purely English. They are all products of biological or intellectual miscegenation: quarter-English, half-English, or merely anglophile. They suggest Englishness gone wrong, a misinterpretation of liberal English values. It is Kurtz's imperfect Englishness that makes him such an extremist in the application of the putatively English values of pity, science, progress, and virtue.

Marlow himself appears to be the Company's first purely English employee. The Company Doctor, who measures Marlow's cranium "in the interests of science" before he leaves for Africa and asks him in French whether there has ever been any madness in his family, excuses himself: "Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman coming under my observation" (p. 15). Marlow's Englishness plays an important part in his Congo experience, differentiating him from all of the other Company employees, linking him to his listeners on the *Nellie*, and eventually serving as the basis for an intimate connection between him and Kurtz. Kurtz and his admirer the Russian har-

lequin continually address Marlow with attention to his nationality, thus “interpellating” him as an Englishman.¹¹ Marlow appears only half-aware of the extent to which his Englishness defines him for those he meets. He inhabits the identity of a representative Englishman uneasily, eager to appear instead as a cosmopolitan cynic. He assures the Company Doctor, who hints that nationality may determine character, that he is “not in the least typical” of his countrymen: “If I were, . . . I wouldn’t be talking like this with you” (p. 15). The Doctor responds: “What you say is rather profound and probably erroneous.”

The problem posed by the Company Doctor will come back to haunt Marlow’s narration, for Marlow finds himself unable to describe his motives for his own actions in Africa. He continually refers to the inexplicability of his attachment to Kurtz: “It is strange how I accepted this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms” (p. 67). He can never quite adequately explain why he chooses Kurtz’s nightmare over the Company’s, why he admits to being Kurtz’s “friend,” or why he is willing to be considered a member “of the party of ‘unsound method’” (p. 67). Yet this choice is the central ethical problem of the story’s climactic final section.

One notable force acts on Marlow, apparently without his realizing it. Throughout the story, and especially in the second installment (in which Marlow recounts his meeting with Kurtz), appeals to his nationality gradually draw Marlow into the “gang of virtue.” Marlow’s “choice of nightmares” shows the importance to him not only of Kurtz’s claim to represent liberal English values but also of the more basic appeals to “partnership,” “brotherhood,” “friendship,” and “sympathy” made by Kurtz and his ally the Russian harlequin, always on the basis of their

¹¹ I draw the concept of “interpellation” from Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–68; and Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993). I use the term in a very concrete sense, such as Althusser recognized when he gave the example of “that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (“Ideology,” p. 174).

shared association with things English. Marlow never says that Kurtz's connection to England forms one of his attractions and makes him, in the words of *Lord Jim*, "one of us,"¹² yet the many references to Marlow's Englishness provide a meaningful explanation for his choosing Kurtz over the Company, a choice for which Marlow himself cannot account. During his nightmarish progression up the Congo, whenever something reminds him of England, Marlow discovers a moment of truth or "reality" among the many lies and illusions of the Company. Whatever appeals to his basic humanity or to his English nationality, whatever is "meaningful," "natural," or "true," draws Marlow to Kurtz's side in the inexplicable "choice of nightmares."

Ever more frequent allusions to England and Englishness in the story's second installment suggest that Marlow has failed to see how his very Englishness is drawing him deeper into Kurtzian depravity. The references to England create a structural pattern of irony in which Marlow's subjective perceptions (his belief in the universal validity of English values) fail to match his objective situation (the contingency and perhaps even hypocrisy on which these values depend).¹³ Marlow persistently sees more than the "typical" Englishman would see, but then he turns out to be more typically English in his blindnesses than he would have expected. His dual role as participant in and teller of his story makes his own account of the motivations for his "choice of nightmares" suspect. Marlow tells his story to four English friends, and its "spokenness" is crucial, for it suggests the process by which Marlow attempts to make sense of what he has done. He seems to believe that "a man's character is his fate" ("*ēthos anthropōi daimōn*"),¹⁴ and he tends to explain the events of his story in ethical terms, from the perspective of a participant.¹⁵ He accounts for the various actions he

¹² Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, ed. Thomas Moser (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 27.

¹³ See Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971).

¹⁴ Heraclitus, fragment 119 DK, quoted in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 136.

¹⁵ On the spoken story and the written novel, see Walter Benjamin, "The Story-teller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in his *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah

describes by reference to the unique moral characteristics of the actors involved, particularly to their possession or lack of “restraint,” “innate strength,” or “character.” Marlow makes many remarks of a sociological or anthropological nature on the Company, its employees, and the Africans, yet he seems unable to grasp completely the ways in which powerful cultural forces have determined his own character (his *ethos*). For example, he attempts to account to himself for both Mr. Kurtz’s actions and his own primarily on the grounds of morality and free will; he is eager to see the “restraint” exercised by the cannibals on board his steamer in the Congo as akin to the restraint of civilized Englishmen; and he wants to believe that a good character can be measured by universally applicable standards, and thus that *ethos* is itself a universal measure rather than merely a product of accident.

Ironically enough, it is by an appeal to Englishness that Kurtz attempts to convince Marlow of the validity of Kurtz’s own internationalist goals. Whereas Kurtz and Marlow are both attracted by the possibility of an international politics based on virtue and efficiency, Conrad seems to suggest that the very values they affirm are so dependent on a particular cultural framework as to be unsuitable for export. Perhaps partly because of his mixed parentage, Kurtz has carried his putatively English values to un-English extremes. It is Marlow’s very susceptibility to the claims of “virtue,” conditioned by his own Englishness, that makes him capable of being swayed by Kurtz’s universalist appeal. What Kurtz presents as universally valid ideals—“pity, and science, and progress”—turn out to be terribly culturally specific. Conrad presents the reader with the material for a sociological perspective on Marlow’s and Kurtz’s actions in which this paradox becomes apparent: the novel is a written document that contains Marlow’s spoken story in crystallized form as well as the primary narrator’s observations of Marlow.

This written document, by showing Marlow from the outside, suggests the influence on him of apparently irrational cultural forces. In the framing of Marlow’s narrative, the novel

Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 83–110; and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).

takes on its significance as the story of the national idea, for it is the primary narrator who at the beginning of the novel apotheosizes the Thames as the river that has “known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud” and who at the end observes that “the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (pp. 8, 76). The written frame suggests the limits of Marlow’s perspective, his inability to explain his own actions. It shows how forces beyond his control shape his action and his character: “I did not betray Mr. Kurtz—it was ordered I should never betray him—it was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice” (p. 64). Yet unlike many realist novels of the nineteenth century, *Heart of Darkness* neither presents an omniscient narrator who can give a purely objective account of Marlow’s character nor allows Marlow to achieve the final sort of maturity that would make all of his mistakes and uncertainties clear to him. At the end of the novel, recounting his lie to the Intended, Marlow will be just as baffled about his own motives as he was when he set out to tell the story. The reader is afforded no position outside culture. Indeed, the novel calls attention to the fact that it is written in English and that it tells the story of five Englishmen discussing far-off events. At key moments of the story Marlow points out that he speaks with most of the Company’s employees in French: he must make sense in English terms of what seems a very foreign story.

Marlow’s ethical discourse, based on his own free will, occasionally breaks down, and he seems to become aware of the possibility of a sociological explanation of his actions as determined by particular social and cultural forces. One such moment occurs after he proclaims his faith in the idea that redeems “the conquest of the earth”: “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . .” (p. 10). After the ellipsis, the primary narrator announces: “He [Marlow] broke off” (p. 11). Here Marlow glimpses the possibility that the idea he reveres may appear to his listeners as a type of cultural fetish, a product made by humans’ own activi-

ties but worshiped by them as a god. He therefore breaks off uneasily, just as later in the story he will frequently cut short his narration while he attempts to think through the ethical consequences of his own or Kurtz's actions: "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . ." (p. 30). Marlow's idiosyncratic mode of narration—his heavy foreshadowing and impressionistic accounts of his perceptions—calls attention to the possible inadequacy of his ethical explanation of events. It signals the development of a distinctively modern consciousness of the forces through which culture shapes character and of the inevitable lack of an Archimedean point from which to make either ethical or sociological judgments.¹⁶ Marlow's perplexity results in part from a tension within his own liberal nationalism. Whereas he wishes to assert the universal validity of the values he embraces and associates with England, he also suspects that these values merely seem universal from a particular idiosyncratic worldview that is itself the product of historical accident. Marlow uneasily occupies the dual position of participant in and observer of English ideology.

It is the indeterminacy of Marlow's motivations that makes *Heart of Darkness* a crucial founding example of literary modernism. It is surely the case, as Conrad's critics have shown, that a variety of psychic, sexual, and social forces draw Marlow into his "choice of nightmares." Yet the story suggests that one of the most significant of the forces through which culture molds character is the mysterious power of nationality, that "hidden something" that works almost unnoticeably on Marlow and that he can never fully articulate. Scholars of Conrad's politics have developed two opposing accounts of his worldview, which I call the organicist-nationalist and the liberal-individualist. Avrom Fleishman, for example, attributes to Conrad three "guiding principles": "organic community, the work ethic, and the cri-

¹⁶ See Said's chapter "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*," in *Culture and Imperialism*, pp. 19–31. On the historical context of this development, see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1977).

tique of individualism.”¹⁷ Yet Ian Watt rightly objects that Conrad held to “basic social attitudes which, though certainly not democratic, were in many ways deeply egalitarian and individualist” (p. 110). Conrad himself expressed sympathy with liberal politics, asserting for example that his mind “was fed on ideas, not of revolt but of liberalism of a perfectly disinterested kind, and on severe moral lessons of national misfortune.”¹⁸ He claimed in particular that England and the English system of government were uniquely well suited to the development of individual liberties. The fact that Conrad’s primary political commitments were to a form of liberal individualism and to nationalism has been one source of the extended debates over his politics, largely because critics in the late twentieth century tend to see liberalism and nationalism as essentially contradictory systems of belief. However, a strong nationalistic current within English liberalism, from Edmund Burke to Leslie Stephen, had venerated English institutions as especially suited to the development of liberty and had even associated the unique character of English institutions with the unique character of the English people.¹⁹ Conrad spoke the language of this English liberal nationalism, treating faith in the nation-state as the necessary corollary of a belief in the fundamentally egoistic and individualistic character of human nature.

Conrad expressed many of the concerns of Victorian liberal nationalists in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, writ-

¹⁷ *Conrad’s Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 10. Fleishman sees in Conrad a critic not only of individualism but of the related philosophies of liberalism in politics and utilitarianism in ethics.

¹⁸ Conrad, letter to George T. Keating, 14 December 1922, in *The Portable Conrad*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 752–53. Conrad’s few recorded comments on British formal politics suggest that despite his scorn for the more socialistic and democratic of the Liberal party’s policies, he admired some traditional Liberal politicians—such as John Morley, the disciple of John Stuart Mill and biographer of Gladstone who also wrote two books on Burke—and disliked certain aspects of the Conservatives’ handling of the Boer War. See the following letters and the corresponding notes: to Spiridion Kliszczewski, 13 October 1885, in *Collected Letters*, I, 12; and to John Galsworthy, 15 November 1909, 27 November 1909, and 5 August 1910, in *Collected Letters*, IV, 288–90, 292, and 353–54.

¹⁹ On the relevance of the development of political liberalism to the earlier history of the novel, see Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).

ten on 9 February 1899, the day after he sent his publisher the manuscript of the final two installments of *Heart of Darkness*. In this letter Conrad thanks Cunninghame Graham for his compliments on the first installment, which had recently appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*, but warns him that in the remainder of the novel the "note struck" may no longer "[chime] in with [his] convictions."²⁰ Conrad's critics have studied this letter but have failed to make the connection between his comments on the novel he was just completing and the remainder of the letter, in which he draws attention to the centrality of "l'idée nationale," "une idée sans avenir," to his political worldview (*Collected Letters*, II, 159, 160).²¹ Conrad attacks his friend's faith in social democracy and international fraternity: "I can not admit the idea of fraternity not so much because I believe it impracticable, but because its propaganda (the only thing really tangible about it) tends to weaken the national sentiment the preservation of which is my concern" (*Collected Letters*, II, 158). He argues that "l'idée nationale" is preferable to "l'idée démocratique" as the basis for a political system. As an alternative to international fraternity, he defends egoism and nationalism: "There is already as much fraternity as there can be—and that's very little and that very little is no good. What does fraternity mean. Abnegation—self-sacrifice means something. Fraternity means nothing unless the Cain-Abel business. That's your true fraternity. . . . C'est l'égoïsme qui sauve tout—absolument tout—

²⁰ Conrad, letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 8 February 1899, in *Collected Letters*, II, 157–58. Part of the letter was written in French (all translations are my own). Most critics see in this letter primarily a reactionary conservatism. In *Political Novels* Hay attempts to defend Conrad from this label, but she considers his nationalism primarily from a biographical rather than a theoretical point of view (see pp. 19–24). Parry describes the letter as reflecting "a conservatism wholly un-English" (p. 190), whereas I see in it a conservative liberalism quite English indeed. Fleishman suggests that the contradictions inherent in his position simply "seem not to have occurred to Conrad" and leaves it at that (p. 29). Watt quotes the letter as evidence for Conrad's view of solidarity but does not analyze the importance of the specifically national content of this solidarity (see p. 327). In his early work *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966) Edward W. Said reprints this letter in full (pp. 201–3) and calls it "one of [Conrad's] most impressive" (p. 137), but he refers to Conrad's "idée nationale" as simply a "subrational sentiment" (p. 138) and equates it entirely with Marlow's "idea" that redeems imperialism. For a full annotation of the letter, see *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham*, ed. C. T. Watts (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 116–22, 204–5.

²¹ "The national idea," "an idea without a future."

tout ce que nous abhorrons tout ce que nous aimons" (*Collected Letters*, II, 159).²² Conrad says that "l'idée démocratique est un très beau phantôme," in the service of "les ombres d'une éloquence qui est morte, justement par ce qu'elle n'a pas de corps" (*Collected Letters*, II, 158–59).²³ However, he defends the national idea by suggesting that at least it is "un principe défini" (*Collected Letters*, II, 159; "a definite principle"). Throughout this letter Conrad draws on a recurrent trope in English political thought that can be traced back, as Fleishman has noted, at least to Edmund Burke's response to the French Revolution: namely, the danger that democratic ideals of international fraternity will undermine the true source of solidarity in the shared national character.²⁴ Conrad argues, however, not (as Fleishman suggests) against individualism but in favor of nationalism as a form of super-individualism, which appeals to the egoistic impulses essential to human nature. Conrad's defense of "l'idée nationale" echoes many of Marlow's comments on social and political matters in *Heart of Darkness* and links them to the English liberal tradition and to the turning-point at which it had arrived by the 1890s.

Ultimately, Conrad's letter to Cunninghame Graham shows that as he was finishing *Heart of Darkness* Conrad was attempting to come to terms with the potential conflict between liberalism and nationalism. Throughout the nineteenth century the two forces had gone hand in hand, as liberal movements sought to replace multinational empires within Europe with self-governing nation-states. Conrad still wants to hold to the old faith in the national bond as the source of "sympathies" that can bind together free and equal individuals within an increasingly competitive and atomized liberal society, yet tendencies within both liberalism and nationalism threatened to destroy this faith. In particular, the principle of nationality could not be extended outside of Europe without threatening the interests of European imperialists.

²² "Egoism saves everything—absolutely everything—all that we love and all that we hate."

²³ "The democratic idea is a very beautiful phantom"; "the shades of an eloquence that is dead precisely because it has no body."

²⁴ See Fleishman, pp. 51–77.

The optimistic, liberal idea that a world of nation-states could embody the principles of freedom, equality, and justice had motivated the founding of the Congo Free State. In 1885 Henry M. Stanley had written:

On the 14th of August, 1879, I arrived before the mouth of this river [the Congo] to ascend it, with the novel mission of sowing along its banks civilised settlements, to peacefully conquer and subdue it, to remould it in harmony with modern ideas into National States, within whose limits the European merchant shall go hand in hand with the dark African trader, and justice and law and order shall prevail, and murder and lawlessness and cruel barter of slaves shall for ever cease.²⁵

The nation-state was to serve the liberal goals of rule by law and peaceful competition among individuals, and mid-Victorian liberals such as John Stuart Mill defended imperialism as a stage on the road to representative government and a world of liberal nation-states.²⁶ In the wake of Darwinism and the disillusionments of the scramble for Africa, however, nationalism and liberalism came increasingly to appear as opposed principles, with nationalists embracing theories of racial determinism and liberals looking toward a future of universal government.

In the letter to Cunninghame Graham, Conrad invokes a possessive-individualist psychology in the English empiricist vein when he writes that "l'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée" (*Collected Letters*, II, 159).²⁷ By reference to Cain and Abel ("thats your true fraternity") he suggests that the state of nature was no paradise. His defense of egoism suggests a Hobbesian understanding of the motivation for the formation of civil society in self-defense, or what might be called unenlightened self-interest. However, Conrad's appeals in the letter to "self-sacrifice," "abnegation," and "fidélité a une

²⁵ Quoted in Kimbrough, p. 142. The most evident political theme of *Heart of Darkness* is, of course, the utter failure of the Congo Free State to live up to this propaganda. Conrad's loss of faith in the liberal idea of the nation resulted in part from this failure.

²⁶ See Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government*, ed. Currin V. Shields (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), especially the final chapter, "Of the Government of Dependencies by a Free State," pp. 249-70.

²⁷ "Man is a wicked animal. His wickedness must be organized."

cause absolument perdue" ("fidelity to an absolutely lost cause") point to a more positive conception of human nature and society. For Conrad the "national sentiment" can cultivate these qualities by encouraging solidarity among individuals. This belief corresponds to the positive side of the English liberal tradition's conception of the nation-state. Far from endorsing the cash nexus as the sole desirable relationship among people, many late-Victorian liberals turned to the shared sense of nationhood as a source of forms of sociability that would mitigate the potentially antisocial effects of an economic and political system based on competition. They described such forms of sociability with words like "altruism," "sympathy," "character," "culture," and "civilization."²⁸ Like Burke and his many Victorian admirers, Conrad rejects the attempt to create a political system based purely on rationality and equality, but he suggests that in the context of a cohesive civil society, inspired by the idea of the nation, people are capable of overcoming their more brutish instincts and creating a meaningful social order.

Conrad alludes in the letter to his devotion to "une cause absolument perdue, a une idée sans avenir" (*Collected Letters*, II, 160). While he is referring in part specifically to the idea of Poland, he seems also to suspect that the idea of nationality in general is in danger of becoming outmoded. Conrad's faith in nationalism was shaped by his parents' involvement in the struggle for Polish nationhood, but he also applied his trust in the "national idea" to his adoptive motherland, England—and it was through the figure of Marlow that he explored the peculiarities of the English national character.

The two concerns that motivate Conrad's defense of the "national idea"—an individualist conception of human nature and an emphasis on the ways in which social institutions contained the potentially destructive impulses associated with individualism—became, in post-Darwinian England, the focus of a debate about the sources and nature of national character. Evolutionary thought encouraged many social thinkers to un-

²⁸ These are all words associated with the liberals' inheritance from the eighteenth-century Whigs. See Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

derstand the characters of various peoples as resulting from the historical development of their cultures and institutions. These thinkers often expressed skepticism about the possibility of exporting English institutions, such as rule by law and representative government, to other nations. Almost all English liberals and other writers on the subject agreed that the English had a propensity for liberty that other nations lacked; the main source of disagreement was the question of whether people of other nationalities, from the French to Indians and Africans, could eventually benefit from English institutions and customs or whether elements of their "characters" made them permanently unsuitable for liberty. As George W. Stocking, Jr., has shown, among liberal political thinkers in particular the challenge posed by the evident diversity of national characters was to defend the traditional Enlightenment (and Christian) view that, despite the variety of human cultures, human nature was fundamentally one.²⁹

Evolutionary thought had at first assisted liberals in making the case that even primitive cultures were capable of developing the character necessary for self-rule. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, the idea of national character began to harden in political discourse. Rather than referring to what the twentieth century has come to call "culture," national character increasingly meant what we today call "race."³⁰ Whereas Burke's primarily political conception of national character had emphasized the importance of English institutions, some of his later admirers attributed the unique character of English liberty not to England's constitutional arrangements but to the physical constitution of Englishmen. The claim that the English had a privileged national relationship with liberty eventually became part of chauvinist propaganda, exemplified by the argument that British imperialism derived from the "desire of spreading throughout the habitable globe

²⁹ See *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987). See also J. W. Burrow, *Evolution and Society: A Study in Victorian Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968).

³⁰ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), p. 275; and E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 102.

all the characteristics of Englishmen—their energy, their civilization, their religion and their freedom.”³¹ Conrad’s defense of England’s conduct in the Boer War contains the distant echo of Burke’s faith in “the rights of Englishmen”: “That they [the Boers] are struggling in good faith for their independence cannot be doubted; but it is also a fact that they have no idea of liberty, which can only be found under the English flag all over the world.”³²

By the 1890s the discourse of national character faced a crisis. The growing eugenicist movement treated character as strictly a result of biological heredity. Eugenics already had a strong following in England by the time that Karl Pearson argued, in 1900, that in England “the feckless and improvident . . . have the largest families . . . at the expense of the nation’s future. . . . [We] cannot recruit the nation from its inferior stocks without deteriorating our national character.”³³ The notion of a distinctive national character in such theories implied the opposite of liberalism. Rather than foster the natural, progressive development of character through liberal institutions, eugenicists proposed forms of social engineering that would ensure the reproduction of the “superior stock” among the English. Traditional individualist and ethical notions of behavior were irrelevant to such projects. Some important, liberal Darwinists, such as T. H. Huxley in his lecture “Evolution and Ethics,” objected to such uses of Darwinism, recognizing that the so-called “evolution of society” was “a process of an essentially different character” from that of “the evolution of species.”³⁴ Huxley ar-

³¹ Charles Adderley, quoted in Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 47.

³² Conrad, letter to Aniela Zagórska, 25 December 1899, in *Collected Letters*, II, 230 (also quoted in Parry, p. 194). In *Political Novels* Hay reads *Heart of Darkness* as a veiled criticism of contemporary government policy in Africa, but actually Conrad vacillated on the issue of the war. Conrad goes on in this letter to attribute the Boers’ essentially despotic character to their Dutch ancestry and to blame the war on German influence in Africa. For fuller accounts of his attitudes toward the war, see Hay, *Political Novels*, pp. 117–28; and Fleishman, pp. 129–31.

³³ Karl Pearson, *National Life from the Standpoint of Science: An Address Delivered at Newcastle, November 19, 1900* (London: A. and C. Black, 1901), pp. 27–28. Pearson argued that the essential struggle for the survival of the fittest was among nations, not individuals.

³⁴ Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (New York: D. Appleton, 1898), p. 37.

gued that the ethical standards by which people in society decide how to act are and should be diametrically opposed to the processes by which the fittest survive in the state of nature, and that the development of human societies could no more be understood as the result of natural selection than could the growth of a highly cultivated garden (pp. 10–15).

From the perspective of the evolutionary social sciences, however, such a stance could not claim scientific validity; rather, it appeared to be a last-ditch effort to maintain the worn-out categories of liberal thought against the onslaught of a more rational biological determinism that seemed to hold the true key to history. Because of the continuing strength of positivism, social theory in late-Victorian England generally did not confront the problems of cultural relativism and pluralism or the intellectual limitations of biological determinism that concerned contemporary continental thinkers such as Durkheim and Weber and that H. Stuart Hughes describes in *Consciousness and Society* (pp. 278–335). As a result, the discourse of national character tended to fade into a strict determinism with distinctly pro-imperialist and authoritarian overtones. Meanwhile, on the political left, democrats and Fabian socialists generally maintained their faith in the rationality of human nature and paid relatively little attention to the problems of cultural difference and historicism that were associated with the notion of national character and its Burkean heritage.

Conrad is stuck between the two extremes of racial determinism and an unbounded faith in the universality of human nature; in *Heart of Darkness* he offers an almost allegorical account of the conflict between these two perspectives. What makes Conrad such a complex figure, however, is that he endorses neither racial determinism nor internationalist democracy but rather presents liberal values as the fragile products of historical accident that seem destined to develop successfully only in a particular cultural context.

Seen in part as the story of the “national idea,” *Heart of Darkness* participates in contemporary debates about national character and the capacity of particular cultures for civilization and progress. One target of Conrad’s critique, as Ian Watt has shown (pp. 147–68), is the extreme optimism of those ad-

vocates of progress, like Kurtz, who maintain a sort of mid-Victorian faith in the ultimate triumph of civilized values. *Heart of Darkness* describes a polarity between what Conrad in the letter to Cunninghame Graham calls “les ombres d’une éloquence qui est morte” (social democracy) and “un principe défini” (the nation). Kurtz exemplifies the internationalist attitude that Conrad criticized in Cunninghame Graham and his social-democratic friends. Kurtz’s politics are populist rather than specifically social-democratic, since he has the character of a demagogue, as his colleague’s comment to Marlow shows: “This visitor informed me Kurtz’s proper sphere ought to have been politics ‘on the popular side. . . . He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party. . . . Any party. . . . He was an—an—extremist’” (p. 71).

Kurtz’s vision of imperialism in the service of civilization has made him the favorite of “the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs.” In the first lines of his report for this Society he wrote that “we whites . . . ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings. . . . By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded’” (p. 50). Kurtz here echoes the most optimistic conclusions of the Enlightenment, such as Rousseau’s claim that “he who could do everything would never do harm.”³⁵ “This,” says Marlow, “was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words” (p. 50). Yet the optimism of Kurtz’s opening paragraph seems to lead inexorably to the insanity of his postscript to the report: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (p. 51).³⁶ By believing in himself and his rationality alone, by abandoning the body and “kick[ing] himself loose of the earth” (p. 65), by serving “the shades of an eloquence that is dead,” Kurtz has been led to a

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, ed. and trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 67.

³⁶ In his letter to Cunninghame Graham, Conrad uses a similar phrase to describe the position of the extreme anarchists: “Je souhaite l’extermination générale” (“I hope for general extermination”). Conrad respects this statement because it is just, or perhaps simply accurate (“juste”), and straightforward (“clair”). His respect for the extreme anarchist resembles Marlow’s for Kurtz: “He had summed up—he had judged” (*Heart of Darkness*, p. 69).

vision of himself as God—and this is in effect the mistake made, in Conrad's view, by the social democrats.³⁷ Conrad's defense of egoism as the basis of human society suggests that by recognizing the fact that selfish interests motivate our behavior, we can escape Kurtzian self-delusion.

While Conrad may be skeptical of the optimism of the Enlightenment, he does not embrace the opposite extreme within the Victorian debate over national character, namely the racial determinism that saw differences among various human societies as directly reflecting underlying biological differences among the races. The Company Doctor represents one pre-Darwinian variant of racial determinism, the polygenetic tradition that had produced such monuments of Victorian physical anthropology as Bernard Davis and Joseph Thurnam's *Crania Britannica* (1865).³⁸ The Doctor has a "little theory" that somehow correlates size of cranium, nationality, and ability to survive in Africa:

"I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there. . . . Ever any madness in your family? . . . It would be . . . interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot, but. . . . I have a little theory which you Messieurs who go out there must help me to prove. This is my share in the advantages my country shall reap from the possession of such a magnificent dependency. The mere wealth I leave to others. Pardon my questions, but you are the first Englishman coming under my observation. . . ." (p. 15)

Marlow rejects the application of a physical scientific theory of national character to his own case. The claim that merely physical characteristics differentiate the Englishman from other Europeans or from Africans seems to offend him because it does not leave room for the "idea" that redeems "the conquest of the earth." If this biological theory of national character were correct, Marlow senses, human autonomy would be a sham, for each person would pursue his or her own lusts without any en-

³⁷ Watt quotes Camus on the need "in order to be a man, to refuse to be a God" (Watt, p. 168).

³⁸ See Stocking, pp. 66–67. The polygenetic tradition continued to influence post-Darwinian racists such as Karl Pearson.

lightenment, driven on by material interest and without any moral purpose.³⁹ The Company's bureaucracy epitomizes such a potential future world, in which the social bond that makes the nation strong has been degraded to a pact among thieves for the distribution of the booty of imperialism. In a world dominated by a struggle among the races, the strongest race would win, regardless of ideals. As Marlow observes near the beginning of the novel, "[the Romans] were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others" (p. 10). If the Doctor were right in attributing national character simply to biological difference, then all conquests would result from a similar "accident."

Marlow particularly dislikes the use of such "scientific" methods on himself, although the possibility that the Doctor suggests—that some fundamental racial difference, correlated with biological inheritance, shapes the actions of various national groups once they get to Africa—haunts him. On his trip up to the Central Station, Marlow makes "a speech in English with gestures" (p. 23) to the sixty Africans under his command, and when they continue to disobey him, he begins to doubt his own sanity and remembers his conversation with the Company Doctor: "It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot.' I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting" (p. 24). Marlow's admission that he himself could be "scientifically interesting" leaves open the possibility that the actions of the various characters in *Heart of Darkness* reflect such underlying racial differences. Yet Marlow rejects this mode of explanation. Kurtz's idealism about human nature, even carried to horrible extremes, seems more congenial to him than the crass materialism of the Company and its philosophical expression in the Doctor's "little theory." Other factors, apparently not understood by Marlow himself, seem to contribute to Marlow's choice, however, most notably a long series of appeals to his nationality made by Kurtz and the Russian

³⁹ See Monygham's conversation with Mrs. Gould in chapter 11 of part three of Joseph Conrad; *Nostramo: A Tale of the Seaboard*, ed. Keith Carabine (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 511.

harlequin. These factors also point to an understanding of human nature and politics that is different than either the racialism of the Company Doctor or the extreme historical optimism of Kurtz. For Conrad, cultural factors—speaking the same language, smoking the same tobacco, shared attitudes toward work—and the habits of mind associated with them play a fundamental part in the makeup of the individual. The success of a liberal political organization seems to depend for him on the fortuitous combination of such ineffable cultural factors.

The novel's opening pages establish two competing versions of a historical explanation of the cultural differences among various human societies, each inspired by the meeting of Marlow and his listeners aboard the *Nellie* and each suggesting an alternative explanation for the origins of noble sentiments in the idea of the nation. At first Conrad seems to be presenting a fairly conventional picture of the English nation—or at least its adult male middle class—as the embodiment of liberal ideals. Yet, as Hunt Hawkins pointed out in his lecture on “Conrad’s Idea of Englishness,” Conrad both “makes and unmakes” the idea of Englishness in his works. *Heart of Darkness* presents a competition among differing conceptions of precisely where English greatness lies. The only cohesive community that the novel offers as an alternative to Kurtz’s disembodied dreams is the friendship of the five men aboard the *Nellie*, the cruising yawl on which Marlow tells the stories of “Youth” and *Heart of Darkness*.

Conrad originally planned to have the first three Marlow stories appear together in a single volume, “*Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories*,”⁴⁰ beginning with the opening statement by the primary narrator of “Youth”:

This could have occurred nowhere but in England, where men and sea interpenetrate, so to speak—the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea, in the way of amusement, of travel, or of bread-winning. (p. 3)

⁴⁰ The three are “Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, and *Lord Jim*. *Lord Jim* turned out to be too long, so Conrad replaced it with “The End of the Tether” (see Hay, *Political Novels*, p. 128).

What “could have occurred nowhere but in England” is the gathering of Marlow and his four friends to share Marlow’s story of his first command⁴¹—the same friends who later, aboard the *Nellie*, listen to his account of his journey to the Congo. “We all began life in the merchant service,” the primary narrator of “Youth” observes; “Between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea” (p. 3). At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* he comments again: “Between us there was as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea” (p. 7). This “bond of the sea,” forged in the merchant service, and the narrator’s comment in “Youth” that in England “men and sea interpenetrate,” suggest that the friendship of the five men has about it something typically English—that their society is a microcosm of the English nation, the island that another Conradian narrator describes as “A great ship! . . . A ship mother of fleets and nations! The great flagship of the race; stronger than the storms! and anchored in the open sea.”⁴² On board the *Nellie*, just a few miles from the open sea, at the gateway from England to the rest of the world, Marlow and his four listeners seem to carry on this function of symbolizing the English nation. The nation appears as a bond among adult men who are all on relatively equal terms with one another precisely because, as in the English parliament of the time, women, the lower classes, children, and of course foreigners are excluded and assumed to be inferior.

The primary narrator tells the first, unabashedly heroic version of the collective story. The Thames, resting “unruffled at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks,” causes the five men on the *Nellie* to “evoke the great spirit of the past,” a history of conquest and commerce that, without any conscious plan on the part of men but as if by divine providence, has spread around the world “spark[s] from the sacred fire” (p. 8). The narrator offers a

⁴¹ The characters aboard Marlow’s ship *Judea* in “Youth” are “Liverpool hard cases” (p. 25), whereas the crew on the real ship *Palestine*, on which Conrad based the *Judea*, included four non-Britons. The real-life crew of the *Narcissus* are similarly anglicized and fictionalized in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897). See John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 34–36; and Watt, p. 92.

⁴² Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”: A Tale of the Sea*, ed. Jacques Berthoud (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 163.

Whiggish interpretation of English history as running in an unabated upward movement from the Elizabethans to the Victorians, spurred on by commerce and conquest. To Marlow, however, the process of civilization appears as a mere flash of light intervening between prolonged periods of darkness. Only after describing the times when Britons were savages and the wilderness exercised “the fascination of the abomination” on the first Roman conquerors does Marlow, as if embarrassed, distinguish himself and his English listeners from the Romans (and from the pre-Roman Britons as well): “Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency” (p. 10). Marlow goes on to utter his famous statement about the idea that redeems “the conquest of the earth.” The narrator’s “great spirit of the past” transforms itself into Marlow’s “idea,” which differentiates the British from the Romans and from other conquerors but has, as it were, an intellectual rather than a spiritual reality.

The primary narrator views English history with reverence and sees in it a quasi-divine “spirit of the past,” uniting “all the men of whom the nation is proud.” Marlow considers the conquest of the earth “not a pretty thing” (p. 10), and he recognizes that before the Roman conquest the Britons too were “savages” (p. 9). Whereas the narrator sees in the national life a hallowed tradition at the root of England’s ability to bear the light of civilization out to the rest of the world, Marlow seems uncomfortably aware that the idea is something closer to mere custom, a mental habit resulting from a series of more or less chance events that happens to have given the English a devotion to efficiency that other nations lack. Despite his inability to account for his own behavior from anything but an ethical standpoint, Marlow takes a somewhat more detached, sociological attitude toward the nation than the primary narrator does. We need the idea, Marlow suggests, because in this age without idols we need something to worship, something that can redeem our otherwise selfish and meaningless acts. Whereas the primary narrator is a willing participant in English history who unself-consciously records his observations on it, Marlow is an observer who wishes to take a skeptical, objective stance but whose scientific credentials are undermined by his evident

emotional need to participate in the national myth. Just as Marlow will later feel himself unaccountably drawn toward Kurtz, in these opening pages of the story he already feels his objectivity to be compromised by too close an identification with his subject.

Marlow's partial submission to the primary narrator's providential account of English history corresponds to his general sense of the importance of accident or mere contingency in political affairs. His ethical stance toward the events of his story reflects his primary concern with the unique individual rather than with the broader movements of history. He remarks near the end of his story: "Destiny. My destiny! Droll thing life is—that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (p. 69). Marlow's attitude toward the stories he tells is a bemused fatalism that leads him to place enormous stress on the notion of character in his analysis of events. As an alternative to Kurtzian idealism about human nature, Marlow continually speaks of the importance of "character," "innate strength," and internal "restraint." He respects the accountant's "starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts" as "achievements of character" that seem to enable the accountant to maintain not only his appearance but also his integrity "in the great demoralisation of the land" (p. 21). Marlow is satisfied that his English listeners possess character and restraint, which they have learned as members of a developed civil society: "What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency." He is less certain, however, about which other groups possess the virtues necessary to the development of civilization. The lack of "external checks" (p. 25) in Africa puts a high premium on internal "restraint." Marlow is disturbed by Kurtz's lack of "restraint" and is amazed to find the hired cannibals aboard his steamboat possessed of it, which they show by not eating their white masters although they outnumber them thirty to five (pp. 42–43). Even the hollow Manager, whom Marlow despises, "would wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint" (p. 43).

Marlow finds the qualities of character and restraint to be unevenly distributed among individuals, probably at birth ("innate"). Despite his reputation among modern critics as a racist, however, he does not find any particular ethnic group to have a

monopoly on “restraint” (although the English do well in his account). In fact, he frequently notes the common humanity of Africans and Europeans. He draws attention to the potentially disturbing thought that “savage” customs originate in the same impulses as “civilized” ones, for example in his reference to “the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country” (p. 23). Marlow, like many a Victorian anthropologist (as Stocking has shown), has an abiding faith in the unity of human nature despite the diversity of its manifestations. In this respect he resembles other of Conrad’s English heroes whose idealism blinds them to the effects of cultural differences, such as Jim in *Lord Jim* and Charles Gould in *Nostramo*. Marlow’s experiences in the Congo temper this faith, but it never leaves him entirely, and, indeed, it seems to motivate his attachment to Kurtz.

Just as Marlow’s own musings on the savagery of pre-Roman Britain seem to call into question the fairly conventional nationalism and historical optimism of the primary narrator, Marlow’s account of his “choice of nightmares” in the Congo will itself problematize his more skeptical account of English culture. For, as it turns out, even the devotion to efficiency and the other saving graces of civilized life nearly desert Marlow in the Congo. Strangely enough, it is his very faith in civilization, progress, and especially the English way of doing things that seems to lead him to make what he himself calls his “strange” and “unforeseen” (p. 67) choice of nightmares. It is in the story’s second installment that Marlow becomes irrationally attached to Kurtz, the man whose “moral ideas” have already made him curious.

Appeals to his nationality mark every stage of Marlow’s recruitment to the “gang of virtue.” Overhearing a conversation between the Manager and his uncle about Kurtz, Marlow learns of Kurtz’s assistant, the “English half-caste clerk,” whose “great prudence and pluck” in carrying out his mission Marlow admires, while the Manager and his uncle consider him a “scoundrel” (p. 34). Marlow soon heads up the river with several of the Company’s pilgrims. As he gets closer to Kurtz, Mar-

low, “travelling in the night of first ages” (p. 37), contemplates his distant kinship with the savages who dance on the shore. He meets what he takes to be his first sign of a nearer kinsman when he comes across a hut recently inhabited by a white man, the Russian harlequin—known to the manager only as a trader who has intruded on the Company’s protected interests. Marlow discovers the harlequin’s copy of

An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship by a man Towser, Towson—some such name—Master in His Majesty’s Navy. . . . The simple old sailor with his talk of chains and purchases made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. (p. 39)

Marlow experiences his encounter with the book by the English sailor as a brief contact with the “real” in the midst of his dreamlike voyage. When he has to leave off reading the book, Marlow assures his listeners, it “was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship” (p. 40). The original owner’s fascination with the *Inquiry* impresses Marlow, especially when he mistakes the marginal notations in Russian for cipher.⁴³ He considers the use of cipher “an extravagant mystery” and comments aloud that the book’s owner “must be English.” The Manager responds to this observation with hostility: “It will not save him from getting into trouble if he is not careful” (p. 40). Marlow reports to his listeners: “I observed with assumed innocence that no man was safe from trouble in this world.”

Marlow feels a bond of national solidarity with the imagined English trader, who has thwarted Belgian protectionism and devoted himself to studying the work of an English sailor. The shared text of Towser or Towson helps to cement the gang of virtue’s claims on Kurtz’s new recruit. It is at this point in the story that Marlow breaks off his narrative to recount the most spectacular appeal to nationality in Kurtz’s own claim to kinship with him and his assurance that “his sympathies were in the right place.” Marlow apparently treats Kurtz’s appeal to his

⁴³ This is a mistake that Conrad himself would never have made and that again emphasizes Marlow’s Englishness in contrast with Conrad’s Polish origin.

sympathies with some irony of his own, prefacing it with the remark “as he was good enough to say himself”—which seems to distance Marlow from the content of Kurtz’s claim, even though the remainder of the story will show Marlow himself developing unexpected sympathies for Kurtz.

After relating Kurtz’s appeals to their shared English “sympathies,” Marlow describes the final stretch of the journey to the inner station. When he arrives and finally meets the Russian harlequin, that other admirer of Mr. Kurtz, the question of nationality arises again almost immediately: “The harlequin on the bank turned his little pug-nose up to me. ‘You English?’ he asked all smiles. ‘Are you?’ I shouted from the wheel. The smiles vanished and he shook his head as if sorry for my disappointment” (p. 53). The harlequin immediately takes to Marlow, just as he admires all things English. Marlow and the harlequin seal their friendship by sharing some of Marlow’s “excellent English tobacco,” for which the Russian thanks him: “Now, that’s brotherly. Smoke! Where’s a sailor that does not smoke” (p. 54).⁴⁴ This act, mirroring the frequent sharing of tobacco on board the *Nellie* on the Thames, seems to complete Marlow’s induction into the “gang of virtue.” He has unwittingly become, at least in the eyes of the European pilgrims, “a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe.” “Ah,” Marlow comments, “but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares” (p. 62).

Marlow never offers an adequate account of his reasons for remaining loyal to Kurtz, for what he calls his “choice of nightmares” in the story’s final installment. His reasons remain unclear to him until the end, but it seems that, after the struggle between his disgust at Kurtz’s barbarism and his hatred for the Company’s hypocrisy, the appeals to national sympathy and solidarity made by the harlequin and Kurtz in large part determine his choice. By the time he has arrived at Kurtz’s station Marlow has almost inadvertently cast his lot with the gang of virtue. He tells the Russian harlequin that “as it happens, I am Mr. Kurtz’s friend—in a way” (p. 62), and when the harlequin

⁴⁴ The counterpart of the Russian harlequin in Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now,” an American journalist played by Dennis Hopper, greets Willard (the film’s Marlow) by shouting out to him “I’m an American” and then snagging a pack of Marlboros.

appeals to him as a "brother seaman" to protect Mr. Kurtz (just before disappearing into the wilderness with one final handful of "good English tobacco"[p. 63]), Marlow makes the promise that "Mr. Kurtz's reputation is safe with me" (p. 62). Later on, when Kurtz's Intended again appeals to Marlow's love for Kurtz, she says to him: "You were his friend. . . . His friend" (p. 73). Although he hesitates, Marlow accepts the designation. Yet why Marlow pronounces himself Kurtz's friend remains obscure, and the lie he tells the Intended about Kurtz's final words has become a crux of Conrad criticism. Marlow offers a quasi-sociological explanation of the lie, claiming that to reveal Kurtz's words ("the horror! the horror!") "would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (p. 76). While Marlow's general concern for the workings of civilization certainly explains this decision in part, his loyalty to Kurtz's memory seems also to result from his sense of their kinship. Marlow lies because he has allowed the sentiments of "brotherhood" and "friendship" to obscure his dedication to the truth: his sympathy for Kurtz and for the Intended blinds him. Conrad, in rejecting the social-democratic ideal of fraternity, observed in the letter to Cunningham Graham that "there is already as much fraternity as there can be—and that's very little and that very little is no good." In Marlow's lie to the Intended, Conrad shows how the dream of fraternity can stand in the way of justice and truth. Kurtz and the harlequin have succeeded in their appeal to Marlow's "sympathies" as an Englishman. Without his recognizing it, they have interpellated him—"brother seaman"—and made him their own.

There is, then, one force that molds character and that Marlow seems unable to analyze to his own satisfaction. In "Youth" he wonders aloud what made a crew of apparently undisciplined English sailors obey him, a twenty-year-old second mate, when they knew that the ship they were trying to save was doomed to sink (help was nearby, so the sailors' lives did not depend on their success). Marlow denies that a sense of duty or a desire for glory or financial reward could have driven them:

No; it was something in [the English sailors], something inborn and subtle and everlasting. I don't say positively that the crew of a French or German merchantman wouldn't have done it, but I

doubt whether it would have been done in the same way. There was a completeness in it, something solid like a principle, and masterful like an instinct—a disclosure of something secret—that hidden something, that gift of good or evil that makes racial difference, that shapes the fate of nations. (“Youth,” p. 29)

The sailors’ very Englishness, a force beyond their understanding or control, makes them act nobly in an emergency. Yet here Marlow’s belief in the existence of a “hidden something” does not amount to any sort of racial theory of history. The uneven distribution of character appears to him as an inexplicable secret, and it just so happens that the English have more of it than other people. Marlow’s pride in his Englishness does not lead him to pronounce race a “key to history”;⁴⁵ even he feels threatened by the biological definition of national character when the Company Doctor tries to apply it scientifically to Marlow himself.

Marlow has proven unable to find a middle way between the idealistic theories of human nature espoused by Kurtz and the racism of the Company Doctor. He cannot account for the logic of the “hidden something” that has shaped his character and made him susceptible to the appeals of the gang of virtue. Conrad himself, in the 1919 author’s note to his autobiographical *A Personal Record* (1912), refers to a force that seems to have molded his “character” and that is superficially similar to Marlow’s “hidden something”:

The impression of my having exercised a choice between the two languages, French and English, both foreign to me, has got abroad somehow. That impression is erroneous. . . .

I have a strange and overpowering feeling that [English] had always been an inherent part of myself. English was for me neither a matter of choice nor adoption. . . . it was I who was adopted by the genius of the language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own so completely that its

⁴⁵ See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “For an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the ‘riddles of the universe,’ or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man” (p. 159).

very idioms I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament and fashioned my still plastic character.⁴⁶

Marlow attributes the English sailors' uniqueness to an innate racial difference,⁴⁷ relatively untouched by cultural and educational forces, whereas Conrad claims that, despite his Polish birth and ancestry, the English language, a product of English history and culture, has decisively influenced the development of his character. Conrad's creation of Marlow seems to result largely from his desire to portray his own life experiences through the filter of an English version of himself.⁴⁸ Most of Marlow's experiences originate in Conrad's biography, but Marlow's Englishness marks him off from his Polish-born creator. Thus, the Marlow stories investigate the question of the transferability of cultural values and assumptions. Marlow, in his remarks about the "hidden something," identifies nationality closely with race and therefore puts an unbridgeable gap between each nation and her neighbors; Conrad implies that nationality, while it determines character and is beyond the conscious control of the individual, can be acquired, and it is thus primarily a matter of upbringing—nurture rather than nature.

The distinction between the cultural and the biological explanations of character corresponds to a broader distinction between two types of explanation of the motivations of an individual's behavior. In the quotation from *A Personal Record* Conrad expresses the subjective sense that he cannot imagine himself as he was before the English language influenced his character. He has a "strange and overpowering feeling" that English has always been a part of him, although it clearly has not objectively always been so: there was a time, "the stammering stage," be-

⁴⁶ Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note" (1919) to *A Personal Record*, in *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record*, ed. Zdzisław Najder (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), pp. iii, v.

⁴⁷ It is important to note here that the idea of "race" itself was undergoing change in the 1890s. What had been a general term including both cultural and biological components of group membership increasingly took on, in the wake of Darwinism, its modern, primarily biological overtones. See Stocking.

⁴⁸ See Batchelor: "As far as one can judge, Marlow seems to be *the kind of Englishman whom Conrad would have liked to have been*" (p. 34). Perhaps it would be better to say, "a kind of Englishman that Conrad could imagine himself having been."

fore he knew English. It is only in retrospect, from his own perspective as a fully formed subject, that his development as an adoptive Englishman seems to have made English “an inherent part” of himself. This retrospective sense of the necessity of character—that is, the sense that his character has been formed almost automatically and without any conscious choice on his part—resembles Marlow’s own sense in *Heart of Darkness* that he could not have chosen to act differently than he did in Africa. It is the sort of illusion that makes the forces by which culture shapes the individual inexplicable to that individual in his or her own ethical terms. The individual, whose character has been formed by the contingencies of birth and upbringing, senses that despite the conscious workings of the mind, some greater forces have shaped his or her destiny.

The nature of this necessity cannot be generalized as a universal, sociological law. The almost mechanistic claim that all people of a given nationality will necessarily act in a similar way in given circumstances coarsens the sense of retrospective necessity felt by the individual subject who attempts to explain his or her own actions with attention to the complex interpenetration between consciousness and circumstance. As an observer, Marlow blithely asserts the existence of a “hidden something” that motivates the sailors, but when the Company Doctor tries to make a similar claim about Marlow—that his nationality has determined his experience in a way beyond his control—he objects. He turns to the mode of autobiographical storytelling that allows him to assert his status as a unique individual, not simply a representative of a given type: “I hastened to assure him I was not in the least typical” (p. 15).⁴⁹ Conrad gives the reader a reason to doubt Marlow’s claim, and the tension between Marlow’s own account of his behavior and the possible deterministic reading of it suggested by the Doctor is a crucial element in the novel’s irony.

⁴⁹ The primary narrator seems to shore up Marlow’s assertion of uniqueness when he observes that Marlow “did not represent his class” (the class of seamen) (p. 9). For the argument of this paragraph, see also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 181–88; Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 136–40 and passim; Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, pp. 93–119; Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”; and Benjamin, “The Storyteller.”

The story's narrative method, which has made it a classic of English modernism, emphasizes Marlow's location within a culturally specific set of assumptions that he cannot escape. Marlow and his four English listeners cannot say clearly what it is about Marlow's story that has caused their unease, but they feel their optimistic outlook on English civilization to be threatened. Incapable of explaining his actions when confronted with the non-English in Africa, Marlow tells his story to four fellow Englishmen, and although telling his story seems to him the best way to lay the soul of Kurtz to rest, the storytelling does not result in a neat conclusion or solution. By making Marlow so incapable of explaining his own attachment to Kurtz, Conrad suggests that the liberal English nation-state represented by Marlow and his listeners faces a crisis it cannot comprehend. Its values—humanity, decency, justice, efficiency, liberty, and devotion to ideals—are culturally specific and on the verge of being outmoded. Since they depend so completely on a particular English character, which is the product of historical accident (or good luck), they are incapable of being exported to the rest of the world. When the devotees of an English-style liberalism attempt to apply it to places and peoples unsuited by character to liberal self-government, the result is either a fanatical idealism tinged with egalitarianism (*à la* Kurtz) that tears down all institutions, or a bureaucratic and hypocritical nightmare (like the Company's) in which the strongest take advantage of the weakest while cloaking their motives in the forms of law and liberalism.

The difficulty is that even the best-willed imperialists seem condemned to apply their own ethnocentric standards to the societies they encounter, and Conrad seems to find little reason to trust that even the most noble sounding of these standards—"humanity, decency and justice"—can really be applied impartially except, perhaps, within the context of a nation-state as fortunate as Conrad seems to believe England has been in the history of its constitutional arrangements and the development of its civil society. Even among this happy breed of men it may be that the ideals of neutral justice, rule of law, and universal standards of right conduct are little more than the totems of a particularly successful cult whose time is running out. At

any rate, Conrad would like to believe that he, a stateless Pole, has successfully become an Englishman, but in *Heart of Darkness* he expresses a profound skepticism about whether Africans—or even Belgians and Frenchmen—can do the same. For this reason, if for no other, Conrad’s “national idea” has no future.

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