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'Coming Home to Roost':
Some Reflections on Moments of Literary Response to the Paradoxes of Empire

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ABSTRACT

Ever since Joseph Conrad chose fin de siècle London as the place to begin and end his *Heart of Darkness*, the city of London has been host to literary meditations on the darker aspects of empire and imperialism. The decline of the British Empire in the twentieth century has had far-reaching consequences for the former heart of empire. In the second half of the twentieth century, immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia have transformed Britain into an ethnically and racially diverse nation. The colonies have 'come home to roost.'

Following Conrad's narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, my thesis begins in London and then moves to the margins of the empire. The long shadow of imperialism shapes the novels of J.M.Coetzee and Bessie Head. In their works these two writers depict the evils of apartheid South Africa and reflect upon the complex psychological mechanisms that underlie encounters between different groups. Such encounters result in a pattern of nonrecognition and misrecognition that in turn create relations based upon domination and servitude. Coetzee's and Head's works speculate on the psychological structures that have shaped the history of colonialism in Africa

Returning to London, my thesis then examines the works of two writers who combine experience of the colony with knowledge of the centre of Empire. Doris Lessing's experience of coming-of-age in Southern Rhodesia supplies her with powerful insights into both the plight of new immigrants to Britain and the concerns and prejudices of native Londoners. Her knowledge of identity politics in Southern Africa deepens her fictional response to post-war British society. The detective writer Mike Phillips came to Britain from Guyana as a child and he now resides in London. While his novels reflect the concerns of a first-generation black immigrant to the United Kingdom they also depict the challenges and rewards of being black in the London of today.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis que Joseph Conrad a choisi le Londres de la fin du siècle dernier comme le lieu où commence et finit son roman *Heart of Darkness*, la ville de Londres a été le site de nombreuses méditations littéraires sur les pires aspects de l'empire et l'imperialisme. Le déclin de L'empire Britannique au vingtième siècle a eu de graves conséquences pour l'ancienne capitale de l'empire. Dans la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle, des immigrants en provenance des Caraïbes, d'Afrique et d'Asia ont fait de la Grande Bretagne une nation aux ethnies et aux races diverses. Les colonies sont venues s'y installer.

Selon le récit de Conrad dans *Heart of Darkness*, ma thèse commence à Londres, puis se déplace aux confins de l'empire. La Grande ombre de l'impérialisme est présente dans les romans de J. M. Coetzee et de Bessie Head. Dans leurs oeuvres, ces deux écrivains dépeignent les maux de l'apartheid d'Afrique du sud et font une réflexion sur les mécanismes psychologiques complexes qui sous-tendent les relations entre des groupes divers. De telles rencontres engendrent des phénomènes de non-reconnaissance et de méconnaissance qui a leur tour créent des relations basées sur la domination et l'asservissement. Les oeuvres de Coetzee et Head font des spéculations sur les structures psychologique qui ont façonné l'histoire du colonialisme en Afrique.

Ma thèse, qui revient à Londres, examine ensuite les oeuvres de deux écrivains qui allient l'expérience des colonies et la connaissance de la capitale de l'empire. L'expérience de Doris Lessing qui a atteint sa majorité en Rhodésie du sud lui permet d'avoir une idée exacte du sort des nouveaux immigrants arrivant en Grande Bretagne ainsi que des sourcis et préjugés des Londoniens d'origine. Sa connaissance de la politique d'identité en Afrique du sud lui permet d'approfondir la façon dont elle traite la societé Britannique d'après-guerre. L'auteur de romans policiers Mike Phillips est arrivé en Grande-Bretagne lorsqu'il était enfant et il réside maintenant à Londres. Tandis que ses romans dépeignent les problèmes des immigrants noirs de la première génération arrivant au Royame-Uni, ils montrent aussi les défis et les avantages d'être noir dans le Londres d'aujourd'hui.

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'Coming Home to Roost':
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> ...in that other London there were no foreigners, only English, pinko-grey, as Shaw said, always chez nous, for the Empire had not imploded, the world had not invaded, and while every family had at least one relative abroad administering colonies or dominions, or being soldiers, that was abroad, it was there, not here, the colonies had not come home to roost.[1]
>
> —Doris Lessing

> 'I love all this ethnic stuff. Even if most of it is bullshit.' He took a long pull on his Guinness and banged the glass down on the table. 'It's what London's all about.'[2]
>
> —Mike Phillips

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[1] Doris Lessing, "In Defence of the Underground," *London Observed* (London: Harper, 1992) 84.

[2] Mike Phillips, *An Image To Die For* (London: Harper, 1995) 142.

An Examination of the 'Politics of Recognition' in Some Fictional Representations of Twentieth Century London and in the Works of Contemporary Commonwealth Novelists

Introduction

Last year saw the return of Hong Kong to China and the marking of fifty years of Indian independence. The hand-over of Hong Kong to China was relatively uncontroversial while the Queen's visit to India last August was a more contentious affair: some demonstrations were held by Indian nationalists who felt that if the Queen was going to visit Amritsar (as was previously scheduled), then it was time for her to apologize on the behalf of the British people for the infamous Jallianwala massacre of 1919. After many problems with protocol, the Queen visited Amritsar and made a gesture of atonement "with flowers, a minute's silence and a bow in homage to the dead."[3] The British delegation's disquiet was not ameliorated by Prince Philip's comment at the site of the ceremony that "the number of people killed in the...massacre of 1919 was exaggerated."[4] However, apart from some diplomatic infelicities, and presumably some tense moments for the Queen, the visit, although high on

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[3] Christopher Thomas, "Queen Heals Open Wounds of Amritsar: Royal Visit," *London Times* 15 Oct. 1997: 21.

[4] Christopher Thomas, "The Queen's Visit Was Disaster Says Delhi," *London Times* 20 Oct. 1997: 11.

rhetoric, will most probably have few long-term implications.[5] Yet the historical resonance of the inexorable dismantling of the British Empire has not gone without comment. These recent events have confirmed a belief among scholars that the Empire, while still capable of eliciting a variety of emotional response, can now be reassessed from a certain critical distance. The planned opening of the Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, England, is a timely invitation to this end.

Of course, one can still go and visit the spoils of empire in the British Museum. While there are undoubted benefits to be gained from viewing such treasures as, for instance, the Elgin Marbles, there is nevertheless a sense that these are guilty pleasures. Regarding the "politics of museum performance," Rosemary Jolly has noted that "exhibitions have historically constituted a primary locus for the exercise of the imperialist anthropological gaze on

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[5] Stephen Gray, "Squabbles Hit Indian Tour to Bitter End." *Sunday Times* 19 Oct. 1997: 22. Gray summarizes the war of words in the following way: "From the outset, the British and Indian media fed off each other's controversies. The Indian press was incensed at reports that (Robin) Cook had offered to mediate on the dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir; at the Queen's refusal to apologize over the Amritsar massacre, in which 379 unarmed protesters were shot by British troops in 1919; and Prince Philip's suggestion at the site that the casualties had been exaggerated. The "colonial attitude lingers on," said a front page headline in the Indian Express that mirrored the indignation of the country's media and its foreign ministry.

exoticized and objectified native subjects."[6] Jolly's remarks, which were primarily directed against the inclusion of Jacques Derrida's "Racism's Last Word," "as a part of a catalog for a museum's exhibition," are, insofar as they were addressing the ethical implications of displaying Derrida's noted essay, both misdirected and clearly debatable. Nevertheless, her statement has some validity if taken as a critique of the politics of display in the days when museums regularly satisfied public curiosity with items brought home as trophies of overseas domination. Yet nowadays the British Museum contains ironies that negate the full force of Jolly's argument. The building reveals evidence of the demise of many empires and at every turn documents the finite nature of imperial force. Due to the exigencies of recent history and the seeming inevitability of imperial decline, the British Museum is no longer party to a colonialist ethos and has itself become an exoticized subject for millions of tourists who visit and take photographs of it every year. But because of a modern sensitivity to the "politics of museum performance," the proposed museum in Bristol is seen by many as a chance to contemplate the legacies of four hundred years of history in a way that has not previously been possible.

As noted by John Mackenzie, the author of various books on British imperialism and a scholarly advisor to the proposed museum in Bristol, we are achieving a new perspective on empire. It is an understanding that highlights the moments of exchange between two cultures while also acknowledging the limits imposed on syncretism by a system that was to an extent (depending on time and place) undoubtedly oppressive. Mackenzie's views on the aims of the planned museum are especially revealing, since they outline the new

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[6] Rosemary Jolly, "Rehearsals of Liberation: Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse and the New South Africa," *PMLA* 110 (1995): 20.

importance of the cultural interaction that resulted from British imperial endeavors:

> ...this museum is not going to be a top-down view, describing how the British created the largest empire the world has ever seen and portraying the subject peoples merely as being acted upon. Rather it is going to describe how indigenous peoples reacted, survived and changed us, creating new elements of hybrid cultures and in the process changing us in profound ways.[7]

More and more people in Britain are realizing their everyday connection to countries that were part of the Empire and are now members of the Commonwealth. This realization clearly results from the influx of peoples from the Commonwealth countries, from the Caribbean, and from South Asia.

The *Empire Windrush*, the first of many boats filled with immigrants from the Caribbean, docked near the Thames in 1948. Although it was carrying only 492 Jamaicans, its arrival has been seen by many as heralding a decisive chapter in the long history of immigration to the United Kingdom. That there was a black presence in Britain long before the twentieth-century is now generally accepted. It probably began with the Roman invasion, when black soldiers were employed in the conquest of England. Before the second half of the present century a negligible number of blacks, working very much against the odds,

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[7] Peter Popham, "After Empire's Roar Fell Silent," *Independent*, 2 Feb. 1997, 3rd ed.: 18.

achieved positions of distinction in British society.[8] But it is only during the latter half of the century that the numbers of British residents of black or Asian descent were to climb sufficiently for them to be considered as demographically significant. The mooring of the *Windrush* is not simply an event which defined the beginning of a remarkable period but it is an episode which if adequately considered can teach us much about the forces which have shaped the experience of racial diversity in Britain.

Inaugurated by the docking of the *Windrush* in 1948, the recent history of immigration to Britain, which reached its apogee during the years immediately preceding and just after the Commonwealth and Immigrants Act of 1962, and which had largely come to an end twenty years later in 1981 (when Margaret

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[8] Ian G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997). "The black soldiers who comprised a small part of the Roman armies that invaded Britain, the African slaves who were not freed by Mansfield's much misunderstood judgment of 1772 and the Asian and black seamen who lived in multi-racial dockland communities are evidence of a long-standing element of racial diversity in Britain...It is certainly the case that Asian and black residents played an interesting and occasionally important part in British society through the centuries. Much has been made of exceptional individuals of the nineteenth century—such as William Cuffay, the Chartist leader, Samuel Coleridge Taylor, the composer and conductor, and Mary Seacole, the nurse—but it would be an exaggeration to say that collectively their part in British life was of any great significance...." It is clear from these comments that Spencer considers revisionist academic claims for a black influence on pre-twentieth century British history to be somewhat overstated (Spencer 1).

Thatcher introduced the British Nationality Act), has created a multi-racial society. There is, as Salman Rushdie has suggested, a "new empire within Britain."[9] London has become a microcosm of the world, a city where one can run up against citizens from a bewildering array of countries and walk along a road in an unremarkable North London suburb and suddenly be confronted with the biggest Hindu temple in Europe.

That London has emerged as one of the largest tourist destinations in the world, or that it still holds financial and diplomatic clout beyond what might have been expected, is in part a legacy of its many connections with countries around the globe. These ties with other nations are far more complex than is warranted by Britain's nominal status as head of the Commonwealth. The complexity is a result of Britain's imperial past and of the recent implosion of its empire. London, formerly the heart of empire and more recently a magnet for immigrants, furnishes those interested in postcolonial theory and literature with a unique opportunity for the analysis of colonial and postcolonial identity politics. At this time, perhaps more than any other location, London is a literary territory ripe for profound and paradoxical reflections on empire and nation, and on self and Other.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that if one wants to meditate on the subject of immigration, of multicultural politics, then it would be better to start on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Wandering through New York or San Francisco, or in any of one of the legion of other places of racial heterogeneity in North America, one inevitably traverses a richly diverse cultural topography. This is the landscape examined of late by writers such as Toni Morrison,

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[9] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (New York: Granta, 1991) 129.

Christina Garcia, Maxine-Hong Kingston, and Louise Erdrich, among others. Whether drawing attention to the Afro-American, Cuban-American, Asian-American, or Native-American communities, we are exploring a set of historical coordinates vastly different from those that are investigated by the likes of V. S. Naipaul, Rushdie, or Hanif Kureshi. Unlike writers who choose to map aspects of the immigrant experience in the United States, or novelists who chronicle the troubled histories of racial minorities in America, the Commonwealth or British writer almost always feels the necessity to confront, however obliquely, a perception of British life and culture that is inexorably yoked to a past of subjection to empire. While it is true that some American minorities can lay claim to histories deeply affected by American imperialism, their experiences generally resonate within the landscapes of America, while Commonwealth writers often move between the considerable geographical distances that, for instance, separate Britain and London from India or South Africa. It is, of course, a melancholy truth that Afro-American writers have the appalling legacy of the slave trade to ponder, a history that points them back to Africa, and it is also true that Asian-Americans frequently have relatives left in Asia. However, they did not come to the 'motherland' after having endured a 'British' education, nor were they under the misapprehension that they would be respected as equal under the terms of their Commonwealth status. No doubt the huge extent of the British Empire, on which the 'sun never set,' played its part in the shaping of a literature dominated by themes such as exile and return. The British government's pragmatic response to post-war decline—maintaining international standing by encouraging migration to Britain, allowing people within Commonwealth countries the right to reside in the imperial hub—and its subsequent negative reaction to black and Asian immigration, have created

migrant fictions which view the themes of exile and return with a certain pathos if not a touch of irony.

When discussing British and Commonwealth fiction, one should allow for a consideration, where it is relevant, of the place empire occupies in the novelist's imagination. Moreover, one should neither underestimate the pull the Empire has had on the thoughts of those who lived under its dominion, nor be blind to its continuing fascination for writers and artists who, in commenting on empire, frequently seek to exorcise both themselves and their societies of the more unwholesome aspects of their colonial heritage.

The diversity of British imperial rule as it was acted on and molded by vastly differing political, geographical, and historical realities has created fictions alive with varying conceptions of Britishness; it is a literature united in its visceral understanding of the difficulties of transculturation. And this is doubly so for writers who have selected post-war London as a site from which to explore self-Other relations and the politics of identity. In Michael Gorra's engaging critical study of contemporary authors' explorations of the history of the British Empire and its lingering influence, he suggests the rich possibilities that await those who are bold enough to examine Britain in postcolonial terms:

> ...if Britain today is a postimperial nation, it is also, albeit in a special sense, a postcolonial one, a country whose recent history of immigration ensures that the conflicts of postcolonial identity are now enacted on the site of the imperial power itself.[10]

Gorra's treatise argues against the distinction made between what we normally think of as the postcolonial novel—i.e., those works from outside of Britain and

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[10] Michael Gorra, *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1997) 8.

America that are, as a matter of course, found grouped together on university reading lists—and the usual candidates from the Anglo-American literary canon. This kind of oppositional grouping fails to acknowledge that writers from the Anglo-American tradition were, in one way or another, also working with the consequences of colonialism. Furthermore, it does not give sufficient credit to the reality that Commonwealth writers have been brought up with literature from Britain and America and quite naturally pen works that answer, and do not simply reject, the authors who were influential in their formative years. To understand the works of postcolonial writers, it follows that one must know their literary antecedents.[11]

In other words, it is essential to remember that postcolonial novelists are regularly involved in a kind of debate with their literary predecessors, and that their arguments do not necessarily respect historical, geographical, or political boundaries. In this sense, it is often valuable to compare writers with vastly different experiences of empire because, oddly enough, their differences can bring them together in a literary dialogue that can reveal much about the ironies and paradoxes of particular moments in the history of artistic reaction to empire. Without invoking particular theories of influence, I would strongly suggest that it is just as valid to juxtapose Conrad with Chinua Achebe or Naipaul as it is to compare Conrad with Rudyard Kipling—his equally renowned contemporary.

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[11] While it is true that writers who fall into the Anglo-American category often utilized stereotypes in order to perpetuate the hegemonic assumptions of those in power, others deliberately challenged them. Herman Melville is a good example of an author who, in "Benito Cereno" (1856), a story involving a slave ship that was overrun by black slaves, delivered a blistering attack on the dominant Manichean ideology of his times.

This leads me to an underlying premise of my work, one that stems from Hans Georg Gadamer's notion of a "fusion of horizons."[12] In approaching postcolonial fiction from distinct cultures, we should not attempt to assess the worth of these works on the basis of some kind of static measurement *vis-à-vis* the canon of Western literature. By reading Commonwealth fictions without either prescriptive indices of comparison, or inherent notions of worth, we can facilitate an awareness of another point of view and broaden our own horizon in

[12] See Hans-Georg Gadamer 's *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1975) 271-73.

the fusion of different cultural perspectives.[13] In effect, we thereby transform our

[13] See David Couzens's essay "Is Hermeneutic Ethnocentric?" in *The Interpretive Turn*, eds. David Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shustermann (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991) 155-75. In this essay he offers a useful summary of critical positions assumed by Jurgen Habermas, Taylor, Clifford Geertz, and Alan Bloom on aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics. After a brief assessment of the reception of Gadamer's notion of a 'fusion of horizons'—regarding its implications for cultural encounter—he concludes: "Perhaps to be consistent, hermeneutics should just say that we understand ourselves differently as a result of encountering others who have a different self-understanding of themselves....Then we could admit that our understanding both of ourselves and others changes, so that new problems emerge. These new problems do not imply that we understand ourselves less well, but only that we are different as a result of now having particular problems to face. This self-understanding would be 'better' only to the extent that we see through our earlier myths about what we were doing when we thought we were observing others" (Couzens 174-75). Couzens' s general acceptance of Gadamer's hermeneutical framework is tempered by a belief that in the convergence of different cultural horizons there is the implication "that every other understanding of the world converge on one's own" (Couzens 156). I prefer Taylor's conclusion in the "Politics of Recognition" (see note 17), which argues that any final perspective from which we can view the comparative value of different cultural traditions is currently unrealizable. "But what the presumption requires of us is not peremptory and inauthentic judgments of equal value, but a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions." (Taylor 73).

perceptions, not only of other cultures, but also of our own. By examining the works of Commonwealth writers we come to know better the fictional creations of the colonial period.[14] Further, in comprehending artistic response to empire as a constantly changing, ever-expanding phenomenon, we will avoid the potentially reductive formulation that views colonial and postcolonial fictions as exclusively antithetical. The point is that colonialism and postcolonialism are terms which, while generally used in contrastive evaluations of periods and practices, are nevertheless intricately bound to one another. Therefore, any assessment of fictions that fall into these categories will implicitly or explicitly involve the crossing of national boundaries and literary traditions. Perhaps at this juncture, it is appropriate to define just what the words colonial and postcolonial designate since literary critics regularly apply these terms rather loosely—invoking them in order to discuss a whole host of historical periods, geographical settings, and psychological scenarios.

Some Definitions

The difficulty of defining the foundational term postcolonial has been acknowledged by Gorra and others and has exposed the field to intense

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[14] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method:* "Actually, the horizon of the present is constantly being developed to the extent that we must continually put our prejudices to the test. Not the least of these tests is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition out of which we come. Thus the horizon of the present is not formed without the past. There is no more a separate horizon of the present than there are historical horizons that have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the process of fusing such supposedly self-sufficient horizons" (Gadamer 273).

criticism; this criticism is perhaps best exemplified by Russell Jacoby's tightly argued essay "Marginal Returns: The Trouble with Post-Colonial Theory."[15] In order to address the problem of slippage in terminology, a situation endemic to a field in which every major term has been subject to vehement and unresolved critical feuds (resulting in numerous revisions), I consider it necessary to draw up some definitions. These I have derived partly from Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*[16]—a notably ambitious and yet clearly expressed overview of an admittedly perplexing field—and partly from Charles Taylor.[17] In Taylor's widely read essay "The Politics of Recognition," he conducts a wide-ranging examination of the philosophical foundations of modern conceptions of identity. His work starts by unpacking key concepts such as *identity* and *recognition*, and in his explication of these terms, exposes their centrality to any discussion of colonialism and postcolonialism:

> The demand for recognition...is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, where this latter term designates something like a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human

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[15] Russel Jacoby, "Marginal Returns: The Trouble with Post-Colonial Theory," *Lingua Franca* Sept/Oct 1995: 30-37.

[16] Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).

[17] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992).

> being. The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being. (Taylor 25)

Taylor's essay discusses the feminist and postcolonial applications of what can be deemed the *recognition thesis*, and goes on to survey the intellectual traditions that underpin modern formulations of identity. His paper considers the implications and likely consequences of the general acceptance of this thesis for such varied matters as education and the curriculum, affirmative action, and Canadian politics. Taylor's work has provided me with a greater appreciation of the intricate genealogy of ideas fundamental to a thesis that is currently held by some to be almost axiomatic. While I defer to Taylor's useful summary of concepts central to colonial and postcolonial studies, his definitions, like Boehmer's, represent just one attempt among many to clarify a notoriously difficult field. Thus, by using Taylor and Boehmer I have made my own effort at clarification. Nevertheless, since the complexity of the theoretical positions involved challenges any final word on these definitions, they should be taken as strictly provisional in nature and merely the necessary conditions for critical debate.

Colonialism is difficult to define because it has been used to refer to periods and practices dating from before the birth of the Roman Empire. For the present purpose it will designate the consolidation of imperial conquest, the

settlement of territory, the harvesting of resources, and the establishment of imperial authority over native peoples. It will also indicate a situation whereby indigenous identity is disturbed by the creation of empire. In refusing reciprocal relations, in denying recognition to others, the colonizer, and consequently the colonized, live out the logic of moments in Hegel's master and slave dialectic. Abusive forms of identity politics were often rendered uncritically in the novels of colonial writers. In works such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), natives were exoticized, projected upon, and spoken for.

Franz Fanon, Abdul JanMohammed, and others have made it abundantly clear that racial difference tends to inflect self-Other relations and is of unparalleled importance in the politics of colonial encounter. The literature of colonialism repeatedly reproduced the prevailing Manichean ethos of the day. Colonial authors did not simply reflect their times but were frequently active participants in the continuation and justification of oppressive modes of recognition. Their fictions were buttressed by theories which sought to prove the superiority of European culture. Some of the most notable colonial works depict archetypal struggles with the unknown or the 'primitive' in which the protagonist has to overcome severe trials in a place remote from 'civilization'. Mirroring Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier hypothesis', and its suggestion that the American frontier had bred a new kind of individual, one who had benefited from the tough conditions at the edge of 'civilization', British colonialist discourse at its zenith was also filled with imagery of necessary endurance and well-deserved reward.

The process of decolonization (which in the context of the British Empire gathered momentum after the Second World War), whether peaceful or otherwise gave birth to what has become known as postcolonial literature.

Postcolonial fiction examines the colonial condition and probes the origins and consequences of inequality and injustice. It resists and rejects the 'them and us' mentality that is symptomatic of colonial patterns of recognition. In part, it is created as a reaction to the experience of nonrecognition or misrecognition and seeks to build a new identity free from the fetters of Manichean or colonialist discourse. In this sense it is often nationalist and sometimes revolutionary in tone. Alex La Guma's *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1986), a novel which portrays the dangers and sacrifices of the revolutionary struggle against white minority rule in South Africa, is a good example of writing that depicts the experience of nonrecognition while also illustrating a potential 'road to freedom'.

To reiterate, even though colonial fiction is usually written from the viewpoint of the white colonizer, whereas postcolonial works are often written from the perspective of the marginalized, or from what Gayatri Spivak has called the subaltern, it would still be overly reductive to characterize the relationship between colonial and postcolonial literature as necessarily a dichotomous one. The postcolonial by definition has grown out of the colonial. Contemporary Commonwealth/postcolonial writers quite naturally evoke the history and culture of empire and colonialism in order to transcend, attack, or simply depict the conflicts inherent in postcolonial identity. Elleke Boehmer makes a point about the danger of viewing the colonial and postcolonial as diametrically opposed:

> We are said to have on the one hand postcolonial subversion and plenitude, on the other, the single-voiced authority of colonial writing. The main difficulty with a warring dichotomy such as this is the limitations it imposes, creating definitions which, no matter how

> focused on plurality, produce their own kind of orthodoxy. Thus the postcolonial tends automatically to be thought of as multivocal, 'mongrelized,' and disruptive, even though this is not always the case. Similarly, on the other side of the binary, the colonial need not always signify texts rigidly associated with the colonial power. Colonial, or even colonialist writing was never as invasively confident or as pompously dismissive of indigenous cultures as its oppositional pairing with postcolonial writing might suggest. (Boehmer 4)

To consider postcolonial literature either without reference to Western or indeed Anglo-American literary reactions to imperialism, or without acknowledging the complexity of concomitant reaction to such postcolonial writing (often a reaction of resistance or ambivalence), is to create a decidedly one-sided argument.

This is partly why I consider self-defeating Chinua Achebe's belief that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) should be removed from the classroom. My thesis argues that Conrad's novella, rather than (as Achebe would have it) portraying a world dominated by colonialist visions of empire in which black is equated with inferiority and evil, is in fact a serious attempt to explode the Manichean dichotomies at play in nineteenth-century Europe. Conrad's work, which uses various metaphors to link the centre of one European empire with the Congo, cannot claim access to privileged knowledge of the indigenous cultures of the area ruled over by King Leopold and the Belgians. Certainly that would have been an extraordinary feat in a time when anthropological research was still in its infancy. Instead, Conrad understood better than most the experience of encounter with radical Otherness. He also had an acute awareness of the complex and conflicted ideology that underlay British and

European imperialism and that could at times be used to justify its worst excesses.

Although Conrad spoke the language of colonialism, he was capable of comprehending the tragic consequences of imperial subjugation for the oppressed as well as for the oppressor. For Conrad, the tragedy lay in the colonialist's often willful failure to see natives as anything but slaves. The dialectics of the master and slave relationship are central to many of Conrad's most notable works, and my analysis of this aspect of his fiction is indebted to Hegel's *Phenomenology* (1807) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Conrad examines the dialectics of domination and servitude by using the metaphor of the double or doppelgänger, an image that implies both a lack of self-knowledge and a profound ignorance of others. Paradoxically, Achebe's criticism of Conrad is itself disturbingly myopic; it condemns him for speaking colonial language, but fails to ask why his work has encouraged countless writers and critics to speculate on colonial patterns of recognition. Indeed, Achebe's noted critique of *Heart of Darkness* has not resulted in either its disappearance from the classroom or from wider literary debate. Instead, the *ad hominem* claim that Conrad was a "bloody racist"[18] by the author of *Things Fall Apart* (1964) has become a critical touchstone in the continuing and seemingly endless controversy over the ethical status of Conrad's works.

This ethical dimension of Conrad's writing, which Achebe's critical intervention publicized, has in fact elevated Conrad's position in classroom discussions of the postcolonial novel. Insofar as he captures the ambiguities and ironies of the imperial project, he is deemed relevant and claims a place in

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[18] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977): 788.

contemporary discussions of the postcolonial condition. If judged by the amount of critical discussion devoted to him—including lengthy treatments by one of the founders of postcolonial studies, Edward Said—Conrad bestrides the subject like a literary colossus.

It is only fitting that the foundational chapters of my dissertation (chapters 1-3) begin with Conrad, since his work has consistently provided, in its steady accretion of critical and artistic response, a key for writers and critics striving to unlock the secrets of the colonial and postcolonial condition. My investigation of some of Conrad's more famous works was not, however, primarily undertaken with his past influence in mind. I evaluate his fictions, on the contrary, on the basis of their *continuing* relevance to postcolonial studies inasmuch as works like *Heart of Darkness* show a singular grasp of patterns of recognition as they occur on both the margins and at the centre of empire. Conrad's meditations on identity, race, and empire furnish the interpretive axes for my analyses of subsequent British and Commonwealth writers who have also tackled these themes but from very different vantage points.

Literary critics have analyzed the vast fictional response to the rise and fall of the British Empire, with particular emphasis on so-called 'colonial' writers such as Kipling, Conrad, and Forster. In this dissertation, rather than concentrating solely on novelists who wrote before the majority of colonies gained independence, I have considered it more worthwhile to trace a relationship between a select group of writers from both the colonial and postcolonial stages of empire; this relationship involves writers who cannot always be neatly categorized as either colonial or postcolonial, and whose lives and fictions involve continual literary shifts between the old centre of empire and the margins. In some cases, such as in the work of Conrad, Doris Lessing,

and Mike Phillips, these shuttling movements between the centre and periphery of empire involve actual physical journeys. In the case of two postcolonial writers from South Africa, the historical and geographical voyage between the colonial centre and the postcolonial or Commonwealth nation is not literal but metaphorical.

The second part of my dissertation (chapters 4-5) examines the degree to which the shadow of colonial identity politics haunts the imaginations of two South African writers. In J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a philosophical and psychological investigation of abusive forms of self-Other encounter, the empire is represented without recourse to historical or geographical context. Coetzee's decision to avoid any kind of social context in this highly allegorical novel has elicited much criticism. Marxist critics in particular found his work to be troubling on the grounds that in avoiding cultural reference it tends to relativize and distance itself from the political urgency of materially improving (in this case) the fate of the black majority in what was South Africa's oppressive apartheid regime. Nevertheless, if we can accept that Coetzee's work is not in any direct sense a call to arms, his novel can be assessed on its own terms. Coetzee's use of postmodern literary techniques, rather than de-politicizing his work, enables him to create a landscape that foregrounds relations between the oppressor and the oppressed and between empire and barbarian. At the heart of the novel are Coetzee's meditations on the possibility of mutual recognition and on how misrecognition and non-recognition are inevitable facets of colonialist consciousness. In my view, Coetzee's various depictions of highly nuanced dramas of encounter in *Waiting for the Barbarians* owe a literary debt to Conrad and illustrate Coetzee's overriding concern with the origins of inequality and with the possibilities of

recognition in the world of empire. Are the cultures of empire and barbarian radically incommensurable? Coetzee hints that although the difficulties of achieving even partial recognition are immense, a mere scintilla of recognition can open the door to the possibility of future reciprocity—surely a positive message in an otherwise bleak contemplation of failed attempts at communication.

Bessie Head's most successful novel, *A Question of Power* (1972), is highly autobiographical and charts the protagonist's retreat into a fantasy world in which she fearlessly confronts nightmares of personal alienation and political tyranny through kaleidoscopic imagery of racism and sexism. My reading of Head's novel scrutinizes this imagery and examines the claims of critics who believe that her novel responds to and can be understood through the work of Franz Fanon and Abdul JanMohammed. While acknowledging the applicability of these critical approaches I distinguish my findings from the work of earlier critics by examining closely the nature of the protagonist's self-projections and by asking how an encounter with the self through an internalized Other can either destroy individual consciousness or project it into new ethical and spiritual territory. Head's work, like Coetzee's, makes use of psychological themes, but she adds a religious dimension, and thus reveals the colonial legacy as a complex psychological and spiritual test.

What binds these two very different South African authors and what energizes their fiction are an aspiration to comprehend the nature of imperial force, a desire to ascertain the most positive response to colonialist modes of recognition, a need to assess the aftermath of mastery or subjugation, and finally a belief that the best way to negotiate the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial condition is by confronting the self. Only by struggling with past

conceptions of the self can one truly move beyond what it has meant to be a master, or a slave. These two novelists, although each possesses a unique literary approach, exemplify much that has emerged from Commonwealth writers over the last few decades. What does their fiction imply for the work of post-war novelists writing from the heart of London? I believe that both Coetzee and Head capture certain aspects of the dilemma encountered by new immigrants to Britain and, surprisingly, by indigenous Londoners themselves. Just how should immigrants acculturate themselves to a host population undergoing its own acclimatization to cultural Otherness? For at least preliminary answers to these difficult questions we should acknowledge the profound insights of authors writing from the penumbra of empire.

In chapters six and seven, the focus of my dissertation shifts from Africa back to London. I assess the works of Doris Lessing and Mike Phillips, in particular their literary representations of the impact of post-war multi-racial immigration to Britain. London has become home to the majority of these immigrants; and, as a result, the place from which the Empire emanated has itself been transformed by the encounter of racial Otherness—'the colonies have come home to roost.'

Lessing is a prolific writer. During the last forty years her works have consistently challenged generic conventions; novels such as *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), for instance, continue to defy easy categorization. In addition to experimenting with literary form, her novels reflect a wide spectrum of theoretical influences including communism, psychoanalysis, and Sufist religious teachings. While in a lesser novelist this multiplicity of form and content could have proven to be both unworkable and otiose, Lessing has succeeded in producing works of lasting

appeal that are strengthened by their carnivalesque narrative structures and complex architectonic conceptions. This feature of her writing is more important and original than a nod to postmodern literary theory; rather, it provides evidence of the vital force that continues to propel her fictional creations into new and surprising territories.

Lessing is haunted by the ghosts of colonialism and by an early exposure to the divisive nature of racial politics in Southern Rhodesia; and this painful knowledge has been translated into her unceasing quest for the roots of inequality and injustice. An immigrant from the Commonwealth, Lessing lived in what was Southern Rhodesia for the better part of thirty years. In the first volume of her memoirs, *Under My Skin* (1995), she vividly describes the claustrophobic atmosphere of racial politics she left behind in southern Africa. Although she came to London in 1948 filled with a new sense of freedom, she could not forget Africa, and the continent continues to live in her fiction. Her exposure to colonial politics of identity was to furnish her with tremendous insights into the evolution of modern London—a city whose ethnic diversity has come to truly reflect its imperial heritage.

Lessing's need to understand the forces that alienate people from each other and from themselves was responsible for her initial interest in Communism and has led her to literary considerations of Jungian and Laingian psychology, mysticism, and the occult. Underlying her often competing frames of reference is a sensitivity to the potential for self-growth that encounters with Otherness can necessitate. This sensitivity is the fruit of bitter experience: her early exposure to the 'Colour Bar.' A familiarity with the limitations of colonial modes of encounter has served to deepen Lessing's literary appreciation of the implosion of the British Empire and the creation of a new empire within Britain.

These paradoxes of empire have been reflected in Lessing's work and she has chosen to use her fiction to investigate schisms between self and Other. There is a warning in her depictions of people who fail to evolve and who remain at odds with the world. Self-knowledge, which is essential to our spiritual development, is only available to us if we are willing to open ourselves to others. If we retreat from Otherness, we will ossify, frustrated and embittered by internal divisions that arise from "desire and hatred."[19] This is a common theme for each of the writers I consider and can be summarized quite simply: "the road of interiority passes through the Other."[20]

The implications of this idea for a city undergoing an influx of immigration are not lost on Lessing. Her London is a brooding metropolis that does not always accept change easily. In *The Four-Gated City* (1972) Martha Quest quickly begins to understand the darkness that lies within London—a place riven by class consciousness. In the second volume of her memoirs, *Walking in the Shade* (1997), which charts her acculturation to London, Lessing writes about having witnessed exchanges between class-obsessed Londoners that echoed the intolerance of racial politics she had left behind in Rhodesia. Lessing has been one of the most reliable latter-day observers of London life, and her work suggests that London itself will develop only if it can learn to accommodate Otherness. By reflecting on the way empire has changed the British nation and

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[19] "All creatures are bewildered/At birth by the delusion/Of opposing dualities/that arise from desire and hatred." See *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, trans. Barbara Miller (New York: Bantam, 1986) 74.

[20] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) 237.

by learning from those who have lived under the colonial shadow, Londoners can evolve a new sense of themselves—one attuned to the multitude of possibilities arising from interaction between cultures.

Yet, ever since childhood, Lessing has had a weakness for utopic visions of ideal cities in which "citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together" (*MQ* 17). One can almost be certain that had Mike Phillips, a British novelist of Guyanese ancestry, ever entertained such a vision, he would soon have dismissed it as just that, a dream, and one that is quickly overwhelmed by the reality of contemporary racial politics in the cosmopolitan London of the 1990s.

Phillips was born in Guyana and came to Britain in 1955. He has written five novels, three of which feature Sam Dean, a black journalist-cum-detective who lives in a small flat in central London. Phillips's knowledge of the Commonwealth and of London's multi-racial population enables him to give the detective genre a new dimension. As one reviewer put it, "the sensibility of his hero—a black man—lends freshness to the form itself."[21] Yet what is really noteworthy about his novels is his direct but highly nuanced depiction of moments of encounter between different racial groups within an urban landscape that is unmistakably British. Sam Dean, Phillips's protagonist, came to Britain as an immigrant from Guyana and had a child with a white woman whom he subsequently divorced. Dean's childhood memories and his ties to his native land are important to him. However, his son, who was born and is being raised in Britain, is unable to share fully in his father's past. Such predicaments

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[21] Marilyn Stasio, "Crime," rev. of *Blood Rights*, by Mike Phillips, *New York Times Book Review* 13 Aug. 1989: 14.

are standard fare for the burgeoning field of immigrant literature, and are portrayed sensitively by Phillips. More significantly, Phillips's careful depictions of the politics of recognition in present-day London are made all the more disturbing by the author's measured yet unmistakably melancholy tone, which helps to project his novels beyond the generic conventions of the 'thriller' or of the 'detective' novel. The underlying sadness in Phillips's fiction reveals the negative legacy of Britain's colonial history. It highlights the damage done to immigrant populations who came to Britain in search of a better life but who were often confronted by racial hostility and official uneasiness. Far from welcoming coloured immigrants from the Commonwealth to Britain as important contributors to a society short of labor, certain sectors of the British population saw them as inferior, as a source of racial strife, and as potential parasites who would soon come to live off the welfare state. These are the painful truths that inspire Sam Dean's melancholy. Phillips's protagonist cannot forget the lessons of past injustice, nor can he be blind to the continuing struggle for recognition that his son will inevitably have to undergo in the labyrinthine heart of post-imperial Britain.

The 'Empire within Britain' and Immigration

If the continuing relevance of empire to the cultural life of present-day Britain is doubted, then Rushdie should quickly be consulted. Rushdie declares the existence of a new empire within Britain and suggests that "[f]our hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzie-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain" (Rushdie 130). In short, he believes that Britain has imported a new empire of subject peoples "with whom they can deal the same way as their predecessors" did. This assertion of

Rushdie's is based on the assumption that, as he puts it, "it's impossible even to begin to grasp the nature of the beast (British racism) unless we accept its historical roots" (Rushdie 130). We can therefore conclude from Rushdie, Lessing, and Phillips that Britain is still living within the shadow of its imperial past. Rushdie's observation illustrates the inescapable bond between colonial patterns of recognition and racial identity in contemporary London. This link is confirmed in the following extract from Denis Judd's judicious treatment of British imperialism in *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present*:

> Th[e] mass settlement of citizens from the Empire and Commonwealth has provoked some interesting and often highly subjective responses from members of the host population. One has been that immigrants from the 'white' dominions have caused scarcely a stir, and certainly no race riots....Immigrants from the 'new' Commonwealth have been less fortunate. West Indians, South Asians and Africans have all come in for their share of racial abuse, discrimination and harassment. Africans and Caribbeans, especially, have borne the brunt of white racism, and have been negatively stereotyped in various ways, despite their contribution to the work of the NHS and to the nation's transport systems, as well as their high profile in sport and the entertainment industry....Saloon-bar comedians may, for example, mock the Australasian colonisation of London's Earls Court as creating a 'kangaroo valley,' but very few propose that Australians and New Zealanders, or Canadians and South Africans, should be

compulsorily repatriated.[22]

The existence of the National Front, the late Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood speech,'[23] and Norman Tebbit's so-called 'cricket test'[24] have all shown that Rushdie's charge is substantive. More disturbing than these indicators of the racial environment within the United Kingdom are fresh academic studies that argue that "the set of the official mind was always opposed to the permanent settlement in Britain of Asian and black communities" (Spencer 19).

While, in response to a labor shortage after the Second World War,

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[22] Denis Judd, *Empire: The British Imperial Experience From 1765 to the Present* (London: Fontana, 1997) 427.

[23] Enoch Powell, "To the Annual General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre, Birmingham, 20 April 1968." On the Race Relations Bill of 1968: "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the river Tiber foaming with much blood.' That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic...is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect." Qtd. in *Reflections of a Statesman: The Writings and Speeches of Enoch Powell*, ed. Rex Collings (London: Bellew, 1991) 379.

[24] Norman Tebbit's so-called "cricket test," which was extensively debated in the 1980s, argued that a Pakistan-born migrant watching a match between Britain and Pakistan who did not cheer for England could not be thought of as fully assimilated. In Norman Tebbit's recent appearance during the Conservative Party Conference under the newly elected William Hague, he embarrassed the Conservative Party by echoing these sentiments.

successive British governments encouraged immigration, there was nonetheless official dismay at the prospect of a future multi-racial society. Racist assumptions were often fundamental to the policy of the establishment. The belief that West Indian and Asian immigrants were unskilled and were likely to be dependent on the welfare state was widespread; yet it has been demonstrated by sociological studies that these immigrant populations were on the whole no less employable than the indigenous population itself. The story of immigration to Britain over the last fifty years is a complex and contradictory one. On the one hand, the British authorities, worried by declining world influence and rapid decolonization, attempted to shore up Britain's international presence by allowing migration from the Commonwealth. The 1948 British Nationality Bill was inspired by this notion. Kathleen Paul's analysis of the political agenda behind this bill is revealing:

> By keeping migratory routes revolving around Britain, and by remaining the only Commonwealth country not to privilege citizen nationals above other British subjects, the bill reinforced the island's distinct position: England remained the center to which members throughout the empire would be drawn and the Westminster Parliament remained first among equals.[25]

Thus, the idea of the imperial hub, of the perceived advantage of sustaining ties between the metropolitan centre and the colonial margins, paradoxically enabled the creation of a new multi-racial nation. On the other hand, even though the consequences of an open-door policy were not fully understood by the Atlee government and had certainly not crystallized into any formal scheme,

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[25] Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997) 16.

the official reaction to the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* was depressingly simple: the debarkation of black immigrants, unlike that of the Irish or white Commonwealth immigrants before them, was a problem. Subsequently, post-war British governments attempted to limit black and Asian immigration in various ways, but it was not until Margaret Thatcher's Nationality Act of 1981 that these attempts came to fruition, largely ending Commonwealth immigration to Britain.

There is no doubt that colonialist attitudes persisted in post-war immigration policy. The empire had instilled deep-rooted beliefs in national and racial superiority among government leaders as well as the population at large. Ironically, during their period as British subjects, the Jamaicans had been taught to think of Britain as home. Those Jamaicans who came to England on the *Windrush*, Paul implies, must have felt, in certain ways, that they were homeward bound. What they encountered when they arrived was at best official indifference and at worst outright hostility. What they could not have guessed was how long it would take for them to be fully recognized as British. Even now some people find it difficult to accept those who were born in Britain of African or Asian descent as truly British. Paul argues that such attitudes echoed governmental policy and have created a hierarchy of Britishness. Rushdie's anger originates in the everyday perception of this hierarchy and in his understanding of the history of British imperialism: a knowledge that enables him to suggest that British racism has a long genealogy.

It appears that the last fifty years of immigration to Britain were in part a result of the British Government's desire to maintain international prestige. "The game was the same, but the rules had changed...gunboat diplomacy and outright domination were to be replaced by colonial economic development and

equality among dominion nation states" (Paul 3). In 1981, Thatcher created three tiers of citizenship and restricted the right of abode to all but the first of these categories, in effect walking away from the "language of a United Kingdom and Colonies citizenship" (Paul 170). Surely the pusillanimous nature of British governmental reaction to multi-racial immigration over the last few decades illustrates the underside of the nation's imperial heritage. So how do we reconcile such evidence with the works of latter-day scholars of British Imperialism that emphasize a positive heritage and an intriguing history of cross-cultural exchange?

This is the quandary analyzed by contemporary novelists such as Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Timothy Mo, and Mike Phillips. These writers have chosen to depict London as somehow central to their meditations on empire and the politics of identity. In this manner they connect their fictions to those of a famous modernist writer of foreign origin who adopted British citizenship and set some of his most memorable works in *fin de siècle* London. Ever since Conrad chose the Thames as the starting and closing point of Marlow's narrative in *Heart of Darkness*, the metropolis has spawned colonial and an increasing number of postcolonial fictions. Rushdie, Mo, and others ponder the new face of London and although sometimes depicting it as a nexus of racial encounter, cannot forget the role of the city in Britain's imperial past.

Unquestionably, London has changed as a result of British imperialism. A large part of all the immigrants to the United Kingdom have selected Britain's urban centre as a place to settle. A survey conducted last year found that of those residing in Britain, 77% of black Africans, 58% of Caribbeans, 53% of Bangladeshis, 41% Indians, and 36% of Chinese have chosen to reside in

London.[26] Immigration from the Commonwealth has meant that it has become a site of multiculturalism every bit as diverse as those to be found in urban areas of the United States, and yet as Rushdie and others have maintained it is a unique type of multiculturalism deeply influenced by the history of imperialism. In the aftermath of empire, the process of acclimatization to and acceptance of Otherness continues to have deep significance for the future of British society.

An Empire of Words?

There are some who have seen the demise of Britain's empire as evidence of a subfusc future for the house of British fiction. Of course, from Kipling to Graham Greene, the empire has provided the possibility of encounter with faraway places and of firsthand experience of the colonialist mentality. It has also furnished British and Commonwealth writers with opportunities for reflecting on the place Britishness occupies in their imagination and has sometimes resulted in profound speculations on the notion of exile and return. Yet, bereft of the empire, writers such as Anthony Burgess have cast doubt on the possibility of a single great work of fiction from a British author; for Burgess implies that without an empire, a *weltanschauung* is no longer possible.[27] But this is surely an excessively lugubrious conclusion. Burgess's observation implies a period of gradual decline for Britain, and a turning away from the world. While Britain no longer occupies a foremost position on the world stage, however, there is scant evidence of its withdrawal from global affairs. Nor is

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[26] Statistics qtd. in the *Atlas of Literature*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury (London: De Agonistini, 1997) 322.

[27] Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now* (London: Faber, 1971) 19.

insularity pervasive in the works of late-nineties British novelists. Britain's role in the Commonwealth, its 'special relationship' with the United States, and its status as part of the European Community militate against such a possibility. Also the inexorable spread of the English language, coupled with the fact that it is the world's leading medium of business communication, has increased the reach of British and Commonwealth fiction.

Although threatening the existence of other languages, English has itself been transformed by incorporating words from a variety of other tongues and this linguistic encounter has enriched the language immeasurably. Such a mixture has also marked the Janus face of imperial enterprise of accommodation and imposition; where brute force inevitably failed, language has perhaps succeeded. When other reminders of empire have crumbled the literature will remain, transformed in reception, but in its language speaking of the past and to the future.

For these and other reasons, the Empire continues to live in the imagination of contemporary British and Commonwealth writers. If current fictions by these authors are any indication of what is to come, then they will continue to elaborate on the paradoxes of the history of imperialism. By so doing, they will avail themselves of the wisdom to be found in the vast storehouse of experience offered to them in the triumphs and tragedies of four hundred years of imperial history.

Part One

Uncertain Coordinates: Conrad's Colonial Consciousness

Chapter 1

Hegelian Dialectic and the Drama of Self-formation in Conrad's Stories of the Double

> But you are afraid of yourself; of the inseparable being forever at your side—master and slave, victim and executioner—who suffers and causes suffering. That's how it is! One must drag the ball and chain of one's selfhood to the end.[1]
>
> —Joseph Conrad

[1] Joseph Conrad, "To Marguerite Poradowska," 20 July 1894, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 162.

> You have done combat here against yourself. I came riding into combat against myself; I would have gladly killed myself, but you could not refrain from defending my own body against me.[2]
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> —Wolfram von Eschenbach

The problem of selfhood in Joseph Conrad's works has inevitably led to various discussions centering on the role or roles the *doppelgänger* takes in his fiction. It has never been difficult to locate Conrad within the tradition of writers, such as James Hogg, Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Henry James, who have to a greater or lesser extent used the double as a locus from which to explore the vast territory associated with a literary treatment of identity. Even the briefest acquaintance with Conrad's work will necessarily entail a familiarity with images of duality, of chiaroscuro, and with profound meditations on the self, the Other, and society. Furthermore, Conrad's

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[2] Wolfram von Eschenbach, *The Parzival*, ed. and trans. André Lefevere, The German Library, vol.2 (New York: Continuum, 1991) 203. The idea of warring against a person or entity that comes in the course of a story to symbolize an element of the self, an element that in order to progress must be overcome, is an archetypal notion. While the image of a struggle against the self can be found throughout the Western literary tradition as well as in Eastern texts such as the *Bhagavad-Gita* this image has received widely differing treatments throughout literary history.

"capability of being in uncertainties"[3] can lead to interpretations that are alive with questions of ontology, of epistemology, and of just how it is possible to "read" Conrad. To read Conrad is to be beset by a world in which identity is found to be elusive, disappearing under Conrad's intense scrutiny much as a point of light, when viewed directly, can be occulted in a blind spot. Boundaries between self and Other fluctuate, streams of adjectives imply layers of meaning, and moments of portentousness hint at ineffability; these ambiguities play their part in a symphony of grand interpretive possibility.

One obvious fallacy of reading would be the attempt to discern quick ethical solutions to the many questions raised by Conrad's work. Just as *Lord Jim* (1900) is not simply a text exemplifying the necessity of facing one's fears, *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is more than a meditation on the breakdown of rules of conduct on the fringes of empire. Indeed, Conrad's writing discourages these easy readings by constantly hinting at the illusory nature of such findings. If Kurtz's weakness is the central moral of *Heart of Darkness*, why then does Conrad make him a powerful and compelling character whose fall creates an impression of such majesty? This is not to suggest that Conrad's writing is nihilistic, nor that his work calls for an approach based on critical relativism.

Conrad, the Double, and Skepticism

One of Conrad's chief obsessions was the search for coordinates of belief, and one of his most powerful insights was that codes of behavior, whether the merchant seaman's, the colonialist's, or the city gent's, could be

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[3] John Keats, "To George and Thomas Keats," 21, 27 (?) Dec. 1817, *Letters*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958) 95.

tested and broken, projecting them into a new world of possibility. Far from coming to the conclusion that nothing can be known, Conrad's prose explores both ethical possibilities of selfhood and, as I hope to illustrate, a dialectical project. By focusing on some of Conrad's best-known instances of doubling one can perceive a dialectical process and a progression of individual consciousness through various stages of development. In other words, I believe Conrad was attempting to find a lens through which he could examine the self, tested and transformed, and the literary device that best suited this purpose was the *doppelgänger.* Although it is almost a truism today to call Conrad a skeptic, I will maintain that Conrad is, as usual, difficult to pin down, and that his moments of extreme pessimism and undoubted skepticism are predicated on a certain belief in the possibility of ethical and spiritual development. After all, if he was an unrelenting skeptic, would Conrad's works speak to so many readers with such power? The role of the double in Conrad's work is intimately tied to this question. Mark Thomas's writing on Conrad and the double expresses a contemporary and standard critical reaction:

> In revamping Gothic character doubling, Conrad puts the device to some new uses, to convey his deeply ironic vision of reality. In this way Conrad exemplifies a shift toward philosophical skepticism that characterized the late Victorian period and grew into existential Modernism. Returning difference rather than similarity, Conrad's doubles are an important means of representing a world in which patterns of meaning are sometimes shown to be hollow

and worthless.[4]

Conrad's writing undoubtedly introduces a world in which, at times, patterns of meaning fall into radical uncertainty. Yet this observation is a commonplace of Conrad criticism. Is his use of the double simply another method of evoking uncertainty? If so, then Conrad's utilization of the topos of the double is really not that different from the function it fulfills in Charles Brockden Brown's fiction. Brown's Gothic novels *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntley* (1799), for example, feature doubles that clearly challenge discrete conceptions of selfhood while promoting a Romantic skepticism of early Enlightenment notions of reason and the senses. A quick survey of the history of the double in American literature is sufficient to unearth countless examples of the use of the *doppelgänger* to promote philosophical skepticism. Can anything distinguish, for instance, Melville's use of the double in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1856) or in *Moby Dick* (1851) from Conrad's employment of this trope in "The Secret Sharer" (1910)? I believe Conrad's vision of the double is generally less bleak than Melville's, less Gothic than Brown's, and more nuanced than Poe's. What separates Conrad from other authors who feature this trope is the manner in which he is able, on the one hand, to indicate radical uncertainty and, on the other, to affirm the potential of the self to evolve.

Conrad in his fiction is a dialectician who, like Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), tackles the philosophical problem of solipsism. By illustrating extraordinary links between two consciousnesses, whether Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, Gentleman Brown and Lord Jim in *Lord Jim*,

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[4] Mark Ellis Thomas, "Doubling and Difference in Conrad: 'The Secret Sharer,' *Lord Jim*, and *The Shadow Line*," *Conradiana* 27.3 (1995): 222.

or Leggatt and the Captain in "The Secret Sharer," Conrad is able to suggest that "the road of interiority passes through the Other."[5] What makes Conrad's use of the double so important is not only that he is able to destabilize comfortable "common sense" notions of identity, but also that he is also capable of provoking his readership into realizing the necessity of uncertainty for both intellectual and ethical development.[6] Such incertitude both marks and calls for transition. While Conrad's fiction is rarely didactic, it does not simply explore "that uncertainty by which the literature of the modern world has come to be distinguished, and has yet to be expelled from,"[7] but also poses the question: once ethical codes and ontological status have been disturbed, how can one exist in what Conrad characterizes as an absurd universe?

"To claim that Conrad shares existential ways of seeing to a remarkable

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[5] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) 237.

[6] Michael J. S. Williams, *A World of Words: Language and Displacement in the Fiction of Edgar Allen Poe* (London: Duke UP, 1988) 17-18. See his discussion of the "primary assumption of a unified self" that lay behind much of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. For example, Thomas Reid states that "[t]he identity of a person is a perfect identity, whenever it is real, it admits of no degrees; and it is impossible that a person should be in part the same, and in part different because a person is a monad and is not divisible into parts" (qtd. in Williams 17-18).

[7] Karl Miller, *Doubles* (London: Oxford UP, 1985) viii.

extent, is not, of course, to say that he comports with them in every last detail."[8] So begins the epilogue of *Conrad's Existentialism* by Otto Bohlmann. Bohlmann goes on to say that while, in an existential sense, action, commitment, and love can achieve self-affirmation or "authenticity," these factors are at best short-lived in Conrad's fictions, which often resolve themselves in bleak horizons filled with the hero's abasement and final destruction. Bohlmann maintains that although only brief moments of "authentic" existence are experienced by Conrad's characters, they provide the key to understanding the overall structure of his works. However, in reading Conrad's numerous stories of the double, the existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus—while providing a useful critical framework—is both more obfuscating and less applicable than that which an exploration of the Hegelian system as found in the *Phenomenology* can supply.

Conrad and Cultural Hermeneutics

Conrad's use of the double also has implications for what John W. Griffith identifies as "'cultural hermeneutics,' or the study of how we come to knowledge of another culture."[9] Griffith's book discusses *Heart of Darkness* in the context of travel writing, anthropology, and ethnographic fiction in the late Victorian and early Modern periods. He understands the anthropological dilemma of these eras to be "the ability of one culture (particularly 'civilized' societies) to

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[8] Otto Bohlmann, *Conrad's Existentialism* (London: Macmillan, 1991) 193.

[9] John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller'* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 24.

penetrate the thought of another (the 'primitive')" (Griffith 5). He goes on to argue that Conrad's fiction concerns the difficulties and anxieties of transculturation. That cross-cultural encounters are investigated by Conrad is certain, but I believe what is less obvious is the extent to which he *knows* these other cultures. Indeed, Conrad's knowledge of other cultures has been recognized, though ambivalently, by V. S. Naipaul, who notes that "Conrad's experience was too scattered; he knew many societies by their externals, but he knew none in depth."[10] Conrad, as Griffith sees it, is primarily a writer who understands the process of "cultural dislocation." In other words, Conrad is aware of the psychological stresses an individual undergoes when experiencing an alien land and culture. These tensions have always been within the domain of fictional representation and have also featured in anthropological studies of the role of the so-called fieldworker. One such study identifies a crucial point both for the assessment of Conrad's fiction and for an understanding of the fieldworker's predicament:

> ...an interesting problem arises: as the fieldworker experiences feelings of discontinuity and identity fragmentation, where will he find a suitable mirror to reflect back to him a secure sense of identity? The anthropologist is, by definition, adrift in a sea of foreigners; the eyes that mirror his soul are alien, unfamiliar.[11]

Gary Thrane has pointed to some recent anthropological research that suggests

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[10] Keith Carabine, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments,* vol. 2 (Sussex: Helm Information, 1992) 391.

[11] John L. Wengle, *Ethnographers in the Field: The Psychology of Research* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P., 1988) 25-26.

that "[i]t is only in the eyes of our own like, of our own ilk, that we can find a mirror."[12] I believe that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novella that explores the implications of the difficulties inherent in the transcultural experience at the same time as suggesting a process by which one can evolve, if not through an alien culture, then through one's own culture in collision with another. Marlow does not come to know the Africans he sees in the Congo; rather, his clearest vision is of the imperial activities of the Europeans and their strategic defenses against "cultural dislocation."

What Marlow gains from his journey is, I will argue, a different form of consciousness. His wisdom is principally obtained as a result of his encounter with Kurtz. The fact that a doubling relationship exists between Marlow and Kurtz is crucial. If we wish to comprehend what Marlow learns from his journey; if we want to discuss Achebe's belief in the text's inherently racist Manicheanism; if we hope to explore relations between colonizer and colonized in a way that is sufficiently nuanced; and, finally, if we desire to understand the process of coming to know the Other in the world Conrad portrays, we must determine the role of the *doppelgänger* in his fiction. To undertake such a task, it is important to examine Conrad's reference to the self as both master and servant, executioner and victim. Conrad, in describing the "being forever at [one's] side," presents a description of doubling that connects this phenomenon with struggle and conflict. John Batchelor, in his incisive critical biography of Conrad, notes:

> The relationship between Conrad the man and Conrad the artist is

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[12] Gary Thrane, "Shame and the Construction of the Self," *Annual of Psychoanalysis* 7 (1979): 330.

> in a sense adversarial or oppositional, as we have seen: the man forms relationships which are in almost every case power relationships, in which he is either dependent (as with Garnett and Galsworthy) or dominant (as with Ford and Jessie).[13]

Many biographers of Conrad have drawn attention to the deeply personal struggles the novelist appears to have undergone in the creation of his fiction. It would not be stretching things too far to imply a very strong link between Conrad and his fictional creations. As Jessie wrote, referring to her husband after he had completed *Under Western Eyes* (1911), "he lives mixed up in scenes and holds converse with the characters."[14] For Conrad, fluidity of identity and the ability to be inhabited by an Other—even an Other that comes from within—are inextricably linked with great personal struggle and artistic triumph.

Conrad's stories of the double are in a very real sense an attempt to delve into a complex set of relations between the self and others. His fiction's preoccupation with identity and doubling is in fact a method through which Conrad is able to construct a dialectic of desire and recognition that at times parallels Hegel's famous examination of these themes. In particular, Conrad's stories of doubling enact much that Hegel points to in the "Lordship and Bondage" section of his *Phenomenology.* However, whereas Hegel claims that

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[13] John Batchelor, *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 84.

[14] Joseph Conrad, *Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum,* ed. William Blackburn (Durham: Duke UP, 1958) 192.

"[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged,"[15] Conrad complicates his fiction's very Hegelian concerns by asking what happens to the self when acknowledged by that which is Other yet later proves to be the self doubled. Conrad's writing, I believe, attempts to transcend self-Other dichotomies by hinting at the wisdom to be gained through a literary experiment. His experiment is to take the double archetype—derived from Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, and the Gothic and Romantic traditions—and give it a surprising twist. What is perhaps truly novel about Conrad's employment of the double is the way in which he is able to use it to question the imperial project and at the same time show how extreme conditions on the frontier or in the colony could transform an individual's consciousness forever.[16] Marlow is profoundly changed by Kurtz, as is our notion of London and of so-called civilized society if we read *Heart of Darkness* attentively. This was Conrad's greatest achievement: to link in a clearly dialectical manner two consciousnesses and two lands—the truth of Marlow being in Kurtz and the truth of London being in Africa. Homi Bhabha points to this when, on Marlow's return to London, he sees "a demonic doubling emerg[ing] at the very center of metropolitan life."[17] Using the device of the double enables Conrad to highlight

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[15] G. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 111.

[16] Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Hypothesis," in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York: Ungar, 1963).

[17] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 213.

the paradoxes involved in the colonial project. As the *Congo Diary* (1890) testifies in its own laconic manner, Conrad himself was to come out of the Congo deeply shaken and cynical about the practices of colonialism. Yet this ordeal perhaps only refined Conrad's skill in depicting the knowledge to be gained from "cultural dislocation," no matter how uncomfortable or horrific it might be. In doubling, Conrad discovered a metaphor for the anxieties of the traveler, but more than this he found a method of connecting the colony with the metropolis. From Conrad's perspective, the knowledge gained in the colony may be crucial for negotiating the metropolitan center.

To Report on the Other?

Marlow's description of Kurtz's lunge towards divinity, Marlow's apparent disgust with lying, and his subsequent lie to the Intended are incidents that highlight the inescapable link between ethical growth in Conrad's protagonists and the existence of the *doppelgänger*. Back from the Congo and his encounter with Kurtz, how should Marlow report his experiences? Again, this is a question that is central to ethnography. James Clifford's essay "On Ethnographic Self-Fashioning: Conrad and Malinowski," while making a variety of comparisons between the two men, argues, most interestingly, that Conrad and Malinowski share common ethical concerns.[18]

Clifford claims that at the turn of the century an epistemological crisis occurs in which "evolutionist confidence began to falter, and a new ethnographic conception of culture became possible" (Clifford 93). He believes

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[18] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 92-115.

that this new kind of ethnography, which involves the stance of the participant observer—"a state of being in culture while looking at culture" (93)—permeates twentieth-century art and literature. By considering Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in conjunction with Malinowski's Troibrand field diary, published after the anthropologist's death under the title *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1966), Clifford contends that both men went through identity crises as a result of their lives and travels, that is, what Griffith refers to as the stress of "cultural dislocation." Clifford goes on to see their negotiation of this experience, one that threatens identity and relativizes notions of truth, as crucial to each man's career in that they rescued themselves from the quandary of ethnographic and philosophical uncertainty through the act of writing.

The necessity of reporting on their experiences calls forth in both men a need to examine what it means to represent the truth. Clifford believes that Malinowski's functionalist approach to the study of the Trobrianders in his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) constitutes a response to the anxieties of cultural dislocation during fieldwork. He argues that Malinowski's study of the Trobrianders is an account in which "the fashioned wholes of a self and of a culture seem to be mutually reinforcing allegories of identity" (104). In order to justify this assertion Clifford looks further than Malinowski's formal ethnographic research and considers his famous *Diary*. His most extensive quotation from the diary reveals the degree to which Malinowski is haunted by the difficulty of being sincere while holding onto a monadic conception of the self. As Clifford puts it, "[h]e suffers from the fact that this rule of sincerity, an ethics of unified personality, means that he will have to be unpleasantly truthful to various friends and lovers" (103). Malinowski, unlike Conrad, creates what Clifford calls "a realist cultural fiction" (109), that being his ethnographic research, while

Conrad's response to the dilemmas of cultural dislocation is to produce a romance that at its heart reveals a profound and paradoxical knowledge of truth and lies.

In addition to revealing a new understanding of the complexities of representing knowledge acquired in the colony, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* suggests that in reporting about the Other we are in some manner reporting on the self. Is it not revealing that Kurtz, that "eloquent phantom" (Conrad 75) Marlow refers to in his interview with the Intended, that figure of daemonic doubling Bhabha sees at the center of the metropolis, in inhabiting Marlow's consciousness at the moment he talks with the Intended, speaks his truth once again? Is it not also telling that at this precise instant—with Kurtz's words ringing in his ears—Marlow famously speaks his lie? According to Clifford and many other literary critics, the lie that Marlow tells the Intended is a "saving lie." Marlow has understood that there are different "domains of truth" and that by substituting words that the Intended can accept he has provided a necessary respite from "the horror." But what are the words Marlow uses to indicate his struggle with Kurtz's phantom and with the ethics of truth-telling?

"I pulled myself together and spoke slowly" (Conrad 75). Marlow has battled with a memory, with a double, with a manifestation of cultural dislocation, and in saving the Intended he has forever changed himself. In wrestling with the memory of Kurtz, Marlow forges a new kind of ethic that, on the surface, resembles Malinowski's "ethics of a unified personality." Looked at more closely, however, Marlow's hard-won new perspective constitutes a vision of ethics that can only be obtained through a profound struggle in which one comes to fathom the self as both master and slave, executioner and victim.

The Double and Hegel

Transformation of the self is at the heart of Conrad's fiction. In most cases the protagonist is changed greatly by exposure to another character who can be called his double. Ever since Albert J. Guerard wrote about *Heart of Darkness* as the "journey within," critics have been aware of the psychoanalytic dimensions of any treatment of doubling in Conrad.[19] Indeed, no less a figure than Freud has provided one of the most useful definitions and clarifications of the term *double*.[20] While I will be working on a definition of the term, it should be

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[19] Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958).

[20] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychoanalytic Notebooks of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth,1925) 219-52. Freud supplies a solid basis for defining the double, and I will stand by it, although I will also discuss other commentators' definitions, which include further distinctions such as "latent" and "manifest doubling." Freud notes: "Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from one of these to another—by what we should call telepathy—so that the one possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even same names through several consecutive generations" (224).

noted that this concept presents a classic problem for the critic. Karl Miller's book on doubling was criticized by the London press because, as one critic saw it, doubles, in Miller's terms, could be found everywhere. All three of the Conrad works discussed here fit Freud's model. The characters do not look the same but are doubles because in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* there is a strong, and on occasion preternatural, link and identification between two characters. Conrad takes this further in "The Secret Sharer," where the doubling paradigm is complicated by his self-reflexive layering of doubled meanings, echoing language, and the conscious manipulation of what can be called literary codes.

Ever since Otto Rank, the double has had an explicit association with the idea of death. Death haunts Conrad's works and, as I shall argue, reinforces the need Marlow has to encounter Kurtz. The link between death and the notion of transformation is archetypal and is a connection felt at every level of Conrad's novella. Yet, having said this, I would add that Conrad chooses, surprisingly, to focus primarily on the relationship between Marlow and Kurtz. The Conradian dialectic as seen at work in their relationship resembles an orthodox Hegelian dialectic insofar as Marlow is transformed in his encounter with Kurtz—gaining insight as a result of a brush with death. Even though Conrad's stories do not realize any grand synthesis or recognize any absolutes, the possibility of this supreme enlightenment is intimated. In this sense, Conrad's dialectic is a positive one and, far from suggesting that Kurtz's death is purely wasteful, clearly illustrates Marlow's ethical transformation.

While the Conrad of *Nostromo* (1904) or *The Secret Agent* (1907) has been viewed by numerous critics as "exhibit[ing] existential ways of seeing," the works of his that depict doubling as a central paradigm tend to feature concerns reminiscent of those addressed in the first parts of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

Interestingly, *Nostromo*'s reception history, although it has generally been dominated by existential readings, has included the following insightful comment by Avrom Fleishman:

> Conrad's special version of tragedy is that this very social rootedness of the individualistic hero contains the contradictions which destroy him. The career and development of Nostromo follow a dialectic as incisive and ironic as one of the character studies of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*.[21]

In a consideration of Conrad's politics, Fleishman makes a very strong case for reading Conrad against a background of German idealism. He claims that Conrad was raised "in a German intellectual milieu," and that Polish nationalism was informed by "German idealist philosophy" (Fleishman 53). He also draws attention to the fact that "Conrad's father wrote in the train [*sic*] of Zygmunt Kransinski, a major poet whose social idealism was a Christianized version of the Hegelian progress toward a rational state" (54). In a wide-ranging analysis of what Fleishman sees as the Victorian organicist tradition, i.e., Coleridge, Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Dickens, he suggests that Conrad has affinities with what he considers the apotheosis of this kind of thought: the Oxford group of neo-Hegelian idealists. By referring to the work of T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, Fleishman is able to speak directly to a key ethical position in Conrad's stories of the double:

> if the self to be realized is not exclusive of other selves, but on the contrary is determined, characterized, made what it is by relation

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[21] Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967) 164.

> to others; if my self which I am is the realization in me of a moral world which is a system of selves, an organism in which I am a member, and in whose life I live—then I cannot aim at my own well being without aiming at that of others.[22]

For Conrad, the double is not only a useful tool for creating and examining what Abdul JanMohamed has called (in reference to certain adventure romances of the *fin de siècle* period) "Manichean allegories," but it is also a crucial factor in his attempt to understand the paradoxical nature of the relation between the individual and the state.[23]

The isolated individual in Conrad's fiction—a figure that has engendered so much commentary—is at the crux of Conrad's fictional polemic. Kurtz is the focal point for Conrad's probing of the anxieties of transculturation, and he is Marlow's mirror: a mirror that sends back monstrous reflections. As fieldworkers in the twentieth century can attest, the ordeal of facing a completely alien world, of leaping as Jim does into the lives of others, is a profoundly unsettling experience—one that cannot be made less traumatic through preparation. As Wengle puts it, "a person's sense of identity is, at bottom, instilled and maintained through those reflections mirrored onto him by significant others" (Wengle 8). The absence of a reflection creates a burning need for one. Kurtz finds a mirror in the land that "whispered to him things about himself which he

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[22] F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Oxford UP, 1927) 116.

[23] Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of the Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 71.

did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating" (Conrad 57). After mastering the Africans as a result of carrying out colonial desires, Kurtz falls into a position where his work loses meaning. Without work, he resembles Hegel's famous description of the experience of the master, an experience that is doomed to stagnation, since, as Alexandre Kojève notes, "if to be man is to be master, the slave is not a man and to be recognized by a slave is not to be recognized by another master."[24] Without recognition and without that which keeps "desire held in check" (Hegel 118), i.e., work, Kurtz reaches an impasse in which his endeavors to master the world result in a tragic realization of the hollow nature of the colonial enterprise. Kurtz becomes a hollow man and his last words echo this truth—a truth every bit as disturbing as the one heard by the visitors to E. M. Forster's Marabar Caves.

To Judge Kurtz

As Orestes' deeds in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* call for judgment from a higher source, so do the actions of Kurtz. Unlike the goddess Athena, who is summoned to judge Orestes, Conrad's readers are invited to hear Marlow's evidence. Marlow is implicated in his testimony, since his link with Kurtz is powerful enough to change his most profound beliefs. The nemesis that lies in wait for Kurtz originates not only in the blood on his hands but also in the conflict between the individual and the state. Or, to put it another way, Kurtz's situation illustrates the dangers inherent in a negotiation between self-will and

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[24] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,* trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., ed. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1969) 46.

the demands of empire.

Kurtz in his solitude finds only himself and sees all within him, yet forgets the "vanity of moral self-fulfillment in isolation from a social-civic fabric of values and options."[25] George Steiner's comment is addressed to a decisive move in Hegel's early thought, and this sentiment is underscored by D. W. Hamlyn, who remarks that the master-servant dialectic in the *Phenomenology* is there in part "to show how the notion of an individual consciousness must inevitably take us to that of a social and thereby universal consciousness."[26]

A similar move from the individual to the societal can be observed when one looks at two works constantly linked by critics who study Conrad's use of the double: *Heart of Darkness* and "The Secret Sharer." Linked through the pronounced use of the doubling motif although written eleven years apart, the two works have striking similarities but perhaps more important differences. "The Secret Sharer" is different from Conrad's earlier novella in that, although it features doubling's intricate recognition and implicit struggle, in this instance dialectical development results in an emphasis on the role of the crew. At the story's inception, the Captain is alienated from his crew, but, instead of attempting to achieve supreme mastery by dominating others, as Kurtz does, or yielding to a desire to understand one's own being through another's experience, as Marlow does, the Captain, during the course of the story, severs the link with his double and becomes a vital and recognized member of the

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[25] George Steiner, *Antigones* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984) 23.

[26] D. W. Hamlyn, *The Penguin History of Western Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1987) 249.

crew. Like Hegel, Conrad understands the necessity of a relation beyond that characterized by the recognition of one's self in the Other.

Kurtz's tragedy stems from an inability to see the self reflected in society. Alone and alienated from those around him, he becomes a victim of the tragic peripeteia associated with a Faustian attempt at godhood, an attempt with an inescapable conclusion: death. In the movement from Kurtz's tragedy to the Captain's triumph there is a correspondence between Conrad and the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* in their hope

> to emphasize the concrete historicity and 'collective' character of ethical choices which the individual is compelled to make, a compulsion which divides and, therefore, advances consciousness on its teleological path. (Steiner 266)

The necessity of Kurtz and Marlow for the creation of the Captain, the protagonist of "The Secret Sharer," suggests that Conrad regarded his characters as prototypes. I am not implying that the characters are cut from the same stone, nor are they simply variants of a single prototype. Rather, Conrad is able to take certain situations and play out the philosophical dramas within them while gaining a more finely nuanced impression of the possibilities for further explorations into similar philosophical territory. Conrad's many stories of the double increased in power and vision as he re-examined notions of selfhood during the course of his artistic endeavors. Almayer is less finely wrought than Jim. "The Secret Sharer" is more self-reflexive than *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's stories reflect an artistic maturation. Many critics have perceived a gradual waning of powers towards the end of Conrad's career, and although there is ample evidence for this claim, I would argue that if one looks at certain themes in his work, a dialectical progression can be traced. Conrad's

meditations on identity and doubling constitute such a theme. Tested by the double, Conrad's characters progress and yet can only be understood if one remembers the tragedies, self-affirmations, hopes, illusions, and finally the importance of the transformations his previous protagonists—undergoing similar trials—have experienced.

Conrad's use of doubling can be regarded as an elaborate experiment that succeeds in providing the impetus necessary for dialectical development. His works stressed doubled characters in order to portray a dialectical interplay. An interplay of this kind tends to imply a progression, and a progression suggests a realization (even of horror), which in turn projects part of the self to deeper levels of awareness—both complex and paradoxical in nature. The knowledge obtained from interaction with the double is not lost, the other part of the self being sublated and integrated within the protagonist's self. The written fate of the sublated self (physical death or expulsion from the story) is not of primary importance. It is the wisdom inherent in the process of questioning identity that is most notable. One of Conrad's chief achievements in featuring the double is to illustrate a character's negotiation with the forces of profound uncertainty. Like "The Turn of the Screw" or "The Fall of the House of Usher," Conrad's art is "conditioned to sustain debate" (Miller 266).

Projects of Selfhood

Victorian notions of societal progress are, of course, an important subtext in Conrad's works. Indeed, to acknowledge that Conrad was influenced by Herbert Spencer's ideas, and also Darwin's, inevitably leads to discussions of conduct and personal development, or what can be termed as "projects of

selfhood."[27] The verb *to project* has many psychoanalytic implications. When one unconsciously transfers one's own impressions and feelings to external objects or persons, one is said to be projecting. If one reads "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" with this in mind, it follows that Hyde is a projection of Dr. Jekyll's unconscious desire to explore his instinctual needs, or, to put it another way, the story is a pre-Freudian study of the id and ego. Yet this kind of reading cannot be applied to Conrad so successfully. When Jim takes his famous leap off the *Patna*, he lands in a new world of guilt and moral ambiguity. Jim's heroic conception of himself is, temporarily at least, destroyed. Jim takes another leap on the Island of Patusan and in doing this starts a project of selfhood—a conscious attempt at reconciling the self to a universe full of uncertainty. When Jim meets Gentleman Brown, his double, one can judge how successful Jim has been at transforming himself on the Island of Patusan. Patusan represents his present while the *Patna* and Gentleman Brown are his past. Can Jim transcend his past beliefs and dreams and create a new self more capable of confronting dangerous uncertainty? This question is posed by Conrad's use of the double in the person of Gentleman Brown. Reading Conrad from this perspective reveals the carefully considered structure of his work. It avoids the reductive potential of some psychoanalytic analysis. Indeed, it is especially problematic to try to fit Conrad's fiction into well-defined ideological categories, since his writings have been identified as resistant to what Roland Barthes famously dubbed "closure." Clearly, Conrad's world does not lack structure but rather in its totality can be seen as reflecting a belief in what

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[27] For more on this subject see Brian W. Shaffer, "'Rebarbarizing Civilization': Conrad's African Fiction and Spenserian Sociology," *PMLA* 108 (1993): 45-58.

William Blake called the impossibility of progression without contraries.

The Monstrous Double

It is evident that Conrad was interested in portraying the self tested by social, environmental, and political circumstances. Some characters fail, others move on to further tests; all are forced into moral mazes. Several characters, for example, Marlow, Jim, and the Captain, are tested on a deeper level. They are pictured confronting what René Girard, referring to Euripides' *Bacchae*, has called the "monstrous double." Girard feels that the double, which always has a monstrous aspect, arises from mankind's desire to conceal the human origin of its own violence by attributing it to the gods.[28] Conrad's world, while not populated by Greek gods and demigods, nevertheless whispers of flights and falls, of vertiginous movements towards divinity, and of "men who would be king."[29] Violence, although important, cannot be seen as the primary originator of the double, at least in Conrad; rather, it takes a secondary role to Conrad's desire to portray moments in which consciousness is pictured as evolving through a multifaceted struggle—one that the double amply provides. As Girard notes, "[h]ow can one defend oneself against an enemy who blithely ignores all barriers between inside and outside?" (Girard 152).

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[28] From Ch. 6 of René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) 143-168.

[29] See Bruce Johnson's discussion of similarities between *Heart of Darkness* and Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" in Conrad's *Models of Mind* (Minneapolis: U of Mass P, 1982) 96-97.

When Gentleman Brown addresses Jim near the end of *Lord Jim,* what is most telling is his preternatural ability to know Jim's guilt, to refer indirectly to his most troubling personal failures. Girard's observation that under close scrutiny the double reveals a monstrous aspect must be tempered by other research in this area that suggests that the double is connected with the desire to know, to grasp at that which is at once inner and outer, uncanny and familiar.[30] The double is, in short, Conrad's metaphor for the ultimate test. In other words, it is the Minotaur in the labyrinth of selfhood, or, if you will, "The Beast in the Jungle." It stalks those who would evolve, who are thrown beyond the bounds of normalcy, and who struggle to overcome their perceived limitations.

It also awaits characters who exhibit the potential for profound egotism pictured against a background of utter "solitude without a policeman."[31] Conrad was to evoke this combination throughout his career. To exist in isolation and to try to assert dominance over the external world, is to invite, within Conrad's literary domain, a confrontation with a double who will challenge the self's egotism and will painfully indicate its temporal nature. As Conrad put it, the double can be both "victim and executioner," since in an uncanny way it is privy to the inner nature of its counterpart, and if that counterpart resists change, it will ultimately absorb it after a struggle to the death. Just as Marlow absorbs Kurtz's

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[30] Freud, *The Complete Psychoanalytic Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1925) 219-252. See Freud's claim that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."

[31] *Heart of Darkness* (49). Also see Decoud in *Nostromo* (1904) on the Great Isabel.

voice, hearing it even after Kurtz's death, so Gentleman Brown dies obsessed by Jim after he has confronted him with his past. Brown perishes fixated on the past and evokes the dangers of stasis in a mutable world. Jim continues after his encounter with Brown and then sacrifices himself. Has Jim understood the lessons of his past, and is he therefore ready for a spiritual transfiguration? This remains a difficult question, but what can be said for certain is that Jim has changed greatly during the course of *Lord Jim*. Jim's narcissism is challenged by Conrad, and it can be argued that Brown's character mirrors Jim's guilt and in so doing disturbs Jim's solipsism. After all, if he does become Christ, then Jim suffers so that we may be saved! But the infamous Kurtz is Conrad's most powerful evocation of a man who needs to be shocked into the reality of his destructive egotism.

On the fringes of empire and in a lawless land, Kurtz becomes a law unto himself. He exults in his desire to assert dominance: "I saw him open his mouth wide...as though he wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (Conrad 59). In a land without law, Kurtz responds by becoming "a voice," and the ultimate center. Marlow quests in part to hear this uncanny voice, and when he does, he hopes to come to terms with the "incomprehensible." Kurtz, "who was just a word for [Marlow]" (29), is shown assuming the word: "'My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my'... everything belonged to him" (49). Kurtz's "magic current of phrases" (51) confronts the silence that permeates the novella, and his voice is absorbed by Marlow, changing him forever. Marlow, who flails around looking for meaning under the weight of the Congo's immense question, seeks revelation and finds Kurtz. Here, as one confronts the self, as one contemplates the divine and the bounds of the mortal, Conrad suggests a tenuous but careful hypothesis of how

the self can develop and function without coordinates of belief and within contradiction and uncertainty.

Chapter 2

Death and the Life of the Other

> This question leads to a much wider interplay of symbolic associations, including...Conrad's fascination with a psychological double. Despite the amount of work that has been done on the subject, the reader will find no mention of it in Watt's book—as if Conrad was not "The Secret Sharer," or as if the double was not a signal feature of Dostoevsky and Dickens.[1]
>
> —Robert S. Baker

This critical rap on the hand for Ian Watt by Robert S. Baker reveals how successful some critics have been, since Guerard, in illustrating and assessing the role the double plays in many of Conrad's more famous works. While Baker refers to the double as psychological, an assumption for which Otto Rank is in part responsible, I prefer to view the double from a variety of perspectives and believe that Conrad's use of this topos resonates on a multitude of philosophical and literary levels.

Conrad stands with Henry James as a writer whose use of doubling introduces us to a point in literary history where doubles—which have been

[1] Robert S. Baker, "Watt's Conrad," *Contemporary Literature* 22 (1986): 121.

generally represented as hidden or latent, occulted by the self, and amenable to psychoanalytic criticism—give way to a radical depiction of a more destabilizing ontological character. Doubles that are "manifest," or exterior, are characteristic of an awareness on the part of the writer that to alter the reader's perception of what constitutes selfhood, one can simply free what has hitherto been restrained by the Realist impulse. This liberation results in the Modernist obsession with fragmentation and the problem of establishing meaningful connection between "alienated" subjects. Later texts are often increasingly self-reflexive, such as Martin Amis's *Money* (1984), a novel that features a character called John Self who actually meets the author within the parameters of the story. Texts such as *Money* express the Romantic knowledge that the self is mutable but in a highly "manifest" way. While this is a useful schema, it is both simple and simplifying, and many authors elude such easy qualification. What must be remembered is that Conrad's use of the double is more prevalent and complex than most other writers', and in this sense he resembles Dostoevsky and Robert Musil, in that to come to any understanding of his art one must wrestle with the area of uncertainty that the topos of the double provides.

Abdul JanMohamed, using a mixture of theoretical apparatus and terminology from Raymond Williams, Hegel, and Lacan, suggests that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* moves beyond the limitations of works he claims constitute "Manichean allegories."[2] Having made a distinction between literature he classifies as "imaginary," i.e., those texts that "fetishize a non dialectical, fixed

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[2] Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985) : 59-87.

opposition between the self and the native," and those he categorizes as "symbolic," which "tend to be more open to a modifying dialectic of self and Other" (JanMohamed 65-66), he goes on to establish a subdivision within the latter category. Either the authors that JanMohamed places in this latter category endeavor to find syncretic solutions to the "Manichean oppositions of the colonizer and colonized," or they realize that "syncretism is impossible within the power relations of colonial society" (66) and therefore confine themselves to an understanding of the "imaginary"—a realm in which texts unreflectively represent and contribute to the colonial practices of domination, projection, and objectification. JanMohamed wisely places Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* among those texts that critique the world of the "imaginary," i.e., that articulate a vision of the complexities of self-Other relations in the colonial enterprise. However, JanMohamed's sophisticated analysis of Conrad's novella is rather one-sided since while he is correct in his belief that Kurtz becomes a prisoner "of his own self-image, which he superimposes on the natives" (71), he chooses to ignore the most crucial self-Other encounter—an encounter that ironizes Kurtz's series of empty projections and reveals the wisdom to be derived from the story of an Other's tragedy.

The relationship between Marlow and Kurtz is established through hearsay. Yet as Marlow imagines Kurtz "setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness" (Conrad 34), his journey becomes a quest. "For me, it [the steamer] crawled towards Kurtz—exclusively" (36). One of the "dark places of the earth" furnishes the impressive backdrop for the drama of encounter: "[f]or Conrad all encounter is enigmatic. The Other is both a man like oneself and

something demonically different."[3] This observation by Paul Coates echoes Girard's idea of the monstrous double. Kurtz is described as a "shadow," as a "wraith," and as presiding over "unspeakable rites." However, he is also at the heart of a darkness and has penetrated certain mysteries that threaten his existence. It is for these mysteries, almost Faustian in nature, that Marlow quests: "I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself" (65).

Death and the Other

Without question, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* gains much of its narrative power from a relentless and multifaceted contemplation of death. If "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell," then Conrad has "borrowed his authority from death."[4] From the beginning of Marlow's narrative we are made aware of the narrow purchase of life on eternity: "We live in a flicker," Marlow suggests, "[b]ut darkness was here yesterday" (9). Marlow's narrative begins in Gravesend and finishes in the "heart of an immense darkness" (76). Garrett Stewart, among others, has commented on the pervasive imagery of death in Conrad's novella—a preoccupation he shares with many other novelists who write romances or adventure stories featuring protagonists at the edge of empire. One only has to consider H. Rider Haggard's hugely successful

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[3] Paul Coates, *The Realist Fantasy: Fiction and Reality Since Clarissa* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 124.

[4] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 94.

She: A History of Adventure (1887) to understand the genre's obsession with death and rebirth. JanMohamed believes Haggard's novel to be a good example of a "manichean allegory" and, as such, to be less interesting than Conrad's text, since Haggard never questions the "easy satisfaction of the allegorical fantasy" that JanMohamed finds "typical of the narcissistic colonial text" (71). There is still much to be said about the appeal and power of some of Haggard's fiction, and I have to differ with JanMohamed's dismissive critical assertion, since Haggard was both knowledgeable about aspects of Zulu culture (he draws from a substantial understanding of African history and myth) and sympathetic to the tragic plight of colonized people—as any reading of *Montezuma's Daughter* (1893) will make clear.[5] Having said this, I would also contend that Conrad's work is distinguishable from Haggard's in that, even though it utilizes some of the archetypal imagery and stock themes of the adventure romance, it does so reflectively. It partakes both of the evocative potential of the adventure romance's themes and images and also puts the implications of particular archetypal resonances under a penetrating lens.

Marlow's ordeal consists in the dangerous attempt to find in the Other what the self lacks, or, to put it another way, to confirm one's being by looking

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[5] Haggard, although obviously relishing the form of the adventure romance and exhibiting an overarching belief in Western superiority—technical superiority is clearly an important factor in his stories, e.g., descriptions of rifles occur with monotonous regularity—Haggard was nevertheless to note in *Nada the Lily* (1892) that "all the horrors perpetrated by the Zulu tyrants cannot be published in the polite age of melanite and torpedoes." Qtd. in Hugh Ridley's *Images of Imperial Rule* (London: Croom Helm, 1983) 19.

into the depths of another's existence. The profound recognition this calls for is fraught with danger. It also bespeaks possible extermination. Marlow is aware of his predicament: "[t]his approach to Kurtz--was beset by many dangers" (65). Hegel famously predicted a life-and-death struggle once recognition of the Other has occurred because affirmation of one's being requires an intellectual and spiritual negotiation with death. As Charles Taylor states,

> [f]or Hegel, a crucial factor in the education of men, in the transformation which brings them to the universal, is the fear of death. The prospect of death shakes them loose, as it were, from all the particularities of their life. Hegel uses the image here of a life which has hardened in a certain form. The menace of death then makes it "that consciousness has been inwardly dissolved, has trembled to its depths, and everything fixed in it has quaked."[6]

When one has experienced the fear of death, a realization comes about that fundamentally alters perspectives on life. An encounter with death can be viewed as both encouraging autonomous individuality and privileging notions of choice and responsibility. Yet the extermination of the Other at an early stage negates the possibility of recognition, and while it is beneficial to have risked one's life, no further development is possible without the continued existence of the Other. Marlow struggles with Kurtz both physically and mentally in *Heart of Darkness*, but behind the struggle is Marlow's perception that Kurtz has gained a powerful insight by having "kicked himself loose of the earth"(65). Paradoxically, Marlow keeps Kurtz alive in an effort to develop an understanding of death and of his relation to it through exposure to the Other.

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[6] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 155.

Indeed, whenever Conrad's narrative focuses on Kurtz, jarring images of death often follow, as the passage where Marlow first sees Kurtz's house illustrates:

> Then I went carefully from post to post with my glass, and I saw my mistake. These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic; they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing—food for thought and also for vultures....They would have been even more impressive, those heads on the stakes, if their faces had not been turned to the house. Only one, the first I had made out, was facing my way. (65)

Marlow gazes at the skull and has in a subtle way already become familiar with Kurtz—who is described as an "animated image of death." Although apparently bearing out much that typifies Hegel's master-slave paradigm, their relationship is complicated by the suggestion that Kurtz and Marlow are doubles. On the other hand, this doubling means that they are, in some respect, preternatural representations of each other, and conequently the drama of the encounter is heightened by increasing the risks involved in any recognition of the self by the Other.

The danger in a confrontation with the double is two fold: first, the self's individuality can be either undermined or possibly strengthened, and second, a narcissistic obsession can result. On the more positive side, the double can supply a greater catalyst for development than Hegel's self-Other relation, and while it is arguable that these paradigms perform the same function—to jar consciousness into dialectical progression—the double by its very nature invites uncertainty. Yet I am not trying to suggest that the double and the master-servant paradigm do not share the same territory: they do. Conrad's literary

treatment of the double, while responding to a Hegelian analysis, is not simply Hegelian, but is also the vehicle for much speculation outside of the Hegelian paradigm. Nevertheless, the Hegelian model can bring to light much that makes Kurtz's portrayal so memorable and so tragic. Furthermore, just as Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a quest whose theological references, though undeniably coded, are nevertheless discernible, the quest that Marlow so clearly takes part in, although filtered through Conrad's Modernist concerns, is on one level a mystified religious quest.

Kurtz's alleged knowledge amounts to mastery over death; he has become the eternal master while Marlow calls himself a "sort of lower apostle" (15). Marlow sees in Kurtz an opportunity for recognition; his profound fascination with Kurtz implies that he believes the key to greater understanding lies in a confrontation with an authority who appears to have mastered so much. Indeed, Marlow suspects that for the Russian, Kurtz "was one of the immortals" (62). Garrett Stewart, on the other hand, argues that Conrad's use of doubling enables him to portray a "surrogate death," a "death by proxy":

> [d]eath is cathartic; it boasts the revelatory "compression" (Marlow's own term) of literature pitched to its "supreme moment," where the consciousness, of the reader or audience or here "partner" can move instructed but unconsumed, through the death of the Other.[7]

Indeed, Kurtz's fall is not difficult to predict; he had gone "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (65). His kudos is short-lived. Kurtz becomes a skeletal

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[7] Garrett Stewart, "Lying as Dying in the *Heart of Darkness*," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 327.

figure, a grotesque image of the high brought low, like Ayesha during her death throes in Haggard's *She*, or Petronius's Sybil (alluded to so famously by Eliot at the beginning of "The Wasteland"), whose eternal life is not accompanied by eternal youth. Haggard's vision is less bleak than Petronius's, since temporality claims Ayesha as it claims Kurtz. As if Conrad were alluding to She, who as an immortal is always veiled, Marlow states that when Kurtz is lying in the dark awaiting death, "[i]t was as though a veil had been rent" (68). What Marlow sees in Kurtz is in part his own mortality, in part a tragic vision of the outcome of a quest for unending dominance—a warning for Marlow that in his turn "to face the darknes," (10) he moves beyond coordinates of belief and comfortable morality and towards uncertainty and death.

Marlow begins with the desire to explore uncharted territory. The unmapped Congo becomes for Marlow what Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924) provides Hans Castorp in the chapter entitled "Snow": an allegorical representation of man pitted against the infinite. Just as sky and land merge into a white vision of infinity for Castorp, Conrad's narrative begins on the Thames, where "the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint". Marlow views his journey "up the river,...like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (35). The journey takes him to a place beyond history, on the outskirts of Empire, where he will encounter "truth" of a kind. As "the Other [Kurtz] penetrates [Marlow] to the heart" (Sartre 237) during the time of death, Marlow will experience a moment of anagnorisis. It may be useful at this juncture to refer to Walter Benjamin, who is typically acute in connecting death with the life of a story.

It is, however, characteristic that not only man's wisdom, but above

> all his real life—and that is the stories that stories are made of—first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as the sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses of the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (94)

Marlow's sentiments during the aftermath of Kurtz's death echo Benjamin's: "perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible" (Conrad 69). Conrad's achievement in the depiction of Kurtz's death is to lend to his demise the authority of which Benjamin speaks. In telling the tale of a momentary insight held by a man about to die, Conrad is able to bring to the fore all the vitality of his story. In further reenacting this flash of insight in the mind of Marlow as he confronts the Intended in London, Conrad evokes the process whereby an Other's negation has explicitly ethical implications for the self as well as for those who are told the story—in this case his readers.

According to Watt, in the Congo Conrad not only had faced "his own mortality" (Watt 146) but also had probably watched at close quarters the death of George Antoine Klein on board the *Roi des Belges* (141-142). If the desire to report on the Other involves complex questions of literary, philosophical, and anthropological import, then surely to report on the death of the Other requires the same negotiation of complexity. For Marlow, as he confronts the Intended,

the overwhelming experience of the Congo is reenacted before him and demands of him a new understanding of the "flavour of mortality in lies" (32).

Before Marlow meets his double, Conrad's narrative symbolism builds an atmosphere redolent of the possibility of apocalypse. Conrad, like the Henry James of "The Jolly Corner" and the Poe of "William Wilson," plunges his protagonist into a labyrinth. Marlow pictures a labyrinthine jungle and a magical river:

> Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped in network of paths spreading over the empty land....You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and...on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way....(35-36)

In combining the archetypal imagery of the labyrinth with that of the double, Conrad masterfully connects the potential loss of individuality the double can symbolize with a landscape capable of blurring distinctions of subject and object. In this rarefied atmosphere, relations between oppressor and oppressed, between the white colonists and the Africans, are thrown into relief.

Marlow is horrified by the spectacle of the shady grove, where "nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lie" (20) awaiting death. Frances B. Singh has commented that "Marlow equates the primitive with the evil and physical blackness of Africans with a spiritual darkness."[8] She goes on to state that "Africa and Africans are his scapegoat for the existence of the powers of

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[8] Francis B. Singh, "The Colonialist Bias of *Heart of Darkness*," *New Letters* 40 (1973): 143.

darkness in the white man and through him the heart of darkness which was first associated with the West gets reassociated with Africa" (Singh 143). This misses the point. What Marlow also notes is that "these people could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies" (19), and that "the conquest of the Earth is not a pretty thing" (10). Conrad's narrative is not a static Manichaean confrontation. His use of chiaroscuro is shaped by his use of irony. Blackness challenges and propels Marlow to new understanding, and Conrad's use of light and dark is never easy to read since both irony and dialectic are involved. The Africans are the slaves, but, as Sartre noted in *Being and Nothingness*, Hegel's notion of recognition within the master-servant paradigm is complicated by the idea of objectification. Dialectical progress is not possible for the slave if objectification occurs. Objectification creates the following relation: to be an object for the Other is to be known by the Other. This is epitomized in the experience of being the object of the Other's look. Thus, Hegel's notion that these roles of dominating and dominated can be surpassed is, according to Sartre, optimistic. Yet in Conrad's foregrounding of the relationship between Kurtz and Marlow (Kurtz being the master), one can perceive a reversal of roles that bears out Hegel's paradigm. Marlow makes several references to the value of work, which Hegel believed was necessary in a dialectical progression beyond the master-slave dichotomy. Through work, one transforms and masters the environment and crucially sees oneself reflected in the world. Marlow begins to understand this:

> I don't like work. I had rather laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done. I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. (31)

Marlow sums up the value Hegel saw in work. Kurtz also transforms his surroundings, but as he is a master he encounters no effective resistance from the world and, as Taylor puts it, "sink[s] back into a stupor of self co-incidence" (*Hegel* 156). Yet, conversely, Conrad also pictures a relation that is apparently doomed: "Six black men advanced in a file toiling up the path...They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages" (19). The humanity of the Africans, who are also characterized as ants, is undermined by abject slavery. There is no possibility of dialectical development here and no resolution of their predicament. Conrad was not an idealist. Yet in picturing a relation of hopeless submission, Conrad highlights a connection full of potential and possibility. Although the African slaves appear deathlike, Kurtz also is pictured as "an animated image of death." Kurtz, in his hubristic thrust towards divinity, becomes, ironically, a stimulus for Marlow. Marlow, who is a third party to Kurtz's exchange with death, is changed and realizes that the object of his desire is not simply to understand Kurtz's experience but rather to gain knowledge of the relation between death and the infinite. *Heart of Darkness* never really emerges as an unambiguous meditation on this theme, and perhaps it is marred by a deliberate nod towards the late Romantic tendency to fall back on mystery rather than to clarify a philosophical position. Nevertheless, Conrad has begun to tackle large questions in a more focused and suggestive manner. *Heart of Darkness* turns again and again to the theme of being and non-being—the language of the novella itself reflecting this concern.

To approach the divine, as George Steiner suggests in a comment on

Dante's *Paradiso*, can result in silence.[9] Yet Kurtz is called "a voice," one that contends with the silence surrounding it. As one critic has noted, Kurtz's voice is rarely heard, confined by Conrad's narrative to a few solitary words or to other characters' descriptions of it. On one level, the whole story "is itself the record and the reward of Conrad's confrontation with the forces of silence."[10] Within the doctrine of St. Augustine, silence is regarded as annihilation of consciousness, prevented by resorting to language. Conrad's attitude to silence is characteristically complex, since in his stories language is often seen as a hopelessly inept form of communication; this is borne out by the conversations between the Verlocs in *The Secret Agent* (1907).

Yet it is within the dialectic of silence and language, and annihilation and consciousness, that Conrad suspends *Heart of Darkness*. This analysis of the dialectical structure of *Heart of Darkness* makes possible a better understanding of "The Secret Sharer" and shows why, as I shall illustrate, the latter story both complements and goes beyond the former.

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[9] George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) 5.

[10] Martin Ray, "Language and Silence in the Novels of Joseph Conrad," *Conradiana* 16 (1984): 41.

Chapter 3

A Motion towards Others

> A man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience, and all that sort of thing. Why—what else would you have to fight against?[1]
>
> —Joseph Conrad

> Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light t he truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.[2]
>
> —Joseph Conrad

"The Secret Sharer" has aroused much controversy. Conrad's story suspends itself between a Realist attempt at depicting a psychological and

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow Line: A Confession* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 131-32.

[2] Joseph Conrad, preface, *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1989) xvii.

ethical bond between two characters and an account hinting at a preternatural or even mythic significance to their relation. Conrad, uncharacteristically explicit, points towards an analysis based on an examination of the role of the *doppelgänger* by using the terms *double* and *Other* throughout the course of the story. Indeed, in this particular tale he uses the terms interchangeably. Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber see "The Secret Sharer" as "a virtual palimpsest of literary codes" and go on to ask: "[b]ut what does it mean to say that doubleness is—or is not—the text's secret?"[3] They attempt to tackle this weighty question by utilizing a variety of psychoanalytical approaches, resolving the story into an exploration of both the pathology of Conrad himself and that of the unnamed protagonist of "The Secret Sharer." While these approaches are interesting, they do not do justice to this work in which Conrad's use of the topos of the *doppelgänger* reaches new heights. His achievement can only be gauged if one understands what Conrad has taken from both the last nine chapters of *Lord Jim* and the experience of writing about Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

The struggle between Gentleman Brown and Jim is memorable largely because Conrad supplies us with the spectacle of a man confronted by the darker aspects of his past. The rather clumsy Christian symbolism deployed by Conrad in the last nine chapters of the book in which Jim (L.J.) becomes Jesus, while Cornelius takes on a decidedly Judas-like character and Gentleman Brown is described as the "scourge of God," fails to hide what I believe to be the real drama. Conrad solidifies the fleeting indications of the mutable nature of

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[3] Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber, "Secret Sharing: Reading Conrad Psychoanalytically," *College English* 49.6 (1987): 628-639.

selfhood to be found in books like *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and comes up with a striking image of two characters locked in a combat without the barriers that a discrete conception of selfhood can provide.

The confrontation between Brown and Jim occurs in a conversation "separated only by the muddy bed of a creek" (*LJ* 274). Obviously the line between them is very thin and disappears altogether when Brown reminisces to Marlow about his meeting with Jim. In the midst of the confrontation between Jim and Brown, Brown visibly disturbs him:

> [w]hen he asked Jim, with a sort of brusque despairing frankness, whether he himself—straight now—didn't understand that when "it came to saving one's life in the dark, one didn't care who else went—three, thirty, three hundred people"—it was as if a demon had been whispering advice in his ear. "I made him wince" boasted Brown to me...And there ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts. (*LJ* 278-79)

Jim, who after all had jumped from the *Patna*, understands the temptations involved in the saving of oneself. In other words, Brown reminds him of his moral shortcomings. Brown takes on a monstrous aspect through constantly being referred to as a demon. He is also responsible, in part, for the climax of the novel. Jim is tested by Brown's knowledge—a trial that forces Jim into a choice between life and death. Brown's advantage consists of the ability to break through the barriers of the self-Other relation in order to emphasize the frailties of Jim's ethical positions. This shakes Jim, but does it transform him?

The question is left open by Conrad. Marlow sees Jim's death as a "celebr[ation] of his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (300). Obviously the book is important as a touchstone for the changes occurring in turn-of-the-century attitudes towards colonization and as a source book for the ethical issues the colonial experiment precipitated. In addition to this, however, Conrad had also begun to explore the territory of uncanny confrontation, and while *Lord Jim* is undoubtedly a tale of Jim's development, the actuality of this development, or lack thereof, Conrad leaves for his readers to decide.

To judge *Lord Jim*, one has to become aware of its dual structure. We see Jim on the *Patna* being tested and failing, over and against the Jim pictured on Patusan, successfully building a place in an alien society. Balancing these two conceptions of Jim's personality, there is the mysterious Stein and the ubiquitous Marlow. Stein's obsession with the transformations inherent in the life of the butterfly point to Conrad's own concerns with the development of Jim. Jim's escape from his past is based upon an elaborate avoidance. Brown manages to confront Jim with all that he had been running from. Although I agree with Ian Watt, who wonders whether "Jim, or indeed anyone else, should be judged and found wanting by standards derived from the unsupported modern dogmas that full self-knowledge is possible," I think that Conrad hints at the danger implicit in the withdrawal from a continuing reflection on past matters.[4] The past after all is constantly evoked by Marlow. Surely Conrad, who in *Heart of Darkness* pictures Marlow sitting like a Buddha on the *Nellie* while

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[4] Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: U of California P., 1979) 349.

reflecting on his past, is suggesting the necessity of a certain kind of engagement with individual history. This at least seems to be the message Brown holds for Jim. Yet Jim's consequent fall is perhaps ameliorated by the restoration of a heroic conception won by a willing sacrifice. So while Conrad has spun a web of contradictions and uncertainty in *Lord Jim,* he has more importantly utilized a series of dialectics and taken his novel to its climax in depicting a confrontation with a double.

Heart of Darkness raises many of the same questions as *Lord Jim,* but emerges as a more powerful, or perhaps more concentrated vision of the self tested by what Girard calls the "monstrous double." As Charles Taylor notes, "[t]o realize the potential of conscious life...requires effort, internal division and transformation over time."[5] *Heart of Darkness,* then, is a story that pictures a self-Other relation intensified by the *doppelgänger* motif. Conrad's novella depicts a struggle between Kurtz and Marlow, a labyrinthine Congo that challenges and fractures Marlow's sense of self, and finally a conclusion that hints at Marlow's ethical and spiritual growth.

The critical arguments surrounding Marlow's transformation or lack of it often center on his opinion of lies. Marlow detests them, yet in his later interview with the Intended he is less than truthful. This is a lesser issue, however, since it seems patently obvious that to avoid cruelty Marlow must tell a lie to the Intended. What Marlow hates is the veneer of civilization and the hypocrisy of its proponents. As the veneer thins, the lies that characterize its mundane evil remind Marlow of the "flavor of mortality." The connection between death and lies in the novella has been admirably established by Garrett Stewart. However,

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[5] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) 84.

I believe that it is not the lie but the way that Marlow's interview with the Intended is described that is crucial if one is to understand Marlow's development. Additionally, Marlow's thoughts on Kurtz after Kurtz has expired show Conrad struggling with the temporal and forging a new vision of self-transformation and spiritual progress. Marlow at first wants to banish Kurtz and all that he represents from his mind:

> All that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up too to the past, in a way—to surrender personally all that remained of him with me. (*HofD* 71)

But Marlow finds that he cannot disregard Kurtz so easily. In an attempt to forget Kurtz, Marlow conjures up a vision of Kurtz so real that he states: "He lived then before me, he lived as much as he had ever lived..." (72). Indeed, the whole of the meeting with the Intended becomes a meditation on the theme of death and of what can be saved from it. "His words will remain," Marlow tells the Intended, as well as "his example." Clearly, irony is very important throughout this passage, and yet Conrad moves beyond simple irony and evokes the tensions between silence and language, consciousness and annihilation, truth and lies. With his evocation of these dialectics, unsurprisingly, come hints at apocalypse. Because this is Conrad, the apocalypse fails to materialize, and the revelations remain merely hints. So what has Marlow gained from his experience? The simplest observation would be to suggest that he has learned that there are moments when lies are actually necessary for the responsible and ethical treatment of others. Some existentialists would study the exercise of choice in what can be termed an absurd world and would center their discussion around

the concepts of responsibility. While going along with these thoughts, I would argue from a Hegelian perspective and suggest that the process that Hegel called *Aufhebung* has taken place.[6] The term as Hegel used it specifies the dialectical transition in which a lower stage is both canceled and preserved in another. Yelton touches upon this when he notes in an essay about doubling and "The Secret Sharer" that "the 'other self,' once it has been confronted, recognized, provided for, remains as a permanent accession to the

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[6] See Derrida's discussion of the term in "Writing and Difference," trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982): 273-77. In this work Derrida attempts, through an investigation of the term, to illustrate the limits of the Hegelian system and its inevitable fall into closure. "The writing-down of Hegel's ideas, e.g., the translation of *aufheben* into the French *relever* (meaning both 'elevate' and 'substitute') illustrates a 'différance' which not even Hegel can transcend." Howard P Kainz's summary of Derrida's critique of Hegel's dialectic (above), and polemic against Derrida's claims can be found in *Paradox, Dialectic, and System: A Contemporary Reconstruction of the Hegelian Problematic* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP,1988) 88-89. Robert Solomon's discussion of the term, if less contentious, is nevertheless worth considering. Interestingly, he draws attention to a connotation of the term that is crucial for my analysis of the dialectic at work in Conrad's stories of the double. "[I]n addition to the moving on and preserving the essential content, *aufheben* also has the implication of an improvement, an elevation of the original into something better." See Robert C. Solomon's *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G. W. Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit (Oxford UP, 1983) 275.

personality."[7] To understand the Marlow who narrates the story from the *Nellie*, one must contemplate the grandiose and tragic figure of Kurtz, who lives on in Marlow's consciousness and therefore by implication in the reader's mind.

"The Secret Sharer," while following a dialectical structure, and while dwelling on duality, is different from *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* in that it is representative of a more self-reflexive look at the metaphor of the double and contains a refined expression of its use as a tool for stimulating dialectical self-transformation. Leggatt, the Captain's double, is introduced holding on to the side of the ship, suffering cramps, and contemplating death. Beside him is the ship's ladder, which offers an escape. The Captain spots him, and after meeting each other under such bizarre conditions, Leggatt states:

> "The question for me now is whether I am to let go this ladder and go on swimming till I sink from exhaustion, or—to come on board here." I felt this was no mere formula of desperate speech, but a real alternative in the view of a strong soul. (144)

In coming to terms with death Leggatt certainly is an impressive figure. As we learn, however, Leggatt is also a criminal; like Kurtz, he has blood on his hands. He has killed, and Conrad's allusions to Cain and Abel add a certain mythic intensity to the tempestuous murder scene. Leggatt strangles his adversary on the *Sephora* until he is "black in the face." The details of the murder are whispered to the Captain, who does not interrupt him. Rather than rejecting and punishing the stranger for his admitted crime, he identifies with Leggatt and instead reflects the narrative he has just heard back on himself:

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[7] Donald Yelton, *Mimesis and Metaphor: An Inquiry into the Genesis and Scope of Conrad's Symbolic Imagery* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967) 285.

> And I told him a little about myself...I didn't know either the ship or the people. Hadn't had the time in port to look about me or size anybody up. And as to the crew, all they knew was that I was not appointed to take the ship home. For the rest, I was almost as much of a stranger on board as himself, I said. And at the moment I felt it most acutely. I felt that it would take very little to make me a suspect person in the eyes of the ship's company. (156)

Instead of demonizing Leggatt, the Captain accepts him. This acceptance is the opposite of the self-Other relation Conrad features in *Lord Jim.* Gentleman Brown hates Jim because Jim represents a part of himself, namely a conscience, that he does not have. Without Jim as the enemy to fixate on, Brown as an individual reaches a dead end. He can only try to conjure the memory of his hatred before he dies. "Rot his superior soul!" Brown gasps referring to Jim, but, ironically, unlike Kurtz's death, Brown's death has no mystery to it; it is just another narrative vying in the carnival of competing narratives surrounding the protagonist. The Captain, on the other hand, treads the shadowy line between duty to an individual and duty to the crew. He chooses to shelter Leggatt, and in doing so partly implicates himself in Leggatt's crime. By identifying with a murderer and an outcast, the Captain is able to experience the underside of man's relation to society. Leggatt's life-and-death struggle and his consequent ease with the possibility of self-annihilation are what the Captain above all learns from. While the identification between the two is fraught with danger for both, the outcome of their juxtaposition suggests Conrad has finally understood that the double can both symbolize inescapable fate, "victim and executioner," and also function as a symbol of the jarring of consciousness towards a superior state. The necessity of a negotiation with

death is the message Conrad suggests in this story of the double. As Kurtz provides Marlow with the opportunity for a surrogate death, Leggatt shows by example the profound power, once the fear of death is mastered, of the struggle for survival. The Captain overcomes this fear in his passage through the Sunda Straits:

> When I opened my eyes the second view started my heart with a thump. The black southern hill of Koh-ring seemed to hang right over the ship like a towering fragment of the ever-lasting night. On that enormous mass of blackness there was not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard. It was gliding irresistibly towards us and yet seemed already within reach of the hand. I saw the vague figures of the watch grouped in the waist, gazing in awed silence. (189)

Ironically, it is in steering towards death that the Captain gives his double a chance at life. Conrad once again indicates that language fails when annihilation is close. Death can be gazed at but reveals nothing. Yet, as Beckett notes in *Malone Dies* (1958), a prolonged meditation on language and death,

"Nothing is more real than Nothing."[8] Various hints of death haunt these last passages, yet they do not culminate in a single word (*Heart of Darkness*) or a grandiose gesture (*Lord Jim*). Rather, the Captain moves the ship under "the very gate of Erebus" (SS 190) and then surprisingly takes control:

> "My God! Where are we?" It was the mate moaning at my elbow. He was thunderstruck, and as it were deprived of the moral support of his whiskers. He clapped his hands and absolutely cried out, "Lost!" "Be quiet," I said, sternly. (SS 189-90)

During these critical moments the Captain is subject to a feeling of alienation from his ship. He is a "total stranger to the ship" (191), and as his and his crew's fate hangs in the balance, he searches the dark sea—the very sea from which his secret self had emerged. In this highly significant moment, Conrad implies that we must learn from past versions of our selves. In order to progress spiritually and ethically, we must absorb and accept the messages the past holds for us.

This is a dangerous moment, since in stories where an uncanny element is central the question arises as to the intent of the ghost or double. Recall the

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[8] Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (London: Coldar and Boyars, 1958). "I don't like those gull's eyes. They remind me of an old ship-wreck, I forgot which. I know it is a small thing. But I am easily frightened now. I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than Nothing.* They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down in the dark." In this passage, Beckett can be seen evoking some of the same tensions between life and death that Conrad renders in "The Secret Sharer"—a story of a near ship-wreck (16).

complexities of *Hamlet,* for example. To act upon a preternatural summons can have dire results. Shakespeare's play appears to call into question the progress of history. The past can destroy the future. By contrast, Conrad, whom many have read in relation to his undoubted skepticism, points in this story to the potential for the past to save the future:

> I swung the mainyard and waited helplessly. She was perhaps stopped, and her very fate hung in the balance, with the black mass of Koh-ring like the gate of the ever-lasting night towering over her taffrail...I could see nothing except a faint phosphorescent flash revealing the glassy smoothness of the sleeping surface...Was she moving? What I needed was something easily seen...All at once my strained, yearning stare distinguished a white object floating within a yard of the ship's side...I recognized my own floppy hat. It must have fallen off his head...and he didn't bother. Now I had what I wanted—the saving mark for my eyes. (191)

Leggatt's escape supplies the key to the Captain's future. He is able to use the hat to gauge his progress and steer away from disaster. The Captain has affirmed his control over the ship and its crew and no longer feels like a stranger to his command. His double, Leggatt, is pictured by the Captain "lower[ing] himself into the water to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny" (193).

These words are without question words of affirmation. They speak of development, of choices being made, and of "standing up to...bad luck, to mistakes and to...conscience." "The Secret Sharer" is, then, a tale of dialectical change and in a Hegelian sense points to the importance of individual history.

Progression is possible, and therefore in his stories of the double I think Conrad cannot be called a skeptic. If anything is to be gained from Conrad's dwelling on identity, it is the knowledge that to progress and function among others, we must partially submerge our identities. The individual partly progresses while encountering uncertainty, and partly undergoes sublation as a necessity of this very progress. While skepticism is perhaps justified on this level alone, I have to disagree strongly with Ian Watt's interesting though dismissive statement:

> [A]ll the evidence suggests that the various Christian, Hegelian, or Marxist theoretical systems which present suffering, conflict or death as necessary parts of some promised transcendental recompense or dialectical reconciliation were, or would have been, completely alien to Conrad's way of looking at the world. (Watt 349)

While fate is not necessarily kind to many of Conrad's protagonists—Jim, for example—I think what Conrad works towards in his stories of doubling is a notion of choice and self-creation. Unlike Greek tragedy, there is the feeling that if one actually confronts the self and its relation to that which is Other, the avoidance of tragedy is possible. The double in Conrad's works not only confronts the self, but because of its preternatural quality throws the self into a questioning and perhaps reconciling movement. To move beyond past mistakes we must understand them, absorb the lessons they contain—be aware that this choice involves a certain loss—and then continue on the apparent path towards self-perfection.

Part Two

Postcolonial Reactions from the Commonwealth

Chapter 4

The Cost of Recognition

> 'I am far from being a master,' he says. 'There is a crack running through me. What can one do with a cracked bell? A cracked bell cannot be mended.'[1]
>
> —J. M. Coetzee
>
> The dark self strives toward humiliation and turmoil, the bright self toward obedience and order. The dark self sickens the bright self with doubts and qualms. I know. It is his poison which is eating me.[2]
>
> —J. M. Coetzee

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[1] J. M. Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Minerva, 1994) 141.

[2] J. M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 27.

J. M. Coetzee's literary career, which began in earnest with *Dusklands* (1974) and has continued for over twenty years up to his latest novel *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997), has exhibited notable shifts in focus: from the America of Viet Nam to the Russia of Dostoevsky, and from the South Africa of the eighteenth-century to the South Africa of apartheid. Coetzee's seven novels and two novellas have been debated in terms of their political content, postcolonial thematics, and obvious engagement with postmodern theory and literature. Such a standard work of literary evaluation as the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, for instance, suggests that Coetzee's novels "[are] as much about the nature of language and the techniques of fiction as about the victims of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and apartheid."[3] It is, however Coetzee's engagement with the themes of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and apartheid that has generated the most intense debate among literary scholars. By utilizing postmodern critical theory to great effect, Coetzee is one of the first authors to address the many implications of the policies of apartheid for the people of South Africa. Yet his successful utilization of postmodern theory in his investigation of colonial identity politics has occasioned much criticism. My aim in examining Coetzee's works is not to tackle at any length the thorny question of the desirability and likely consequences of using postmodern theory in a postcolonial context. Rather, while acknowledging his fictions' prevailing postmodern theoretical references, the primary aim of my critical investigation is to assess how effectively Coetzee conveys and responds to the politics of recognition in apartheid South Africa. To discuss this aspect of Coetzee's work I

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[3] *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. Ian Ousby. 2nd ed. (Cambridge UP, 1994) 187.

refer to the philosophy of Hegel, specifically the master-servant dialectic in the *Phenomenology*, as well as Conrad's canonized and controversial masterpiece *Heart of Darkness.*

Coetzee's fiction exhibits a continuing concern with the depiction of highly nuanced encounters between the self and the Other. This statement, while it can be applied to numerous authors, is nevertheless particularly appropriate to Coetzee. More than Nadine Gordimer or Alex La Guma (or any other writers who have examined the peculiar circumstances of 'identity politics' in what was the land of apartheid), Coetzee is able and willing to investigate the psychological implications of domination and servitude, albeit without direct reference to South Africa's immediate historical and political circumstances. In fact, the most controversial and widely discussed of his novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), scrupulously avoids any historical, geographical, or cultural context.

Waiting for the Barbarians, a book that the critic David Atwell has called "a pivotal work in the development of Coetzee's oeuvre," illustrates more than any other of his novels what fuels and sometimes ignites Coetzee's fictions of encounter.[4] The strength of his writing lies in Coetzee's uncanny ability to depict a tragic trajectory to relations between self and Other and to illustrate a condition where every self-Other encounter is inflected by power. Michael Valdez Moses has analyzed *Waiting for the Barbarians* by describing what he perceives to be a narrative movement from

> the teleological historicism of Hegel to the anti-teleological historicism of Nietzsche. History does not end with the objective

[4] David Atwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 70.

> realization of the idea of Freedom in the form of the State, but with the vertiginous recognition that the State is merely a particular and unavoidable expression of Will to Power that is beyond good and evil.[5]

Moses goes on to suggest that, taken together, the Magistrate's statements and equivocations at the end of the novel, where he reflects on the lessons he has learned as a result of being ejected from his easy life as a minor imperial official, are the protagonist's attempt to flee from the ironies inherent in the rise and fall of empires and to find solace in a time without history; in short, in a state of nature. Intimations of this 'time without history' are provided by Coetzee's strangely disconcerting fictional background, which allows for seasonal indications of time (four seasons are discernible) but withholds other clear signs of historical period. Against this uncertain backdrop, which heightens our sense of the psychological by furnishing a dreamlike or fairy-tale quality to the narrative, Coetzee relentlessly explores the theme of freedom and slavery. In nearly every image and metaphor in *Waiting for the Barbarians* , Coetzee ponders methods of escape from the institutions that can stunt our expression as human beings. It is quite possible to detect in Coetzee's work, as does Moses, the influence of such unlikely bedfellows as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Rousseau. Indeed, in another essay Moses argues persuasively that in order to engage meaningfully with the *Life and Times of Michael K.* (1983), it is

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[5] Michael Valdez Moses, "The Mark of Empire: Writing, History, and Torture in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *The Kenyon Review* 15.1 (1993): 124.

necessary to consult the philosophy of Rousseau.[6] Applying Moses's insights to *Waiting for the Barbarians,* we might say that Coetzee, the heir to Rousseau's philosophical legacy, displays an overriding concern with the nature and possibility of the Magistrate's ethical development during a time of empire and imperialism. It is inevitable that the Magistrate is himself integral in the running of the imperial machine. But who is the Magistrate? Coetzee tells us very little about him except that he is a "minor civilian administrator" (50) who has (before the Colonel's arrival) largely run the affairs of the tiny frontier settlement. Because Coetzee does not provide the reader with the Magistrate's name or details of his background the Magistrate provokes questions which are clearly relevant to many times and places—foremost among them apartheid South Africa. If it is possible for one such as the Magistrate to change, is change not perhaps achievable for the ruling white minority in South Africa? Such a question is so fundamental to *Waiting for the Barbarians* that we miss the point if we criticize this novel because it fails to expose entirely the world of the victim.

Coetzee's work is directed to those *in power*; it is a meditation on the deprivations of the master, of the spiritually enervating institutions one can be part of and support during a time of colonial expansion and imperial persecution of the Other. Fundamentally, the novel attempts to determine whether the Magistrate learns anything of substance in his dialectical journey from victimizer to victimized.

Coetzee's most compelling question, to put it another way, is whether there is potential for a *bildungsroman* in the face of an apparently episodic and futile scapegoating of the Other. Surely this is a timeless subject, and during the

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[6] Michael Valdez Moses, "Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (Winter 1994): 131-156.

grim days of apartheid South Africa, what better question could Coetzee have posed? Can the Magistrate and, by implication, the reader gain further understanding of how to act during a time of persecution? The Magistrate notes: "In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians" (Coetzee 8). Commentators have suggested that Coetzee puts liberal ideology to the test by subjecting a liberal protagonist to the kind of hardships most will never have to undergo themselves. The Magistrate begins his observations from the comfort of a secure and respected job; he ends them bereft of any kind of position and having suffered both torture and public scorn.

The Magistrate's story is in essence a journey in quest of the truth. More than anything, the need for and composition of this truth are determined by the central metaphor of the book: the encounter between empire and barbarian. It is relatively insignificant whether the nature of the association he depicts is that of master and servant, father and son, or victim and victimizer. Coetzee is at his best when he describes moments where consciousness is moved inextricably beyond itself, when in other words, the self is forced beyond solipsism and has to recognize the existence of an Other's consciousness. This is one of the most important issues in Coetzee's fiction. His work is not merely a journey into indeterminacy, nor is it simply a withdrawal into postmodern aesthetics; in reality, its most significant theme is the need for recognition.

To discuss the concept of recognition I shall refer to Hegel, who gave the notion one of its most influential and profound treatments, and I will also draw on Charles Taylor, whose recent work considers the politics of recognition and describes the *recognition thesis* as a readily accepted and agreed upon principle of political and psychological practice. That principle is that in

twentieth-century democratic societies it has become commonplace to expect that individuals or groups gain recognition from society at large and to argue for that recognition. Drawing on a vast storehouse of political theory and philosophical thought, Taylor examines what he designates the "politics of recognition" and exposes the theory's underlying suppositions: first that identity is formed partly within and partly by interaction with others; and, second, that when a society's recognition of a group or individual is withheld in some way, that group or individual is consequently harmed.

Coetzee's Hegelian Allegory?

When *Waiting for the Barbarians* made its initial appearance, it was to largely favourable but unremarkable reviews. Of these early assessments I believe the most insightful was George Steiner's. Writing in *The New Yorker*, he argued that Coetzee's novel was in essence a thinly veiled literary dramatization of what he referred to as "the most famous of all modern political allegories": namely, Hegel's master-servant dialectic.[7] Steiner is correct in his assertion that Coetzee's novel reflects the Hegelian paradigm, and he is astute in his belief that "the master servant allegory dominate[d] South African writing" (Steiner 103). It is true that Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, and Alan Paton all make use of this allegory; yet, once one has noted this similarity between Coetzee and other contemporary African writers, his treatment of the master-servant theme remains remarkably distinct. The originality of Coetzee's fiction lies in the complex and powerful manner in which he sketches out various patterns of recognition and misrecognition without always alluding to particular times and places. While his fiction is seemingly bereft of the political

[7] George Steiner, "Master and Man," *The New Yorker* 12 July 1982: 102-3.

engagement that would come with Realist depictions of racial injustice and inequality, his writing nevertheless contains penetrating insights into the psychological ramifications of apartheid, of oppression, and of domination.

Brilliant thinkers have examined individual moments in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and have derived profound insights from particular stages in Hegel's intellectual journey. These often compelling commentaries on particular parts of Hegel's work should, however, be balanced against the strength of Hegel's project in its overall conception, one which sought to develop a unified philosophical framework wherein both the past and future could be philosophically understood as a unity or whole. Coetzee's novel has in its own minor way a corresponding strength. The Magistrate's tentative reflections on empire near the end of Coetzee's work should not necessarily be taken as his definitive statements; rather, they are thoughts that, although interesting, should be considered in the context of the journey itself: a dialectical progression from victimizer to victim and from innocence to experience. While this can be said of many novels, Coetzee's particular concern is to distill the Hegelian dialectical experience into a terse and tightly written fictional account that, on the surface, in accordance with the tenets of some postmodern thinkers, rejects the notion of Aufhebung or synthesis.

Additionally, and in contrast to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Coetzee's retreat into ambiguity at the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not an example of a late Romantic tendency to accentuate mystery over a philosophical position, but rather is evidence of a rigorous desire to engage with contemporary linguistic and philosophical debates. It is this desire to hold a dialogue with postmodern thematics, and with philosophical positions derived from the teachings of Nietzsche, that has exposed Coetzee to much criticism.

Two Neo-Marxist Criticisms of Coetzee

Marxist critics in particular have found Coetzee's work to be troubling on the grounds that in avoiding cultural reference it tends to relativize and distance itself from the historical necessity of materially improving (in this case) the fate of the black majority in what was South Africa's oppressive apartheid regime. One of the more strident Marxist appraisals was made by Paul Rich, who closes an influential article on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* with this revealing comment:

> Perhaps, white postliberal and radical writing is moving into another literary formulation based upon a deeper understanding of African society....There are signs of this in Gordimer's work. Coetzee's novel, though, has failed to suggest such a direction and indicates that literary postmodernism in a postcolonial context as South Africa, burdened by cleavages of race and class and the historical inheritance of Western imperialist control, is a moral dead end.[8]

Rich's assertion that Coetzee's work represents "a moral dead end" may in part result from the problem of evaluating the knowledge the Magistrate has gained at the end of the novel. The Magistrate's insights manifest themselves in strange dreams and portents that are highly complex and hard to decipher. These dreams have a similar function to the wood chips the Magistrate finds in the desert. Much like the American Transcendentalist writers' fascination with

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[8] Paul Rich, "Apartheid and the Decline of Civilization Idea: An Essay on Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," *Research in African Literature* 15.3 (1984): 389.

Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Magistrate ponders these traces of a past civilization and can only guess at their significance. The wood chips "can be read in many orders. Further, each single chip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history in the last years of the Empire" (112). Coetzee's laconic prose constantly draws attention to the hermeneutics of reading, the problems of language, and the contingency of truth. Yet while these postmodern concerns inform Coetzee's writing, they do not dominate his works; instead, they supply a backdrop for the negotiation of uncertainty and a contemporary understanding of perennial questions: How can we turn experience into wisdom? How can we know the Other? These questions are at the heart of Coetzee's fictional meditations; they lend a resonance to his literary creations and furnish them with ethical dimensions that argue against Paul Rich's assertion that Coetzee's work has little to add to South African writing. Furthermore, Coetzee's fiction, although responsive to the strictures of deconstructive criticism, skirts the edge of irresolvable paradox. Read from a certain angle, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is alive with a message of hope--albeit a deeply buried one.

Abdul JanMohamed has gone so far as to critique Coetzee's work on the grounds that even though it examines the colonial mentality, it has little to offer in terms of syncretic solutions to the problem of the incommensurability of self and Other. Further criticizing Coetzee's "adamant refusal to admit the possibility...of a rapprochement between self and Other," JanMohamed finds the implications of Coetzee's use of allegory disturbing:

> Although the novel is obviously generated by white South Africa's racial paranoia and the guilt of its liberals, *Waiting for the*

> *Barbarians*, unlike Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, refuses to acknowledge its historical sources or make any allusions to the specific barbarism of the apartheid regime....In its studied refusal to accept historical responsibility, this novel, like all "imaginary" colonialist texts, attempts to mystify the imperial endeavor by representing the relation between self and Other in metaphysical terms.[9]

JanMohamed's critique is in itself critically revealing because it suggests that Coetzee should adopt an alternative literary approach, or, in other words, write a different kind of novel.

In this sense, JanMohamed's analysis is reminiscent of a large body of Marxist criticism inaugurated by Paul Rich and continued by Richard Martin, Peter Kohler, Michael Vaughan, and many others. Their standard "materialist" reading is that Coetzee's exploration of metaphysics and individual consciousness downplays the importance of historical and economic forces. In a strange parallel to Marxian critiques of Hegel's idealism, Coetzee is accused of retreating into abstruse metaphysics.[10] It is worth noting that by "mystifying"

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[9] Abdul JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 73.

[10] In fact, Coetzee pictures such a philosophical divide in *The Master of Petersburg* when Nechaev, the revolutionary, argues with Dostoevsky: "You keep talking about the insides of people's minds. History isn't thoughts, history isn't made in people's minds. History is made in the streets." *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Minerva, 1994) 200.

self-Other relations, Coetzee was seen to be abdicating his ethical responsibility as a writer in apartheid South Africa. The thematic concerns of his novels were regarded by some as evidence of a retreat from politics and a corresponding engagement with aestheticism. This perceived withdrawal from politics was then taken as an indication of Coetzee's complicity with the South African regime, and his works were judged to perpetuate the imperial project. This charge was answered by Teresa Dovey and others who argued, among other things, for the radical potential of deconstructive readings of Coetzee's novels, a potential that it was argued foregrounds the ethical dimensions of his work, especially when viewed against the background of Derrida's comments on apartheid in "Racism's Last Word."[11]

In my view, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is far from being another Manichean allegory or a manifesto for political action, or even a retreat into postmodern aesthetics; rather, it should be read primarily as a sophisticated investigation of the dynamics behind colonial encounter. How does Coetzee approach this subject? He chooses to depict a relationship between three people: the Magistrate, the barbarian girl, and Colonel Joll. His portrayal of their relationship ultimately originates in a psychoanalytic explication of the Hegelian master-servant dialectic. Although at one level Coetzee's work can be read in terms of its representations of the psychological dynamics between the Colonel and the Magistrate, he constantly returns to the dialectic between the individual and society. Surely this should be no surprise, as Coetzee draws so heavily from Hegel's "Lordship and Bondsman" section of the *Phenomenology*. George Armstrong Kelly, commenting on this moment in Hegel's dialectic, points to how

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[11] Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985): 290-299.

the interpretation of this aspect of Hegel's work has been conducted from three different angles:

> One of these angles is necessarily the social, of which Kojeve has given such a dazzling reading. Another regards the shifting pattern of psychological domination and servitude within the individual ego. The third then becomes a fusion of the other two processes: the interior consequences wrought by the external confrontation of the self and the other, the other and the self, which has commenced in a struggle for recognition.[12]

Coetzee examines both the social and psychological angles of self-Other confrontations. Further, he is able to fuse these angles and explore their complex relationship. In order to do this he has to depict moments of non-recognition and misrecognition and social and psychological isolation.

Even though Coetzee analyses various failures of recognition in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, he nonetheless allows for the promise of reciprocity. Yet he was writing from a time and a place that did not encourage optimism. That Coetzee was able to produce an austere work within which lay a kernel of optimism does him some credit. An unequivocally bleak novel would have been less effective. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Coetzee's novel gains much of its narrative power from its steady evaluation of the social and psychological consequences of non-recognition, misrecognition, and finally potential recognition.

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[12] George Armstrong Kelly, "Notes on Hegel's Lordship and Bondage," in O'Neill, John, ed. *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition: Texts and Commentary* (New York: State U of New York P, 1996) 257.

The Africans in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are portrayed as dehumanized and objectified. Conrad refuses to leave open even the slightest possibility of a dialectical progression for the African slaves. This creates a haunting backdrop for the drama of encounter between Marlow and Kurtz. The horrific reality of the imposition of power on the Africans in the Belgian Congo is indisputable, yet what readers should ask when assessing Conrad's work is how Conrad tackles the dilemma of just what one can learn from a confrontation with such injustice. Conrad's perspective is, of necessity, a late-nineteenth-century one (however much some critics may chafe at this fact when applying late-twentieth-century 'liberal democratic' criteria). Coetzee, mirroring both Conrad's portrait of a tragic lack of possibility in Marlow's encounters with the indigenous inhabitants of the Congo and a powerful affinity between Marlow and Kurtz, heightens the dramatic tension of the Magistrate's encounter with Colonel Joll by portraying a corresponding failure of recognition. The Magistrate is unable to *know* the barbarian woman since his real interest in her is, at base, a desire for the Colonel's desire.

The Colonel and Recognition

The Magistrate is convinced that the mere presence of the barbarians constitutes a danger to the Empire. The need to gain information about potential threats to Empire furnishes the Colonel with an unending quest—a perverse holy grail in which answers are to be found through the torture of others. The Colonel believes that truth only comes through pain; only in the penetration of the Other with the mechanisms of empire can one be assured of authenticity. It is no surprise that the conclusions he reaches are the conclusions he has been conditioned to look for. The Colonel's dark glasses shade him from the light of

the truth concerning the Empire. Teresa Dovey has pointed out Coetzee's careful allusions to the Oedipus tragedy. Blinded, the Colonel never goes beyond what he perceives to be the Empire's wishes. He is still obedient to the Empire, in contrast to Kurtz, who infamously becomes his own authority. In Conrad's tale, Marlow is fascinated by Kurtz partly because he has gone beyond the bounds of what is permitted of a colonial employee. He also becomes a sort of overlord for the native people, and although he harbors murderous thoughts towards them, he nevertheless has knowledge of them, since he is reported to have taken part in their rites.[13]

The Colonel, like Melvilles's Ahab in *Moby Dick* (1851), is dominated by an obsession that ultimately destroys him. In the Colonel's case it is not a whale that is the object of his compulsion, but the so-called barbarian hordes. Ahab's desire to hunt the whale is given metaphysical significance by Melville and comes in part to signify the dangers of aspiring to control that which by its very nature can never truly be known or controlled. The whale remains a mystery to Ahab as do the barbarians for the Colonel. The Colonel can only see them as a threat to empire, a menace that must be brought under strict control. From his

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[13] It is a commonplace observation that during the Colonial period in America the Catholics were more successful at communicating with native Americans than were the Puritans. Many have suggested that this was because Catholics shared with the natives an interest in religious ritual. This was not the case with the Puritans in New England, who, especially after King Philip's war,came to view native rituals as excessive, an extension of their distaste for Roman Catholicism. Without the syncretic possibility of ritual, the first-and second-generation Puritans were especially susceptible to the forces of projection that Coetzee's novel portrays.

perspective, the barbarian's secrets must be military secrets.

The Magistrate and the Barbarian Woman

Teresa Dovey uses René Girard's study of tragedy and the monstrous double to show that the relations between the Magistrate, the barbarian woman, and Colonel Joll illustrate the Girardian view of mediated desire. Citing Coetzee's essay "Triangular Structures of Desire in Advertising," she goes on to analyze *Waiting for the Barbarians*, stating that "the apices of the triangular structure are occupied by the Magistrate, as desiring subject, Colonel Joll (or Mandel, both standing merely for the oppressor), as the mediator of the desire, and the barbarian girl as object of desire."[14] Dovey realizes that "it is as victim of Joll's cruelty, as object of his perverse desire, that the girl becomes the object of the Magistrate's (mediated) desire" (Castillo 238). In other words, the Magistrate needs to understand her as his own construction, as a slave to his desire for mastery and control. Only after he has achieved this would it be possible for him to arrive at an unmediated relationship with her. During the course of *Waiting for the Barbarians* , the Magistrate never attains such a relation and is only able to approach one when he is with her in the wilderness--outside of the Empire's sphere of influence. In the liminal zone between the Empire and barbarian, he transgresses the edicts of empire and the door swings open for a second, exposing an Otherness based upon a different culture, a different way of being. During this moment the Magistrate is utterly transformed. Despite his transformation, the Magistrate's encounters with the

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[14] Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Cape Town: Donker, 1988) 238.

barbarian woman exhibit some uncomfortable parallels to Marlow's interactions with the indigenous inhabitants of the Congo. The Magistrate is unable to move beyond the limitations imposed by Empire, and the barbarian remains inaccessible to his understanding. Yet like Marlow, the Magistrate begins to realize both the nature of his unwholesome association with the Colonel and that, in his desire to understand the barbarian girl, he too is acting like an inquisitor.

What Coetzee provides in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a meditation on the costs and rewards of attempts to recognize the Other in the world of Empire. Coetzee features a complex series of relations between, among others, the Magistrate and the Colonel, the Empire and the barbarian, the Magistrate and the barbarian woman, and the Magistrate and Mandel. However, it is Coetzee's portrayal of the encounters between the Magistrate and the Colonel, with its combination of provocative image and subtle allusion, that furnishes the novel with its most revealing literary speculations. Indeed, it is in this relationship that Coetzee most obviously alludes to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*

Conrad and Coetzee

Writing about the influence of other authors and philosophers on Coetzee is, as Stephen Watson has pointed out, remarkably difficult, since "there are occasions in his work when Coetzee puts one strangely in mind of something said by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness.* Like Kurtz, one is tempted to say 'all of Europe' (and North America) has gone into the making of Coetzee—at least into the making of his books."[15] But rather than run through the inevitable

[15] Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," *Research in African Literature* 17.3 (1986): 380.

list of enlightenment and post-enlightenment thinkers who inhabit Coetzee's fiction—a literature that Watson compares to a museum or "graveyard of the thought and literary culture of the west"—I believe it is beneficial to establish some important links between Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Various critics have pointed to the parallels between these two works: George Steiner when discussing the Magistrate; Rosemary Anne Jolly when referring to Colonel Joll; and Dick Penner in his analysis of the nature of the association between the novel's two main characters. Yet these references to Conrad's novella are mere literary asides and fail to establish the truly significant connections between the authors' works.

Heart of Darkness and *Waiting for the Barbarians* highlight the relationship between the world of civilization and the world of the barbarian. On the surface they explore the lack of syncretic possibility, the irresolvable problem of overcoming the Empire's series of projections onto the barbarian, and the impossibility of mutual or reciprocal recognition. There are, however, moments in both works that point to a dialectical movement where a greater knowledge of self results in a progression beyond static, and sometimes Manichean, dichotomies. Debra Castillo's analysis of the constitution of the self in Coetzee's novel shows how the Colonel and the Magistrate, and indeed the townspeople, are governed by "the imperial image of the barbarian":

> It could even be considered a constituitive element of the frontier officer, a hidden but necessary part of the being of both Joll and the Magistrate. "Are they reflections of us," asks the Magistrate during the journey to the mountains, "is this a trick of the light?" (68). More than an insidious force spelling the end of the Empire's hegemony, the barbarians, unrecognized reflections of the self,

> represent a perverse hope, a secret desire, an ineluctable reality sustaining the self.[16]

She goes on to suggest that projections are made onto the barbarian prisoners so that "[t]he utterly foreign is domesticated and becomes an uncanny presence." According to Castillo, the Magistrate internalizes this presence, and in his dreams he confronts uncanny projections at an unconscious level. Analyzing one of his dreams, Castillo notes that "[t]he scene is replete not only with the latent dread of a monstrous unknown, but also with a fearful recognition of an uncanny projection" (Castillo 83). I would contend, however, that the real engine of change in the Magistrate is not to be found in the interpretation of his dreams, which, while significant, are capable, as the Magistrate remarks on the task of decoding his wood chips, of being "read in many ways." Instead, Coetzee's protagonist is transformed through his encounters with Colonel Joll. The Magistrate's secret self is Joll in the same way that Marlow's 'secret sharer' is Kurtz. Although different on many levels, Kurtz and the Colonel share an uncanny dimension: a preternaturally close and disturbing rapport with the respective protagonists and a profound influence on the course of their encounters with the Other—whether it be the barbarian or the native African.

In contrast to the meeting between Kurtz and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, the Magistrate's first encounter with Colonel Joll is immediate. Unlike Conrad's novella, where Marlow's journey into the Congo sets the scene for a truly momentous experience, the initial encounter between Joll and the Magistrate, although significant, involves little dramatic tension. During their first meeting, the Magistrate is unable to see the Colonel's eyes because of the

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[16] Debra Castillo, "The Composition of the Self in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" *Critique* 27 (1986): 83.

Colonel's dark glasses (one of the only references to technology), and there is the strong suggestion that the Colonel is blind to the light of truth. The dark glasses become a powerful motif in the novel, and can be seen as a symbol of ignorance as well as a barrier between conscious thought and unconscious desire. The Colonel's task is to search for the truth, and yet he appears unaware of the motivations that underlie his endeavors. To make matters worse, his inability to know himself inevitably means that he cannot know others. His tragedy lies in his determination to look for something that will always remain opaque to his understanding. "'There is a certain tone," Joll says. "A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone'" (5). Again, Coetzee's protagonists are preoccupied with an issue that is central to *Heart of Darkness*. Like Kurtz and Marlow, the Magistrate and the Colonel are bound together in their unconscious need to find a truth about the Other. The Magistrate, although he is consciously aware of the way his occupation yokes him to the Colonel—"It had not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks" (7)—is nevertheless surprised by the revelation of his true interest in the barbarian woman:

> ...and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time to offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me....I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. No! No! No! I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping up on me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea leaves. There is nothing to link me with

> torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars....I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (44).

Coetzee could hardly be more explicit in rendering the Magistrate's horrifying realization of his relation to the Colonel. Earlier, the Magistrate notes that "[i]t has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). The Magistrate's relentless search for the circumstances of the girl's torture suggests that he has taken to heart the Colonel's pronouncements on how to recognize truth.

Once Coetzee's protagonist has understood his link with Joll (the knowledge of which had been hidden by his naive liberalism), his journey towards ethical development gathers momentum. At the start of the novel the Magistrate is subject to the empty projections of the Empire, and yet he is not dominated by them because, unlike the Colonel, he constantly questions his motives. He is also confused and struggles to understand the dynamics of the so-called confrontation between empire and barbarian. The Colonel, on the other hand, does not question his role and "is filled with passionate intensity,"[17] launching his garrison on a doomed campaign to discover the non-existent barbarian rebel armies. It is only after the Magistrate has experienced torture and thereby suffered a fate similar to the barbarian woman's, that he can truly understand the dangers and limitations of a total blindness to the Other. The lack of syncretic possibility JanMohamed complains of is epitomized by Coetzee in his depiction of the Colonel and his inability to connect with others. However, the Magistrate moves beyond the projections of empire and comes to

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[17] The Colonel does his best to exemplify Yeats's line from "Easter 1916."

understand the kind of dangers that the Colonel's solipsism involves. The movement from the Magistrate's initial confusion is unmistakable. In one of Coetzee's finest moments, the Magistrate confronts the Colonel in a scene that recalls the doubling relationships that I argue are vital to the understanding of Conrad's fiction:

> At the window, in the moonlight, I catch a glimpse of Joll himself. He sees me too: the door is slammed shut, I hear the click of the bolt inside. Peering through the glass I can make him out sitting in the dim far corner, rigidly averting his face. I rap on the glass but he pays no attention....I stare through the window at the faint blur that is Colonel Joll. My coat flaps, I shiver from the cold, but also from the tension of suppressed anger. An urge runs through me to smash the glass, to reach in and drag the man out through the jagged hole, to feel his flesh catch and tear on the edges, to hurl him to the ground and kick his body to pulp. As though touched by this murderous current he reluctantly turns his face towards me....He looks out at me, his eyes searching my face. The dark lenses are gone. Must he too suppress an urge to reach out, claw me, blind me with splinters? I have a lesson for him that I have long meditated. I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: "The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves," I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. "Not on others,..." (145-46)

Clearly, in his depiction of the fraught but powerful intimacy between these two men, in his suggestion of reflection, of doubling, and of the murderous impulse, Coetzee has moved into Conradian territory. This scene captures the intense

atmosphere of the confrontations between Gentleman Brown and Jim in *Lord Jim* and the peculiar sympathy between Leggatt and the Captain in "The Secret Sharer." What keeps his work from simply being derivative of others, however, is Coetzee's unyielding grip on the narrative, a grip that is never, even for a moment, relinquished. The image of the confrontation between the Colonel and the Magistrate illustrates Coetzee's narrative control; the author refrains from the excessive use of allusions, metaphors, or adjectives (a charge famously leveled at Conrad) that would have softened the impact of his lucid prose. Coetzee manages to convey terrific emotion and is didactic without being overbearing. He has understood the terrific potential of the double to convey the uncanny, and he has done it without sinking into bathos or cliché. More importantly, he has also recognized, like Conrad before him, that an encounter with the uncanny furnishes a literary metaphor through which one can illustrate the ethical transformation of self.

Dialectics

Drawing upon the work of Albert Memmi, Stephen Watson claims that Coetzee's works are dominated by portrayals of divided minds, by protagonists who suffer Hamlet-like quandaries, and by characters who are placed in the unenviable position of being the "colonizer who refuses." He goes on to claim that Coetzee's works can be seen as containing "failed dialectics":

> Just as the unequal relationship between colonizer and colonized can take many forms, so this divided mind finds expression on a number of levels and, at its very deepest, translates itself into a series of oppositions or opposed needs which at times appear to be the first two terms of a rudimentary dialectic but which never

> manage to issue in a third synthesizing term. As is the case with South Africa today, so much of Coetzee's work can be viewed as a failed dialectic, a world in which there is no synthesis, in which the very possibility of synthesis would seem to have been permanently excluded. (Watson 382)

In contrast to Watson, I believe that Coetzee's work contains a very self-conscious attempt to illustrate the possibility and applicability of a positive dialectic in the depiction of self-Other dichotomies in a colonial context. The Magistrate, through his meetings with the Colonel, achieves ethical insights that would never have occurred to him if he had simply turned a 'blind eye' to the Colonel's abuses of power. Indeed, the characters in *Waiting for the Barbarians* lend themselves rather easily to dialectical analysis. Yet to reiterate, Coetzee's work, according to Watson, lacks even the possibility of synthesis or the Hegelian Aufhebung. While there are no clear leaps forward in Coetzee's work, I believe that in the course of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, some fundamental changes do occur in the Magistrate's outlook. We begin the novel and are introduced to a confident and self-satisfied Magistrate who thinks of himself as "a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out [his] days on [a] lazy frontier, waiting to retire" (8). But as the Magistrate undergoes a series of encounters, with Colonel Joll, Mandel, and the barbarian woman, his old confidence deserts him; he is no longer comforted by the old certitudes of empire and the idea of living as a responsible bureaucrat cannot supply any solace. At the end of the novel his uncertainty is fully evident:

> I think: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history

> of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that this is my cause for shame?"
>
> I think: "I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms. Of all the people of this town I am the one least fitted to write a memorial. Better the blacksmith with his cries of rage and woe." (154-55)

The novel finishes with the Magistrate waking from a dream: "Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (156). The Magistrate's awakening is a commentary on his journey as a whole and, on a different level, is also a statement directed to those in positions of power during the age of apartheid. The Magistrate is subjected to torture, public shame, and is rejected by his own community as a result of questioning the imperial project. Coetzee understands the costs, as Memmi put it, of being the colonizer who refuses. As we follow the Magistrate on his journey from blindness to light, from indolence to action, and from certainty to uncertainty, we nevertheless gain a new respect for him: he has become less sure of himself but more alive.

If, as seems clear, Coetzee's work is addressed to those in power, why not set the work in late-seventies South Africa and make the novel a *roman àclef?* Coetzee heightens *Waiting for the Barbarians* 's sense of allegory by withholding from the reader any indication of the Magistrate's name, parentage, and origin. He has sought to generate a mythical time beyond or "outside of history." The story makes no reference to colour or race and furthermore is not situated in any clearly defined geographical context. All we can do as readers is listen to the Magistrate's elaborate musings on the Empire and its cruelty and wonder at his unceasing quest for answers. It is too easy to denigrate Coetzee's

work by arguing that it provides no easy solutions, no political formulations for the victims of apartheid, and no indications of progress. What *Waiting for the Barbarians* does do is portray the costs and rewards of the recognition of Otherness for those in power, those who perhaps have the most to lose in the rejection of the status quo. If Coetzee had written a novel full of revolutionary intent or of enlightened liberal empathy for the victims of apartheid, his novel would have lacked the very qualities that have sustained its place in critical debate. More importantly, his work would have been less subversive; it would have failed to show just how those who choose to ignore the dispossessed, the victimized, and the oppressed are themselves stunted by their acceptance of present circumstance, by their adherence to institutions that keep the individuals within them in a state of bad faith. By projecting the fears of the Empire onto the barbarians, the Empire will never understand them, and, as Coetzee implies, if the Other cannot be known neither can the self.

Waiting for the Barbarians, while it does not furnish any unequivocal answers to those who seek a book with a recipe for change, and while it does not allow for easily identifiable moments of syncretism, nevertheless makes a profound contribution to the literature of modern South Africa. Coetzee has furnished South Africa with a literary examination of the theme of recognition in universal terms. By doing so he is able to cast light on the particular circumstances of apartheid South Africa in a highly original manner. In his consideration of the Magistrate, Coetzee has courageously portrayed the predicament of the imperial master, of being an individual caught within an institution that rewards the abuse of others and encourages stagnation within the self. To renounce the rewards of imperial certainty, of economic security, and of one's own social standing within the hierarchies of imperial power is not

without cost. Having lost his position the Magistrate nevertheless becomes a man whose questions invite our sympathy and whose actions acquire a complex ethical dimension. One can hope that the Magistrate will eventually recognize the Other; however, there is no doubt that the Colonel will never do so. Will the white South African minority government realize the necessity of change, or will they remain forever waiting for the barbarians? It seems that since the publication of Coetzee's controversial work, history has spoken and the costs of recognition have provided their undoubted rewards.

Chapter 5

Living in the Penumbra of Colonialism: The Transition from Victim to Self-Mastery in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*

> The self is the friend of a man who masters himself through the self, but for a man without self-mastery, the self is like an enemy at war.[1]
>
> —Bhagavad Gita

> Journeys into the soul are not for women with children, not all that dark heaving turmoil. They are for men, and the toughest of them took off into the solitude of the forests and fought their battles with hell in deep seclusion. No wonder they hid from view. The inner life is ugly.[2]
>
> —Bessie Head

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[1] *The Bhagavad—Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War,* trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (Bantam: New York, 1986) 64.

[2] Bessie Head, *A Question of Power,* African Writers Ser. 149 (Heinemann: London, 1974) 50.

Bessie Head's fiction forms a powerful and complex literary response to the politics of recognition in apartheid South Africa and neo-colonial Botswana of the 1970s and 1980s. Her novels and short stories arise from her particular circumstances as a South African born of mixed parentage and then later, as a citizen of Botswana; however, while they often contain scenes of local or regional interest, they tend to move beyond the regional by posing questions of universal significance. In her desire to explore the origins of inequality and the roots of and possible responses to models of victimization, Head typifies what is most telling and most unsettling about postcolonial fiction from the periphery of the old empire. Less artistically wrought than other South African literary works of the period, Head's novels nevertheless proved remarkably successful in attracting critical attention. In *Maru*[3] (1971) and *A Question of Power* (1973) Head is able to lay bare the tortured sensibility of an individual who has fallen victim to the worst forms of identity politics practiced by the white minority South Africans in the glory days of apartheid. Most notably, in the latter work, Head's analysis of how her protagonist—a deeply troubled woman called Elizabeth—manages to surmount the obstacles confronting her reveals an author at the height of her powers.

Head's *A Question of Power*, much like Doris Lessing's *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), conveys the inner life of a protagonist who oscillates between two worlds and enters surprising and disturbing interior landscapes. Elizabeth voyages into a fantasy realm populated by characters of uncertain identity. In several episodes, the protagonist loses grip on reality altogether, and

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[3] Bessie Head, *Maru* (New York: McCall, 1971).

it is during these moments that Head's book is most compelling, for, as Ronald Blythe put it, Head is able to "give mind suffering a kind of picture language."[4] Elizabeth, who refers to 'hell' on several occasions, is confronted by the "uncertainties of questing within" (Head 42) and has to endure being the "receiver of horror"(131). She undergoes a spiritual and psychological struggle of truly mythic proportions, and her internal universe is described with imagery borrowed from the Christian, Buddhist, and ancient Egyptian religious teachings. Her fantasy life is dominated by two shadowy figures named Dan and Sello. Periodically, characters called 'Medusa' and 'Sello in the brown suit' also appear. As the latter of these names indicates, the nature of identity is both highly mutable and generally suspect in Head's literary world; this uncertainty contributes to the drama of the protagonist's spiritual quest. Just what did Head want to express in her harrowing depiction of Elizabeth's mental suffering? This is a complex question; nevertheless, one can attempt an answer by determining what it is that Elizabeth fights against. Following Conrad and many others before her, Head suggests that the most important struggle one can engage in begins with the self.

When queried by her editor, Head found the novel's subject matter difficult to explain. Requested to explicate her difficult and abstruse text, Head faltered and revealed a deep ambivalence about the thematic concerns of her fiction. In a missive to the publisher accompanying her manuscript, she wrote:

> It is an allegorical novel. It is about God and Dante's inferno. Sello is the traditional image of God as Old Father Time, yet in no way does he give to Elizabeth a traditional explanation of God. He is

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[4] Ronald Blythe, rev. of *A Question of Power*, *Sunday Times* 18 Aug. 1974: 34.

> doing several things at once—he is divesting himself of vesture garments, he is partially recreating for Elizabeth the Fall of Man, he is slaying Lucifer or the killer dog power theme that has caused so much misery in human history.[5]

On a separate occasion Head stated that the novel was not

> the classic struggle with God and the Devil I thought it was. It might simply be local African horror and I might have put my grand and faulty imagination into something I don't understand. (Eilerson 150)

Head's contradictory evaluation of her literary intention should warn against the critical presumption that her novel will exhibit simple and self-evident dichotomies—good and evil or black and white. Horrace Goddard's oversimplification of Head's novel is a good example of a critic's failure to grasp the deeper import of the author's deliberations. He dwells on Head's imagery and finds that it consists of static dualities:

> Bessie Head's statement in this novel is that man is basically evil and corrupt. The juxtaposition of light and darkness reveals a propensity for either of these forces. Power is obviously equated with darkness and evil and light with goodness....Both novels castigate the evil of corrupting power, human denigration and the forces of darkness. Their controlling and unifying images and those of light and darkness, with their associated meanings. In the end, light predominates, but Bessie Head makes us fully aware

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[5] Gillian Stead Eilersen, *Bessie Head, Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing* (London: James Currey) 148-49.

> that it is only the human soul which, acting as a torch or beacon, can keep the forces of evil in check.[6]

Head's treatment of contradiction and ambivalence in *A Question of Power* is neither simplistic nor overdetermined. Her cosmology is not easily decoded, and biblical imagery, much evident throughout the novel, should not be taken at face value. Although Head endeavors to examine the origins of inequality and the problem of evil by utilizing a series of opposed terms, I consider it unlikely that a heuristic method is at work in her fiction. The nature of the truth being arrived at is, at best, difficult to interpret.

In and of itself, this does not mean that her writing is impenetrable; on the contrary, *A Question of Power* rewards careful consideration. Goddard's criticism is astonishing because it completely fails to take into account one of the novel's chief strengths: namely, that the world it portrays is full of movement between dark and light, heaven and hell, and good and evil. Surely, if Goddard's interpretation was justified and Head had written a novel of strict oppositions between "beacons of light and forces of evil," Elizabeth would not have been of mixed parentage, and the "normal and the abnormal" would not be said to have "blended completely in [her] mind" (15). Additionally, there are numerous episodes in the novel in which good and evil are yoked together: "She could not sort out Sello, the shuttling movements he made between good and evil, the way he had introduced absolute perfection and thrown muck in her face"(137). Head's fiction, far from arguing for an ethics based on moral relativism, searches instead for spiritual and moral truth from within the

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[6] Cecil Abrahams, ed., *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa* (New Jersey: Africa World P): 105-111.

dialectical interplay of orthodox categories such as good and evil.

Dan and Sello

These two characters dominate Elizabeth's mind and function as guides to the fantasy world she inhabits. Although it is tempting to see Sello as an agent for good and Dan—referred to as Satan on one occasion (198)—as primarily evil, Head stresses the various connections between these two characters. Elizabeth thinks of Sello as "really Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. I just burst out with the right lines on cue as though I am living with a strange 'other self' I don't know so well. And you know Sello? He has a terrible Medusa hidden away in his subconscious" (58). Sello, like Elizabeth herself, is host to multiple personae, and they fulfill various functions. Further, Dan, while initially seeming uni-dimensional in his negativity, is, it turns out, very positive: "She treasured the encounter with Dan. The suffering she had endured had sealed her Achille's [*sic*] heel; that of the brutal murderer for love. He was one of the greatest teachers she'd worked with..." (202). Dan instructs Elizabeth how to resolve oppositions through suffering. In other words, Elizabeth attempts to synthesize oppositions and recreate a sense of self that moves beyond the seemingly ineluctable inequalities of the archetypal colonial self-Other encounter. Her book searches for a sense of self that will function in the neo-colonial world, a self that is stronger because of the suffering that resulted from the colonial enterprise.

Inequality

A Question of Power reveals a profoundly racialized society. Head demonstrates how racial assumptions derived in part from the shadow of a

colonial past continue to dominate and degrade Elizabeth's life even after she has fled apartheid South Africa for Botswana. Her move to Botswana enables her to engage in a kind of debriefing, a closed session wherein she questions what she has undergone in her native land. Yet, as the following indicates, merely thinking about the past is a dangerous enterprise:

> In South Africa she had been rigidly classified Coloured. There was no escape from it to the simple joy of being a human being with a personality. There wasn't any escape like that for anyone in South Africa. There were races not people. She had lived for a time in a part of South Africa where nearly all the Coloured men were homosexuals and openly paraded down the street in women's clothes....An African man gave her the most reasonable explanation: 'How can a man be a man when he is called a boy? I can barely retain my own manhood. I was walking down the road the other day with my girl, and the Boer policeman said to me: "Hey, boy, where's your pass?" Am I a man to my girl or a boy? Another man addresses me as a boy. How do you think I feel? (44)

Head's description of a black man's humiliation exposes the grim reality of identity politics in apartheid South Africa: specifically, the feeling of being categorized and objectified on the basis of race. This passage resonates with the language of racial inequality. For instance, a man addresses another man as 'boy,' with its implication of sexual immaturity and inadequacy. The black man claims that under such circumstances he can "barely retain his own manhood." Elizabeth realizes that the behavior of the coloured men, behavior she had previously considered effeminate, is in reality a reaction to a society that literally unmans them. After relating this telling account of a moment of

misrecognition, Head then leads us into the mind of Elizabeth, a coloured woman tortured by the internalization of the very same categories:

> Suddenly the nights became torture. As she closed her eyes all these Coloured men lay down on their backs, their penes in the air, and began to die slowly. Some of them who could not endure these slow deaths simply toppled over into rivers and drowned, Medusa's mocking smile towering over them all. (44-45)

Head's narrative shows how perceptions of racial injustice can precipitate fantasies resounding with the imagery of humiliation. This story of the African man's dishonor has the power to disturb Elizabeth's peace of mind, suggesting that Head considers individual incidents of misrecognition to have implications far beyond the private sphere. In other words, such incidents can produce an atmosphere of distrust and dislike, which has negative consequences for the society at large.

Head, like Albert Memmi and Frantz Fannon, undertakes to explicate racial encounter in terms that partly originate in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Head's novel is not unique in this sense, since many South African writers have covered similar philosophical territory and have frequently alluded to the workings of Hegel's "Lordship and Bondsman" section of the *Phenomenology*. Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), for instance, clearly exposes the continuing relevance of Hegel's dialectic in the relationships between wealthy white South Africans and their black house-servants.[7] What

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[7] See Abdul JanMohamed's explication of *July's People in Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Minneapolis: U of Mass P, 1988).

makes Head's evocation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic unusual is the way in which she illuminates the internal consequences of Hegel's paradigm. Elizabeth's fantasies clearly reveal how she is herself, as Conrad put it, both "master and slave, victim and executioner [and the one who at once]...suffers and causes suffering."[8] By suggesting that the path to freedom involves a radical confrontation of the self, a self at war with itself, she avoids Gordimer's more standard rethinking of Hegel (one that emphasizes the social implications of the dialectic). Instead, she focuses on the dialectic's psychological implications and echoes what I have argued is crucial to the understanding of Conrad's fiction.

In *A Question of Power,* Elizabeth's mental life is formed by a struggle against various forces of repression. Her consciousness has been shaped by others who have projected upon her their own fears and prejudices. In so doing, they have helped to create a mind that rigidly adheres to black and white lines and exhibits both Manichean sensibility and colonialist desire. Elizabeth becomes the victim of self-hatred and misdirected anger. Her liberation depends on the confrontation of a self forged from the embers of the colonial experience. Belonging to a society under the sway of the worst excesses of Manicheism, she must undergo a dangerous but necessary transformation, one that can only originate in a 'life and death' struggle with the self.

Elizabeth's plight in *A Question of Power* reveals the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi's remark that "[t]he moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be

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[8] Joseph Conrad, "To Marguerite Poradowska," 20 July 1894, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad,* ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 162.

a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states."[9] Gandhi's comments reinforce the idea that if one is to move beyond the position of the victimized, then what is required is a radical break with the past and an imaginative reconception of the self. Yet Head's work implies that such an undertaking, if it is to be successful, calls for a kind of spiritual cleansing or baptism of fire; it is evident that Elizabeth's quest involves a truly Herculean effort of will and a journey that is every bit as perilous as Marlow's voyage into the Congo. As Head remarks, "the inner life is ugly," especially if one has been raised as a victim of apartheid. Yet while apartheid was a singularly abhorrent example of a government policy derived from a historical, religious, and political climate particularly favourable to racial distinction, Head implies that it was also an outgrowth of something more universal. Head's fiction argues that apartheid is built upon archetypal foundations that have traditionally caused people to view the stranger as a threat, a barbarian, or a rival to be bested.[10] These ancient modes of encounter have proven so powerful that they have largely shaped patterns of recognition

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[9] Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Non Violence in Peace and War 1949,* ed. Paul F. Power, Vol. 2 (New York: Garland, 1972) 10.

[10] See Bernard Lewis, "The Historical Roots of Racism" in *The American Scholar* Winter (1998): 17-25. "In the state of nature, among wild creatures or primitive humans, a stranger, he who is "not one of us" or like us, is viewed at least with suspicion and more likely hostility. He may be seen as a predator to be fled or as a prey to be seized; or, if neither of these, as a rival, and therefore an enemy to be fought" (17).

during European colonial expansion.[11] If we are to transcend the limitations of the kind of thinking that predicates various forms of racial intolerance, then, according to Head, we must look to ourselves and examine the primitive fears that so often coalesce into a hatred of others or, in Elizabeth's case, a hatred of the self.

Head analyzes the nature of Elizabeth's psychological responses to racism in order to find the universal wellspring from which all inequality and injustice flow. Like *A Question of Power,* Head's previous novel, *Maru,* also sees racism as a fundamental force in the relations not just between black and white Africans, but between all peoples of the world:

> How universal was the language of oppression! They had said of the Masarwa what every white man had said of every black man: "They can't think for themselves. They don't know anything." The matter never rested there. The stronger man caught hold of the weaker and made a circus animal out of him, reducing him to a state of misery and subjection and non-humanity. The combinations were the same, first conquest, then abhorrence at the looks of the conquered and, from there onwards, all forms of horror and evil practices. (Head 109)

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[11] As Bernard Lewis notes, it is a terrible paradox of history that "[t]he Europe that enslaved so many Africans was not, as one might have expected, the semi-barbarous Europe of the Middle Ages for which, as for other societies, the enslavement of the outsider would have accorded perfectly well with its beliefs; it was the Western civilization of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and of the French and American Revolutions" (23).

Head's reflections on inter-tribal tensions and prejudices in *Maru* suggest an early interest in the kind of psychological speculation that was to mark her later work. Her fiction does not champion any revolutionary cause, nor does it hypothesize on the future of any nation *per se*; rather, it perpetually returns to the theme of the powerless individual caught up in bleak patterns of encounter—patterns familiar to anyone with an interest in the history of European imperialism in Africa. When we read Head's work, we are reminded again and again of both the social construction of identity and the relentless pressure on the minds of the conquered to accept the image the conquerors choose to mirror back to them.

Elizabeth's mind has fully absorbed the projections of the architects of apartheid. As Roger Berger notes in an influential essay on *A Question of Power,* Elizabeth's mental battles are not, as one might expect, with white colonial figures, but instead with two black men—Dan and Sello. He concludes that Elizabeth's fantasy life is dominated by white racial stereotypes. Unlike Johnson[12] and Pearse,[13] critics who have viewed Dan and Sello as "competing systems for confronting evil" (Johnson) or as "representing the subconscious and the unconscious" (Pearse), Berger's views their roles as in the "final analysis indeterminate." In concluding his essay, Berger argues that Head's text "offers an intriguing extension of Fanon's paradigm, because the novel's

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[12] Joyce Johnson, "Metaphor, Myth and Meaning in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," *WLWE* 25.2 (1985): 198-211.

[13] Adetokunbo Pearse, "Apartheid and Madness: Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," *Kunapipi* 5.2 (1983): 81-98.

protagonist, like Bessie Head herself, has experienced both a colonial and neocolonial world."[14]

Berger's observation explains why Head's difficult book has continued to fascinate critics. Her novel portrays a situation that has become increasingly common and yet has not, with few notable exceptions (such as Lessing, V.S. Naipaul, and George Lamming), been adequately translated into fiction. How does one negotiate the transition from the colonial to the neo-colonial world? This dilemma is central to Head's work, and during the course of *A Question of Power* she arrives at a solution, one that requires both a profound self-examination and a radical break with the past. Head contends that such a confrontation with the past enables one to accept the challenge of the future. However, in a society that continually reinforces negative stereotypes in its wish to repress certain sectors of the population, the kind of examination that Head advocates is all but impossible. Consequently, Elizabeth is only able to fully evaluate her upbringing in apartheid South Africa after she has moved to Botswana. *A Question of Power* makes it clear that, for some, the ordeal of confronting the legacy of colonial identity politics is perhaps only feasible in a place far from home.

Education

Throughout *A Question of Power,* Head stresses the importance of education and socialization in the establishment and perpetuation of social

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[14] Roger Berger, "The Politics of Madness in Bessie Head" in *The Tragic Life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa,* ed. Cecil Abrahams (New Jersey: Africa World P) 31-43.

inequality. Elizabeth's child is highly impressionable and possesses a mind that is a veritable *tabula rasa*. He constantly mimics his mother, even when she voices her inner tumult: "'You're at death's door, my son' she said murderously. 'You're at death's door, my son' he shrilled" (50). Elizabeth is fascinated by this aspect of her son's behavior. She understands the link between her son's need to mirror her conduct and the possibility that she is reliving the travails of her mother's life. Elizabeth painfully recollects what she knows about her mother's fate: when Elizabeth was sixn her mother went insane and committed suicide. Other than this basic information, our knowledge of Elizabeth's mother is sketchy. However, it is significant, as indeed other critics have indicated, that, at times, Head's protagonist seems destined to repeat her mother's sad journey into self-destruction. Elizabeth imagines the silent appeal of her dead mother: "Do you think I can bear the stigma of insanity alone? Share it with me" (17).

Elizabeth's visions of her deceased mother are reminiscent of Hamlet's first encounters with what appears to be the spirit of his dead father. Like Hamlet, Elizabeth is haunted by a figure from the past, a reminder of an historical injustice that has the power to lead the protagonist astray. Yet there is more at issue here than Elizabeth's private, troubled past. Head implies that her protagonist's and Africa's plight are in essence the same, that Africa itself must revisit its colonial legacy in order to secure its future. To move forward, the lessons of history must be learned and the ghost of colonialism conjured and faced down. Living in the penumbra of the colonial shadow, Elizabeth is prepared to re-examine her past. One of Head's most interesting questions is whether Africa is also finally ready to undertake this kind of journey to self-understanding.

Head's work gives rise to another question: Is it possible to escape the

cycles of victimization and abuse? Sometimes her conclusion appears grimly final: if we mirror those around us and if we are educated by those who wish to victimize us, then it is inevitable that we will acquiesce and take up the role of victim. The strength of Head's book is that this principle is made disturbingly personal. During our voyage into Elizabeth's fantasy world we are exposed to the inner workings of her pathology. Here, in her heart of darkness, she battles with herself and with the shadowy figures who populate her imagination. These characters threaten to isolate and destroy her. Her fantasies, although terrible in their apparently arbitrary nature, nevertheless are propelled by the protagonist's aspiration to understand the necessity of suffering and by a hope, however tenuous, of escaping from her 'mind forged manacles'. To put it another way, *A Question of Power* is a spiritual and psychological quest in which Elizabeth acknowledges the terrifyingly destructive power of her upbringing. She emerges from the struggle with a renewed sense of herself, one that finally allows her to accept Africa as her homeland.

Head's book avoids becoming merely a private exploration of troubled consciousness. In its finest moments it demonstrates the inexorable links between Elizabeth's private quandaries and the problems besetting her native land. For example, Elizabeth's insights into the nature of her socialization and the potential for the past to destroy the present are crucial components in her analysis of South African education. Head refers to the institutionalized racism that shapes South Africa's educational system:

> It wasn't like that in his country, South Africa. There they said that the black man was naturally dull, stupid, inferior, but they made sure to deprive him of the type of education which developed personality, intellect, skill. (57)

Yet Botswana, while not subject to the racial politics of apartheid South Africa, is nonetheless a poor and inhospitable place for a coloured school teacher. With respect to her efforts to teach children in Botswana, Elizabeth observes: "Children are great imitators, but the radius of imitation had already, by the time she received her class, been severely restricted to barren ground" (67). Head's emphasis on the importance of socialization and the power of imitation is an affirming insight in that change is perhaps possible through a collective act of empathy and imagination. But always in *A Question of Power*, the positive is tempered by Elizabeth's unflinching gaze at the poverty she encounters in her life as a teacher.

> Children's literature and writing was often the most magical world, and yet there were harsh environments like this where all magic was dead or had not even begun to live. Everything was touched by this harshness. [The children] ate no breakfast in the early morning, and by midday their mouths were white and pinched with starvation....The children she had taught were stark, gaunt, thin, like twisted thorn-bush. (68)

This passage is very characteristic of Head's fiction because it suspends her conviction that she should try to create works that are both "beautiful and magical" against a kind of realism based upon keen observations of life in Botswana. Thus, Elizabeth spends some of her time in fantasy worlds that are alternately resplendent and horrifying, and other times in the bleaker settings that are an integral part of being a teacher in Botswana. There are periods when Elizabeth inhabits a fairly ordinary state of mind, but these episodes are usually short-lived. Every so often her "inner storm" (67) overwhelms her and at these times she notes that she "found her mind turning in relief to African

realism....A real, living battle of jealousy, hate and greed was more easily understood and resolved under pressure than soaring, mystical flights of the soul" (66). As insanity claims more and more of Elizabeth, Head's writing becomes correspondingly less easy to interpret. This being said, there is no doubt that Head continues to reveal the direct connection between Elizabeth's inner life and her 'exterior,' African life. Elizabeth's existence in Botswana is fairly uneventful, but when her fantasy world comes crashing in on her, she is reduced to a profound state of torpor. It is a feature of Head's approach that during these to-ings and fro-ings between different states of consciousness we are given inklings of the grim details of the everyday in Botswana. The dialectical relationships between self and Other, the private and public spheres, and reality and fantasy fuel the fire of Head's critique of abusive identity politics while deepening the turmoil that afflicts Elizabeth's troubled mind.

Summoning the Double to Save the Self

For colonial and postcolonial writers the *doppelgänger* motif has provided an enduring enigma, one that has intriguing implications for the depiction of self-Other encounters as they figure in fictions assessing colonial patterns of recognition. Head uses the topos of the double to great effect. Near the beginning of *A Question of Power* we are informed that "[m]ost of what applied to Sello applied to [Elizabeth], because they were twin souls with closely linked destinies" (11). Head's novel is full of references to self-projections; taken together they reveal a concern she shares with both Conrad and Coetzee. Head cautions that if we condemn those who are overtaken by colonial desires, by the need for the domination of others, we must first recognize that these desires live within ourselves; it is only by conceding their

existence that we are able to resist their siren call. Head appears to understand this better than most:

> Then again the story was shaded down to a very personal level of how a man is overwhelmed by his own internal darkness; that when he finds himself in the embrace of Medusa she is really the direct and tangible form of his own evils, his power lusts, his greeds, his self-importance, and these dominate him totally and bring him to the death of his soul. (40)

Head attempts to comprehend the failures of recognition that lie behind the need for mastery over others. By understanding the position of the master, Head's protagonist in *A Question of Power* hopes to achieve a position of self-mastery, one that avoids the dead end reached by those who attain status by domination. We have come across fictional characters who exhibit this kind of behavior before. Both Conrad and Coetzee, in *Heart of Darkness* and *Waiting for the Barbarians,* respectively, have portrayed individuals who exhibit both a pronounced solipsism and, at first, an obsessive need to subject others to the demands of empire. Kurtz and the Colonel are probed by protagonists who find that their investigations inexorably lead them back to a painful reassessment of themselves. Slowly, the reader discovers that Marlow and the Magistrate are closely linked to Kurtz and the Colonel. They are opposite sides of the same coin, doubles, and so if we wish to comprehend the nature of colonial perception in these stories, we must contemplate the status, for instance, of Marlow's relations with Kurtz. Malevolent self-projections have the potential either to transform or to destroy the self. In Marlow's case, for instance, his obsession with Kurtz foretells a trial that, when successfully negotiated, produces a certain kind of wisdom. For Kurtz, the Belgian Congo functions as

Head's Medusa, while for Marlow, Kurtz comes to symbolize Marlow's own dubious aspirations.

This kind of analysis has become fairly standard and has led many critics to suggest that repressed guilt lies at the base of horrific projections or doublings of the self. One of the most compelling statements on this subject is by Patrick Brantlinger, whose analysis of "[t]he myth of the Dark continent" is preceded by quotations from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In a discussion of a passage by Dominique Mannoni, who elaborates on European writings about Africa, Bratlinger raises the subject of Kurtz's "painful division":

> [N]ot even Marlow sees Kurtz's going native as a step toward the recovery of a lost paradise; it is instead a fall into hell, into the abyss of his own darkness....Nothing points more uncannily to the process of projection and displacement of guilt for the slave trade, guilt for empire, guilt for one's own savage and shadowy impulses than those moments when white man confronts white man in the depths of the jungle. The archetypal event is Stanley's discovery of Livingstone; the famous scene of "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" suggests a narcissistic doubling, a repetition or mirroring. The solipsistic repression of whatever is nonself or alien characterizes all forms of cultural and political domination.[15]

Bratlinger's analysis argues that the double gains much of its vitality from the repression of colonial guilt. While there is an element of truth to this position, I consider it to be a rather one-sided explanation of the prevalence of such

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[15] Patrick Bratlinger, "Victorians and Africans," *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1985): 196.

instances of projection in the colonial world. These moments of projection, which are sometimes captured in narratives and at other times created by imaginative writers (episodes that occasionally coalesce into what can be referred to as a doubling relationship), have manifold implications. There has been a large amount of medical and literary research suggesting that the existence of the double is connected with anxiety about death;[16] it has also

[16] See Lara H. Maack and Paul E. Mullen, "The Doppelgänger, Disintegration and Death: A Case Report," in *Psychological Medicine* 13 (1983): 651-54. Their article makes some interesting observations about how literary treatments of the double can provide insight into certain medical conditions. The connection between death and the *doppelgänger* is clearly stated: "To the observer Mr B's psychotic world, incomprehensible as it may appear, seems to exhibit interconnections between his experience of bodily disintegration, the fear of death and the Doppelgänger" (654). For a medical discussion of literary representations of the double, see Jean Lhermitte, "Visual Hallucination of the Self," *British Medical Journal* 3 Mar. 1951: 431-34.

been linked to the desire to commit suicide.[17] Suicide is a constant theme in Head's work and is most apparent when Dan urges Elizabeth to kill herself and predicts her death (13). Indeed, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* pictures a prolonged negotiation with death in order to illustrate the wisdom resulting from self-encounter. I would argue that one of the functions of self-projections in a colonial context is to jar consciousness into a state of profound uncertainty. This uncertainty in turn allows for new questions to be asked and the door to be opened to a recognition of the existence of others. The uncanny solipsistic doubling Bratlinger refers to is not simply an image whereby white European civilization can displace its considerable guilt but an elaborate psychological mechanism that can initiate one into the lives of others.

From the beginning, Head's novel features a tension between being for oneself and being for others. As the novel progresses, we are given evidence of the causes of Elizabeth's retreat from the world of others. The indications of her troubled childhood together with her reflections on race relations enable the reader to piece together a picture of Elizabeth *as* victim. She internalizes the cruelty of Others and confronts aspects of this cruelty within herself. Thus, Marlow's and Elizabeth's journeys, although they may have very different

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[17] For example, see Peter Bruger et al, "Heautoscopy, Epilepsy, and Suicide," *Journal of Neurology,Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry* 57 (1994): 838-839. They conclude: "The vivid descriptions of the few survivors, such as our patients, however, would rather favour a causal relation between the doppelgänger experience and the impulse to kill oneself. The clinical experience of all these cases seems to confirm the understanding of the double as a 'harbinger of death,' as known from folklore" (839).

coordinates, are similar in certain respects. While Marlow becomes more and more absorbed by the specter of Kurtz as he ventures up the Congo, Elizabeth stares at her own image and then reels from the shock:

> She washed and dressed, then had to comb her hair in the mirror. She flinched and looked away. There was an unnameable horror there. She could not endure to look at it....How could someone run away from their own mind? (46)

This fear of her reflection foreshadows the trial Elizabeth will have to undergo during the course of the novel. She will have to endure the hell of self-torture; only after she has suffered several mental breakdowns does she finally find a "lever out of hell" (198).

Carol Margaret Davison argues that Head's book is a female *bildungsroman.*[18] Unlike many female novels of development, such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) or Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Head's novel, while it refers to suicide, avoids such a termination. Elizabeth, according to Davison, "embarks upon...a quest for self-definition and self-actualization," and at the end of the work the protagonist is able to attain a "final state of complete integration" (Davison 24). This quest involves confronting aspects of her past, aspects that find expression as actors in a drama of her own making.

Hybridity and Isolation

Elizabeth is a product of miscegenation. She explains to Eugene that she

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18 Carol Margaret Davison, "A Method in the Madness" in *The Tragic life: Bessie Head and Literature in South Africa*, ed. Cecil Abrahams (New Jersey: Africa World P.) 19-29.

is "used to" (56) isolation. Her withdrawal from society seems the inevitable result of a taboo union: hybridity in a society that is forged along Manichean lines will not be tolerated for very long. Much like Hester's child, Pearl, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Elizabeth is largely bought up alone. Unlike Hawthorne's protagonist, Elizabeth's mother is unable to sustain herself. Because of her mother's madness and suicide, Elizabeth is at the mercy of South Africa's hostile racial environment. Head shows how Elizabeth's behavior mimics societal reaction to her. In her native country her very body is a living sign of transgression. Alone, bereft of meaningful connection, Elizabeth not surprisingly turns inwardly for solace, eventually populating her mind with self-generated characters. Rejected by society, she exhibits behavior that will result in further exclusion; expected to be an outcast, she starts to act like one. Indeed, whenever Elizabeth blends experiences normally kept separate and descends into madness, she runs the risk of alienating others. She leaves her job as a teacher because of a mental breakdown, and for long periods she refuses the help of others—even accusing her steadfast friend, Tom, of prejudice. Although her erratic behavior would have isolated her in South Africa, it fails to do so in Botswana. Instead, it proves to be a hidden blessing that furnishes her with an unusual method of escape from the restrictions of her background. By creating characters that are at times aspects of her own personality, and at other times doubles of herself, she is able to revisit old and barren territory, renewing it with the use of a fertile imagination.

Head's insistence on placing Elizabeth in the zone between good and evil, dream and reality, black and white, is an indication of her desire to demonstrate the rewards of a progression beyond dichotomies. Elizabeth's vision of the colonial past and of apartheid South Africa is generally bleak. She

chooses, however, to use her past experiences of life in the colonial world to gain a better understanding of her new life in Botswana. Head views human suffering in terms of power and inequality; she understands that suffering is at the root of the human experience shaping not only the colonial but also the neo-colonial world. In fact, *A Question of Power* is in one sense a prolonged deliberation on hybridity's potential to disturb ossified categories of being. Michael Dash could be writing about Elizabeth's efforts at self-regeneration when, on the subject of the capacity of hybridity to aid what Wilson Harris has called the "counter-culture of the imagination," he remarks:

> Such an investigation of the process of adaptation and survival in the oppressed cultures of the New World could well change the vision of the past which froze the Third World writer in the prison of protest and reveal the colonial legacy as a positive and civilizing force in spite of the brutality and privation which cloud this historical period....That is to say that colonization and slavery did *not* make things of men, but in their own way the enslaved peoples might have in their own imagination so reordered their reality as to reach beyond the tangible and concrete to acquire a new recreative sensibility which could aid in the harsh battle for survival.[19]

By imaginatively coming to grips with the legacies of colonialism and the root causes of racial distinction (which have so shaped the history of South Africa), Elizabeth is able to renew both herself and her connection to Africa and

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[19] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 200.

Africans.

What Does *A Question of Power* Attempt to Teach?

To tackle the weighty question of what Head's novel attempts to teach, Elizabeth's pronouncements on return from her inner journey should be examined. First, she states that she "had gained an insight into what the German concentration camp must have been like" and declares that "she had no illusions left about God or mercy or pity" (200). For Elizabeth, the idea of a Judeo-Christian God is untenable. In a parody of Mohammed's statement, she notes that "there is only one God and his name is man" (206). Clearly, she has developed an antinomian perspective on the human relation to God. Moreover, she claims that it is necessary to move beyond a personal love towards a love of all things. Carnal love is replaced by a spiritual love in which "there [is] a feeling of being kissed by everything" (202). Personal love, which discriminates and attempts to feed "private hungers," is the enemy of universal love. According to Head, the expression of personal love has two unfortunate consequences: jealousy and inequality. Only after Elizabeth has faced her past, only after she has internalized and confronted the brutalities of the colonial world, of "African circumstances," is she able to move beyond isolation, alienation, and self-loathing. She concludes that the most important thing about a love that "include[s] all mankind" is "that it equalize[s] all things and all men" (202).

Head argues that the knowledge obtained from the dispiriting history of racial encounter in South Africa can be ultimately liberating. This liberation is based on the principle that a clear perception of possible psychological responses to victimization is the first stage in a long and painful process that

results in a new kind of freedom. She understands how inequalities can shape individuals and groups; but, while Head acknowledges the dynamics of victimization, she refuses merely to represent them. Rather, she teaches how certain reactions to colonial domination are inappropriate in a neo-colonial context. This does not negate the importance of the colonial experience, but it does imply that it has to be understood and confronted if it is not to perpetuate itself endlessly. Once this has been accomplished, the difficult process of adapting to the stresses of the neo-colonial world becomes possible.

Part Three

Ends of Empire and Beginnings of Post-Imperial London

Chapter 6

Doris Lessing and the Emergence of London's Empire Within

> One reason for writing this autobiography is that more and more I realize I was part of an extraordinary time, the end of the British Empire in Africa....[1]
>
> —Doris Lessing

> Then a feeling of unreality—couldn't remember where I was here, in London, or there, in Africa....[2]
>
> —Doris Lessing

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[1] Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin* (London: Harper, 1995) 160.

[2] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Panther, 1973) 236.

Doris Lessing's recent memoirs, *Under My Skin* (1995) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997),[3] as well as a very large part of her fictional output, have been shaped by a desire to reflect upon the origins, practices, and consequences of inequality. Her pronounced interest in social and racial injustice, it can be argued, is a result of her nearly thirty years in Southern Rhodesia. Yet unlike other novelists such as Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, and J. M. Coetzee, who have lived in and written about the colonial and neo-colonial worlds, Lessing left the colony to reside in what was the centre of an extraordinary empire. In many of her most notable works she recalls Rhodesia from London—reimagining the edge from the centre. Her move to London from Southern Rhodesia in 1949 was part of a conscious effort to become acquainted with a place she had previously only been able to imagine. An early fascination with the classics of British literature, differing tales of England as 'home' from her parents, and antipathy toward the white settler community in Rhodesia combined to create within her an urgent need to escape from old ways of thinking, to begin afresh with "a clean slate, a new passage—everything still to come" (*WS* 3).

London was to become Lessing's new 'home,' and yet she did not forget her colonial past. The lessons of her former life in the colony enriched her understanding of a London that was itself, and not for the first time, becoming colonized, undergoing its own kind of acclimatization to Otherness. In novels

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[3] Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade* (London: Harper, 1997).

like *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969),[4] Lessing recalls the spirit of a time, immediately following her arrival in London in 1949, when she herself was undergoing a process of transculturation. She gives expression to the tensions and anxieties regarding her identity as she was assailed by the manifold uncertainties of starting over in a foreign land. Like many other writers and travellers, Lessing found that London presents a considerable set of challenges for the foreigner. She refers to this in *Walking in the Shade:* "How London's enormousness does dismay its newcomer, and I was still that, six, seven, eight years after my arrival, for I was always trying to come to terms with it, take it in" (181).

David Seamon suggests that Lessing's fiction reflects the dialectic between "existential outsiders and insiders." At first, according to Seamon, her protagonists have to adjust to what he calls 'existential outsideness'—"a situation in which the person feels alienated from an environment devoid of meaning."[5] This notion, which is epitomized by the ubiquitous literary figure of the outsider, and in particular by the sentiments of the European exile, has been explored at great length by critics and journalists alike, and it is not the subject I wish to consider here. Rather, I contend that Lessing's 'exile' or experience of outsideness is not so easily interpreted as Seamon asserts, since it is

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[4] Doris Lessing, *The Four-Gated City* (London: Panther, 1972).

[5] David Seamon, "Newcomers, Existential Outsiders and Insiders: Their Portrayal in Two Books by Doris Lessing," in *Humanistic Geography and Literature Essays in the Experience of Place,* ed. Douglas C.D. Pocock (London: Croom Helm, 1981) 86.

complicated by a variety of Lessing's preexisting ties to the colonial centre.

This set of relations comes to the fore when Martha Quest, Lessing's protagonist in *The Children of Violence* series (1952-69), views Piccadilly Circus in the heart of London:

> It was with Henry that she had first seen this place, on a clear gold evening, the sky awash with colour. She looked at the haphazard insignificance of it, and the babyish statue and began to laugh. My dear Martha? 'This,' she tried to explain, 'is the hub of Empire.' For him a part of London one passed through, he attempted her vision, and smiled his failure:... She had, for a moment, been unable to conceal a real swell of painful feeling, all kinds of half-buried, half-childish, myth-bred emotions were being dragged to the surface: words have such power! Piccadilly Circus, Eros, Hub, Centre, London, England...each tapped underground rivers where the Lord only knew what fabulous creatures swam! She tried to hide pain, Henry not being a person who knew how to share it. (*FGC* 33-34)

According to Seamon, Lessing's *In Pursuit of the English* (1960) and *The Four-Gated City* express two different kinds of phenomenology of place: outsideness and the opposite situation "in which a place is experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection yet is full of significances" (Seamon 89). As the above passage indicates, Martha's response to London is not the same as one would expect from an individual with no experience of the British colonial ethos. Her associations and feelings on confronting Piccadilly Circus highlight the pervasive influence of the British culture in her Rhodesian upbringing. Lessing herself, like many colonials before her, was raised to believe that London, and

'old blighty,' were essentially a 'home away from home.' Lessing settled in London, but not without some painful adjustments, for there were disjunctions between the London of her upbringing and the reality of London in austerity England.

Her acculturation to London, however, introduces us to some of the issues addressed by writers like Samuel Selvon, Colin MacInnes, and Mike Phillips. These writers share Lessing's understanding that the migrant's experience of London is quite different from that of the native Londoner. Selvon in the *Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Maciness in the *City of Spades* (1957) wrote about the London of the fifties, the London of Lessing and Martha Quest. They reflected on the ironies and paradoxes of immigration from the West Indies and Africa. Lessing does not directly treat issues arising from black and Asian immigration to Britain, and she refrains from making this historical movement of peoples the centre of her fictional concerns. Nevertheless, her insights into the difficulties of transculturation for the white colonial combines with her early exposure to the racial tensions of the colony to create a literary consciousness sensitive to the realities of the Commonwealth citizen's mixed reactions to 'finding the centre.' Attuned to the racial politics of the colony by her upbringing, Lessing has an active appreciation of the combination of accommodation and resistance that greeted the new immigrants to London. So it is only fitting that when Lessing's protagonist Martha Quest suddenly comes face to face with the imperial hub, she expresses, as Seamon's puts it, "a feeling for the hidden dimensions of particular places, an understanding of people and events," quite alien to the sensibility of Henry, a native Londoner, whose conception of London can only extend to seeing it as "quite a jolly little place" (*FGC* 33). In other words, Martha views London through the eyes of a colonial, and Seamon

considers that during this transitional period between existential insideness and outsideness, Martha is "without links to place" (Seamon 89). In contrast, I would say that her perceptions of London are mediated by a whole set of ties, the most important being the inescapable fact that the city had been the axis of a truly global empire. Martha's reaction is pre-reflective; it is 'bred in the bone'—the response of one who has been imbued with the colonial's vision of empire.

Lessing is never truly an outsider, to use Seamon's schema, since her colonial education had equipped her with "an imagined community." This is also true of Martha, whose consciousness in *The Four-Gated City* is alive with the myths of empire. Yet Lessing's heroine is never completely at ease in the city. She endures moments of pain whenever she is forced to confront her former self in the heart of London. On a fundamental level, the suffering that afflicts Martha and that forces Anna Wolf in *The Golden Notebook* to record her life in differently coloured notebooks is a pain that originates from self-division. Both Anna and Martha struggle to make sense of their lives in a "blind grasping out for their own wholeness" (*GNB* 79). Martha also undergoes a kind of mental breakdown from which she presumably emerges a stronger, wiser person. In Anna's case, her experience is broken up into five notebooks reflecting a sense of ruptured selfhood (and Lessing's masterful narrative strategy). In her novels, which question the validity of a unified conception of identity, Lessing tests the effectiveness of juxtaposing different genres and conflates them within an elaborate and carefully considered architectonic conception. Combining poetry with prose, and Jungian dream analysis with Sufi religious epigrams, her novels reflect the classic difficulties that arise when an author attempts to convey life in its entirety. By utilizing various notebooks to record different periods of her life, Anna endeavors in *The Golden Notebook* to portray the

many-sided nature of reality. Paradoxically, this very act of dividing a life into segments calls attention to the desirability of a certain kind of wholeness.

A source of tension and a cause of self-division in Lessing's fiction lies in her attempt to reconcile her new life in London with the shadow of her colonial past. Arguably, she has achieved this in her fiction and, recently, in her memoirs by revisiting and reexamining the past and making connections between different periods in her life; in short, she has shored up the fragments of herself in a search for unity.

"Fragments. This was a country where people could not communicate across the dark that separated them" (*FGC* 93)

Like T. S. Eliot and Henry James before her, Lessing chose to live in London; she has long since established "a sense of personal and interpersonal history" (Seamon 89) in relation to the city. The darkness that isolates people from one another in Lessing's London evokes the London of Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), where "on Margate sands" one "can connect Nothing with Nothing," or Forster's call in *Howard's End* (1910) to "[o]nly connect." Although her intellectual concerns were not greatly influenced by the horrors and disillusionment of the First World War, Lessing certainly shares Eliot's feeling that life without a spiritual centre is bereft of meaning, a profoundly hollow prospect.[6] For Lessing, as for T.S. Eliot, the city becomes the site of a spiritual

[6] The theme of the First World War does, however, find expression in the first volume of Lessing's memoirs when she discusses her relationship with her father, an individual who was physically and psychologically damaged by the war.

longing, but unlike Eliot's project, Lessing's quest is fueled by a vision of empire to which he never had access: an intimate knowledge of the set of relations that constitute colonial identity politics.

Impressions of London

Lessing's arrival from the colony to London parallels a literary tradition that is largely dominated by Anglo-American figures such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry James whose primary purpose in travelling to the "cousin across the water" was to report on England's literary, cultural, social, and economic circumstances and, as Hawthorne put it, to judge the United States from the perspective of *Our Old Home* (1863). These writers' preconceptions, prejudices, and insights have enlivened and enriched the multitude of literary appreciations of British culture and society. Lessing's fictional representation of London is yet another entry into a vast array of impressions, literary and otherwise, of the mother country. Arguably, her keen observations of British social life inaugurate a new chapter in the appraisal of London. She writes as a war-weary post-imperial reality commences for Britain. Britain was about to be irrevocably changed by a new wave of immigrants from the Commonwealth. Rather distant from literary figures associated with American Transcendentalism and the Victorian and Modernist periods, Lessing shares more with the relatively recent generation of writers such as V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, who have selected England as the natural

location to ponder the paradoxes and legacies of the British Empire.[7]

Echoing Conrad, Lessing has been able to connect the seemingly disparate worlds of the colony and the metropolis in a surprising and revealing manner. Attempting to make sense of her history and the history of her times has meant posing the following question: What does her life in Rhodesia have to do with her life in London? This dilemma adds a peculiar intensity to Anna's reflections in *The Golden Notebook* and more recently to Lessing's self-consciously autobiographical works. Lessing does more than compare, judge, or measure differences between two countries; she writes about them as if they were both new to her, alien and alive with promise. In the negotiation between two worlds, between two phenomenologies of place—that of the newcomer and the long-term resident—Lessing is forced time and again to ponder what I consider to be some of the deepest issues in her writing, namely, the quest for unity, the understanding of inequality, and the escape from stultifying or limiting patterns of behavior.

Class

One of Lessing's early impressions of British people occurs while she is

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[7] Admittedly, among the writers I have mentioned in relation to Modernism, James did ponder empire in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), but I believe his focus on colonialism was inevitably distinct from the attitudes of writers who grew up in the Commonwealth, or who had an early exposure to that set of self-Other relations which are identifiably colonial in nature. At the same time this dissertation argues that at least one associate of James's provides a notable exception to such a claim: Joseph Conrad.

staying in a boarding house in Cape Town awaiting a boat bound for England. From her lodgings, she observes English women disembarking in Cape Town for the first time, and she feels sorry for them:

> It was only then I really understood how fortunate I was to have been brought up in Africa and not in the Home Counties. These women seemed to me ignorant, innocent, insular. I was feeling protective, as if they were children. But the main thing was this: what they knew, what they had done, was determined by their class. (*UMS* 408)

In the second volume of her memoirs Lessing remarks:

> And then there was this business of Britain's class system. It shocked me—as it does all Colonials. Britain is two nations, all right. When I first arrived my Rhodesian accent enabled me to talk to the natives—that is, the working class—for I was seen as someone outside their taboos, but this became impossible as soon as I began talking middle-class standard English: this was not a choice; I cannot help absorbing accents wherever I am. A curtain came down—slam. I am talking about being treated like an equal, not of the matey, rather paternal 'niceness' of the upper classes. (*WS* 59-60)

Lessing's disquiet with and unerring appraisal of the British class system resulted from the experiences of her Rhodesian upbringing. Her exposure to class 'thinking' came from several sources. First, it sprang from having grown up burdened by the pathos of her mother's middle-class ambitions. Maude Lessing's aspirations were to be frustrated by the hopelessness of her family's situation (poor white farmers in a relatively isolated community). Indeed,

Maude's preoccupation with class was to add to tensions between her and her daughter; the painful gulf between mother and daughter is a feature of Lessing's memoirs as well as a prominent theme in her fiction.[8] Lessing's familiarity with class is also a result of having developed, at an early age, a huge appetite for British literature, a canon of works replete with the phenomenology of class consciousness.

Finally, I consider her sensitivity to class to be a result of the particular racial environment in which she was raised. As a young woman in Southern Rhodesia in the forties, she was standing at the crossroads of the white settler community's relations with Africa and the Africans. These relations were partly influenced by the myth of the 'African Dream,' which consisted in (a) the notion that there might be a utopian land uncorrupted and unspoiled, an idea Lessing explores in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* (b) the myth of the noble savage, and (c) the implied liberation from a class-bound society. These attitudes, which persisted while Lessing was growing up in Africa, were to be replaced by a narrow paternalism, a neurotic denigration of outsiders, and a 'them and us' mentality in which black Africans were largely subject to a "discriminatory system built up to contain them."[9] Lessing ruefully recalls that in the rural areas of Southern Rhodesia there prevailed a "democratic spirit," and people of

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[8] It is also a subject that receives its most memorable expression in Lessing's portrayal of the conflicted relations between Martha and Mrs Quest in *The Children of Violence* series.

[9] Eve Bertleson, in *Approaches To Teaching Lessing's Golden Notebook,* eds. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (New York: MLA, 1989) 32.

various classes mixed without apparent difficulty. This democratic spirit, however, extended to "the Whites" only, and even among whites the towns were already becoming increasingly stratified along class lines and were "snobby and would get worse" (*UMS* 148).

It is safe to say that Lessing's early instruction in the paradoxes and ironies of identity politics in the colonial world was largely built upon the direct observation of the insecurities of the white settlers and the escalation of their abusive behavior towards the indigenous black population. In her memoirs Lessing indicates that she was able to develop such an acute awareness of British class prejudice because she had seen similar patterns of behavior in the racial politics of Rhodesia. The subtle nuances of the everyday gestures of recognition or nonrecognition in Rhodesia were absorbed by the young author, and yet somehow she was able to question and reject the limitations these patterns imposed on both the practitioners and recipients of racial injustice. The long-term consequences of Lessing's early rejection of the prevailing social mores and assumptions of the white settler community are all too evident in even a cursory reading of her memoirs. For example, in London, many years later, she writes: "I did not like the togetherness, the family, the 'we against them'—the tribe; I had had enough of all that to last my life" (*WS* 225).

Her depiction of the arguments her parents had over the treatment of the black farmhands speaks volumes about the tensions and angers of the white colonial situation. Lessing's father "went into a shouting, raging temper" when he saw his children mimicking the racial attitudes of the majority of settlers with the tacit approval of his wife. "He said how dare she let us call a grown man 'boy'" (*UMS* 73). Lessing pictures her mother as a "white missus" (73) whose voice, when she speaks to the 'boy,' is "scolding, insistent, nagging...full of [the]

dislike so many white women used to their servants" (157). Again, years after Lessing has left Africa for London she is to witness a scene that reminds her of the darker aspects of the colonial mentality:

> In the Oxford Street Underground, I watched a little bully of an official hectoring and insulting a recently arrived West Indian who could not get the hang of a ticket mechanism. He was exactly like the whites I had watched all my life in Southern Rhodesia shouting at blacks. He was compensating for his own feelings of inferiority. (*WS* 13-14)

These vignettes from her autobiography are clearly linked to important thematic concerns in her fiction. Lessing's works examine moments that hint at the universal mechanisms that separate, alienate, and divide people from each other and from themselves. As she has publicly stated on numerous occasions, her writing is not only about gender issues, racism, or social class and the need for revolution, but rather it is made up of all of these things and more. In such diverse works as *The Golden Notebook, Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* and *The Children of Violence* series, Lessing repeatedly implies that in order to progress we must suffer division—a touch of madness—and that while this is certainly dangerous, it may ultimately enable us to obtain a more unified conception of ourselves and others. Through the negotiation of divisions, it is possible to become more conscious of our connection to others without retreating or attempting to assert dominance. Lessing does, however, provide a warning: one can become "immobilized by self-division" (*UMS* 253), and the result may be stagnation rather than progress and mental illness rather than sanity.

The delineation of unstable mental states is a constant theme in

Lessing's novels, yet her conceptions of madness tend to coalesce around a single issue: the attempt to resolve dichotomy, or, to put it another way, the need to achieve unity. Throughout the corpus of her works, Lessing's message is always the same: she contends there "[is] something in the human mind that separate[s], and divide[s]" (*FGC* 93). Like Bessie Head, Lessing supplies us with numerous examples of people who are divided, who are lost to themselves and to others. These are messages of defeat and of failed dialectic; they are about individuals who will not progress but will remain ossified, unable to move beyond stultifying codes of behavior that were originally designed to protect but that now result only in stagnation. Lessing, however, dwells not only on the fate of individuals *per se* but also on the destiny of associations, political organizations, and nations. She conveys the history of political groups—most notably communist organizations—in a highly original and sometimes allegorical manner that suggests that, just like individuals, these groups can also fail to evolve. Illustrating the logic of what Sartre named *bad faith*, they become stuck in false positions where members recognize the irrationality of their organization's beliefs, but perversely choose to ignore this inner knowledge and continue to think of the past or of the opinions of their superiors or supporters.[10]

Early Questions

Lessing's *The Children of Violence* series traces the development of its

[10] Both Martha and Anna, although they eventually leave the British Communist Party in disgust, remain in the party long after it is obvious to them that there is something deeply wrong with its ethos.

protagonist, Martha Quest, from childhood in Rhodesia to adulthood in London. In *Martha Quest,* the first and perhaps most impressive of these novels, the protagonist begins to formulate the questions that will eventually precipitate her mental breakdown in *The Four-Gated City,* the fifth and final novel of the series. During this time, Martha exhibits symptoms similar to those Elizabeth suffers in *A Question of Power*; she becomes possessed by thoughts that appear to have a will of their own. Unlike Head's short narrative, which almost immediately introduces us to the inner terrain of Elizabeth's madness, Martha's mental trials are the culmination of a richly woven narrative spanning five books and many years.

The young Martha first begins to ponder the notion of the colonial, and of the separation into groups, while standing on the Greek storekeeper's veranda among the 'Dutch' settlers of her neighborhood. In a well-known passage that typifies Lessing's preference for literary movement from the particular to the universal, the protagonist frames the concerns that will dominate the last novel in the series, and arguably the greater part of Lessing's output as a writer:

> [She] looked over the empty dusty space to the railway line, and thought of the different people who passed there: the natives, the nameless and swarming; the Africaans, whose very name held the racy poetic quality of their vigorous origins; the British, with their innumerable subgroupings, held together only because they could say, 'this is a British country'—held together by the knowledge of ownership. And each group, community, clan, colour, strove and fought away from the other, in a sickness of dissolution; it was as if the principle of separateness was bred from the very soil, the sky, the driving sun; as if the inchoate vastness of the universe...bred a

> fever of self-assertion in its children like a band of explorers lost in a desert, quarreling in an ecstasy of fear over their direction, when nothing but a sober mutual trust could save them. (*MQ* 56)

The "sickness of dissolution" that Martha perceives while growing up in the colony kindles her desire for something better. Her exposure to the contradictions and lies that are the basis of such evils as the colour bar and apartheid system was to provoke a mental quest in which schisms between self and others were subjected to intense scrutiny.

Madness and the Journey Within

The journey within, as we have found with Conrad, with Head, and to an extent with Coetzee, begins with the self. By witnessing abuse and exclusion, the protagonists in all these works become acutely aware of the necessity of a dangerous and painful self-examination. For instance, when faced with the realities of oppression, Conrad's Marlow feels compelled to recount his story—arguably in what is an act of self-preservation. Furthermore, during his time aboard the *Nellie,* Marlow reveals a profound truth about himself in his narrative account of Kurtz's colonial drama. Coetzee's Magistrate, for his part, questions his most cherished beliefs when his obsessive desire to gain knowledge of the barbarian girl's torture makes him recognize an awful psychological connection between himself as a minor imperial functionary and the Colonel as a torturer. Indeed, the Magistrate begins to doubt himself when he becomes aware of the Colonel's interrogation and torture of the barbarians. Head's Elizabeth realizes the truth of Conrad's statement that the self can be both "victim and executioner" in the moments of calm between episodes of insanity that involve warring elements within the self. Elizabeth's inner quest

begins when she becomes her own victim. Head's protagonist exemplifies R. D. Laing's notion that the experience of being divided from oneself, of temporary insanity, can in the long term heal the self.

Madness figures prominently in Lessing's controversial *Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* which opens with the protagonist, Professor Charles Watkins (whose drama is categorized by Lessing as "Inner Space Fiction"), being admitted to a mental ward in London's "Central Intake Hospital." He remains in the hospital for months. There, he is subjected to a battery of treatments culminating in electroshock therapy. For a large part of the book, we follow the protagonist as he embarks on a rather convoluted mental space trek. At one point during the course of his inner journey, Watkins is exiled on an island. He awaits entry into a higher form of consciousness, symbolized by Lessing in the form of a crystal. The crystal is, among other things, a type of spacecraft, and Charles hopes to be picked up by it. While waiting to join the strange craft, he witnesses the killing of a cow, and, in a moment that evokes the death of the albatross in Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* (1863), he feels that something has changed:

> And now I understood my fall away from what I had been when I landed, only three weeks before, into a land which had never known killing. I knew that I had arrived purged...and guiltless, but that between then and now I had drawn evil into my surroundings, into me. (*BFDH* 60)

Later, Charles takes part in an act of cannibalism in eating raw flesh with three women; subsequent to this, he becomes aware of his nakedness. Following these mysterious events, the island is populated by various kinds of beast-like creatures who, in a kind of inter-species war, eventually come close to

annihilation. Lessing's version of Eden and the fall is completed when the Professor is finally absorbed by the crystal and realizes that, although grotesque and horrifying, his participation with the "murdering women had become a page in [his] passport for this stage of the journey" (*BFDH* 90). Much like Marlow's encounter with the Congo, the Professor's stay on the island, although gruesome, engenders a new knowledge, or a higher state of being.

Lessing's preoccupation with self-division and conflict is coupled with a belief in the necessity of acknowledging the complicity of the self in creating a climate of inequality and injustice, a conclusion Coetzee's Magistrate arrives at in *Waiting for the Barbarians* when he states that "[t]he crime that is latent within us we must inflict on ourselves" (Coetzee 145). Lessing and the other authors under consideration here suggest that this confrontation with the self is not common and that it often requires a great effort of will and an accompanying immersion in profound uncertainty. The message from writers who are familiar with human relations in the colonial and postcolonial settings seems to be that such uncertainty is often encountered when one travels between the heart of empire and the colony.

Lessing's Martha, like Conrad's Marlow, attempts to withdraw from the horrors of racial abuse in the colony and instead turns her face to the centre of empire. She will discover, as Marlow does, that one cannot escape the painful knowledge of the colony; it lives within, like a malevolent double-vision, threatening to impose itself on the drab orderliness of London life.

The Little Girl Lost

In *Walking in the Shade,* Lessing recalls her initial perceptions of London: "When I was newly in London I was returned to a child's way of seeing

and feeling, every person, building, bus, street, striking my senses with the shocking immediacy of a child's life, everything oversized, very bright, very dark, smelly, noisy" (4). Martha, in *The Four-Gated City,* discovers in London a sense of freedom she has never known before. She finds comfort in anonymity, in being able to live without "boundaries" (14), and somehow this allows for the rebirth of "Matty," a persona that Martha had forgotten existed within her. When approached by a stranger on a London street, Martha pretends to be another person and invents a new identity—and a new name, Phyllis. This rather comical role-playing not only emphasizes the new sense of self-possibility available to her, but also foreshadows the identity crisis that culminates at the end of the novel.

Before a "breakdown into synthesis" can occur in *The Four-Gated City,* Martha has to confront the past in a new guise.[11] She must observe how people in London—like those in the colony from which she came—constantly bump up against patterns of behavior, in themselves and in others. These patterns result from external social forces but are perpetuated through individual indolence that is manifested both in a refusal to question and in an easy acceptance of habitual forms of abuse. Martha, looking out from the Greek storekeeper's veranda all those years before, had acknowledged the difficulty of moving beyond the static dualities of the colonial world. "Martha could feel the striving forces in her own substance: the effort of imagination needed to destroy the

[11] Robert Arlett, "The Dialectical Epic: Brecht and Lessing," *Twentieth Century Literature* 33.1. (1987): 75. Referring to the *Golden Notebook,* he suggests that for Anna Wulf, the content of the gold notebook represents a "breakdown into synthesis."

words black, white, nation, race, exhausted her, her head ached and her flesh was heavy on her bones" (*MQ* 56).

The freedom Martha feels on arrival in London is temporary, since the categories dividing racial groups in the colony did not spontaneously arise out of the African environment; rather, they were the product of the Empire, somewhat adapted to the particular circumstances of colonial life. Lessing, like Head, believes that these types of self-Other dichotomies, while supremely important during a time of empire, nevertheless originate from and are built upon archetypal or universal foundations. Thus, it is not long before Martha rediscovers in the colonial centre the very dichotomies she had attempted to flee by coming to London.

> His face darkened, clenched, was ugly. 'Blackmail! That's a word you use for decent people, not a dirty little dago.' 'I hate that word.' She was discouraged: all her energy had leaked away; she wished now that she could wrap a blanket around her head, like an African, and turn her face to the wall and sleep. 'When I left home I really thought I'd be free of the race thing. Isn't that funny? There's no end to our being stupid. One's always making up day-dreams about places somewhere else. But since I've been here—things are just as ugly as they are back home, but people don't know, it's all hidden. And now you start talking about dagoes. (*FGC* 71)

Martha's day-dreams of a new Jerusalem in London are destroyed by the narrow mental categories of the Londoners she meets. What had initially been liberating—her walks in the city, where she was "struck by new experience throughout the day," when "her whole self cleared, [and] she became alive and

light and aware" (*FGC* 47)—is transformed into a fresh recognition of the forces that connect the new with the old.

Reflecting for a moment on Professor Charles Watkins's sojourn on an Edenic island during his inner voyage in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, and especially the way in which Lessing chooses to frame this stage in Watkins's journey, I would like to point to a recurring pattern in Lessing's work: the dialectic of innocence and experience. Past events haunt the present because in a dialectical universe they are part of a unity, of what must be accepted, of a history that reflects that which it contains but in an ever-changing manner. The realities of the identity politics Martha confronts in post-war England parallel the Professor's hard-won knowledge on the island: they are an essential page in Martha's passport on her journey to a higher state of being.

Thus, even after Martha has been in London a short while, she begins to synthesize her past insights into colonial life with her present experiences of London. This synthesis provides her with a fresh understanding of both worlds. Indeed, when Martha is asked how she is "finding" London, she recalls how, as a young woman, she had contemplated the peoples of Southern Rhodesia:

> Fragments. This was a country where people could not communicate across the dark that separated them. She opened her mouth to say: I am thinking a good deal about class...and shut it again....It was nothing to do with class. In Africa, as a white, she was so and so; and if she had been black, must be such and such. There was something in the human mind that separated and divided. (*FGC* 93)

By the time she is in London, her understanding of the institutions that separate and alienate includes a firsthand awareness of the British class system. Class,

however, is a symptom rather than a cause of inequality and division. Martha realizes that people's proclivity to devalue others and isolate themselves from others is a universal tendency. She "understood...how human beings could be separated so absolutely by a slight difference in the texture of their living that they could not talk to each other, must be wary, or enemies" (93). Discoveries of this kind are often made by Lessing's protagonists: these are revelations that involve the collapsing together of two worlds, those referred to by M. A. Singleton as the *City and the Veld.*[12]

Martha, like Anna in *The Golden Notebook,* desperately needs to unite the disparate elements of her life. The shuttling movements between Martha's recollections of her former Rhodesian life and her daily experiences of London are of particular importance in an analysis of *The Four-Gated City.* They point to Lessing's persistent theme of unity and integration.[13] Unlike other travellers who are tempted to disregard the past for a passionate engagement with the

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[12] M. A. Singleton, *The City and the Veld: The Fiction of Doris Lessing* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1977).

[13] As for Lessing herself, her memoirs are after all (so far) in two volumes; the first is a record of her life up till 1949, and the second commences with her arrival in London. Like Henry James's memorable protagonist in "The Jolly Corner," Spencer Brydon, who encounters an alter-ego who apparently represents the road not taken, who embodies the sum of what he would have been if he had not left America for Europe, Lessing has hypothesized what would have happened to her if she had stayed in Rhodesia. She has made it clear that her move to England was wholly beneficial.

present, Lessing's characters tend to find that a new location does not release them from the weight of the past. Instead, painful recollections return, bringing with them the perils of self-division and of potential breakdown and madness.

Unity

The reconciling of opposites, the dialectical progression toward *Aufhebung,* the transcendence of divisions between self and Other, and the breakdown into synthesis have all been acknowledged as forces in Lessing's fiction. Her writing has widely been recognized as expressing a profoundly

"dialectical imagination." [14] During an interview with Michael Thorpe in London in 1980, Lessing described her thoughts on *The Golden Notebook* and addressed the issues that have troubled Anna Wulf, her most memorable protagonist. She also revealed the source of her lifelong fascination with inequality. Lessing looks at the compulsion to form oppositional categories as a symptom of a universal problem.

> **Lessing:** About *The Golden Notebook* when I was writing it was the opposite of what it was taken to be. I had spent a lot of my time breaking things down into categories and classifying things and

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[14] See Roberta Rubenstein, *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1979) 121. "The expression of the bivalent nature of consciousness is a prominent thematic and formal structure in Lessing's fiction, reflecting not only the primary separation between 'self' and 'other' but also the internal self-divisions inherent in the progress of consciousness as it accommodates the shifting relationships between internal and external modalities. Linearity is the mode in which such contradictions are expressed, and circularity is the mode in which they are overcome, reconciled, or transformed through some larger synthesis. The tension of these opposing modes, and the presence of antinomies seeking reconciliation, echo the classical Hegelian dialectical model. Lessing's work is, in fact, profoundly dialectical, illustrating what N. O. Brown aptly describes in another context as the 'dialectical imagination': manifested in such diverse forms as poetry, dreams, mysticism, and psychoanalysis, it is 'an activity of consciousness struggling to circumvent the limitations imposed by the formal-logical law of contradiction'" (121).

> making either/ors and blacks and whites of everything. I'd come to realize that it was psychologically, psychically, an extremely dangerous thing to do, and the people that I've known in my life who've done it have invariably broken down and cracked up, particularly in religion and politics. So the thesis of *The Golden Notebook* was the opposite of what it was taken to be. You know, these thoughts that you suddenly have and you can't understand why you never had them before. It was one of those thoughts that prompted *The Golden Notebook*, the thought that there's something in the way our minds are set up, created or conditioned, that makes us think of what divides people. So all of us all the time, if I say black and you say white, will instantly think of what divides the black and white or divides men and women, and I have been trying ever since then to try not to do this and to try to see in fact what we have in common, which is more important.[15]

The critical appraisal of Lessing's works is often supplemented by readings from Hegel, Karl Marx, Gustav Jung, R. D. Laing, or Sufist religious thought, and the resulting new perspectives create further complexity in an already extensive reception history. However, looked at in their entirety, her fictional works, notwithstanding obvious differences in form, attempt to answer questions that have remained constant throughout her literary career. Lessing's concerns

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[15] Michael Thorpe, Interview with Doris Lessing, 23 June 1980, "Running Through Stories In My Mind," *Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (New York: Ontario Review, 1994) 96-97.

continually return to the premise that there is something inadequate in our perception of the world. According to her, all too often humans fail to connect and consequently fall into self-Other relations based on dominance and servitude. Before we can change others, we need to analyze the extent to which we are at fault in perpetuating this behavior. Only by recognizing the culpability of the self does it become possible to teach others how to get beyond the limitations of internalized social categories. It is these inherited and limiting modes of thought that keep people from realizing their true capacities. As she puts it in her memoirs, "[m]ost people live their lives out with, I would say, nine-tenths of them stifled, dormant" (*UMS* 269).

Some Objections to Lessing

A belief that an deficient perception is all too common among the greater part of humanity is coupled with Lessing's notion of the necessity for self-transformation. Lessing is firmly committed to illustrating the universal nature of inequality and injustice, and this points to the real dilemma in assessing Lessing's contribution to Commonwealth and colonial fiction. Is it beneficial or even desirable to consider the huge variety of inequity in the world as a distinct emanation originating from a single universal source? In an essay that discusses racism in contemporary Britain, Salman Rushdie has argued that it is not enough to make a case for the universality of racial prejudice:

> However, it will not suffice to blame racism and the creation of lying images of black peoples on some deep bubbling, universal failing in humanity. Even if prejudice has roots in all societies, each malodorous flowering of the plant occurs in specific historical, political and economic circumstances. So each case is

> different, and if one wishes to fight against triffids of bigotry, it is the differences that are important and useful. Interestingly, the universality of racial prejudice is often used to excuse it....[16]

While no responsible critic would accuse Lessing of condoning racial prejudice, especially in her realistic depiction of Martha Quest's and Anna Wulf's colonial lives, Lessing could be accused of abandoning her engagement with specific social inequities when she undertook forays into her less "realistic" inner space fiction. *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The Memoirs of a Survivor,* along with the *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series of space-fiction novels, attest to Lessing's willingness to take on different genres and in some cases argue for brand-new generic categories of fiction.[17] Nevertheless, Lessing's more experimental and less 'realistic' fictional creations provoke the following questions. Is it possible that her literary experiments have blunted her engagement with the inequities and adversities of life in London? An early longing for Utopia, a new Jerusalem, a golden age—a society in which "citizens moved, grave and beautiful, black and white and brown together" (*MQ* 17)—has been a strong feature in her experimental works, but are they lacking the astute observation of the everyday that was so memorable in *Martha Quest*? By

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[16] Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (New York: Granta, 1991) 144-145.

[17] Traditional Lessing readers felt uncomfortable with Lessing's new interest in creating vast interplanetary tableaux and protagonists who visit alternative dimensions while shifting between different states of consciousness. They also, perhaps, felt alienated by an author claiming to be a disciple of the Sufist teacher Idres Shah.

creating fantastic worlds and by juxtaposing Jungian and Laingian psychology with Sufi religious teachings, has Lessing lost touch with the "specific historical, political and economic circumstances" that Rushdie argues are crucial in the fight against racism? Finally, does she sacrifice her experiential knowledge of the paradoxes of empire by writing about this subject in the guise of space fiction?

Coetzee has faced similar questions with regard to *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Moreover, Head's *A Question of Power* combines moments of gritty realism with fantastic depictions of internal mental struggles. In both cases, the authors investigate the plight of the victimizer or the victim in ways that suggest that nonrecognition or misrecognition of the Other is a universal experience. However, in acknowledging the universal nature of this pattern of encounter, these authors do not gloss over the ways in which the politics of recognition can distort relations between peoples and perpetuate cycles of injustice. Rather, their fiction grapples with the psychological ramifications of the encounter of dominance and servitude. The complexity of these novels argues against the notion that asserting a common origin of patterns of social discrimination inevitably simplifies and curtails our understanding of racism and colonialism. Lessing, Coetzee, and Head are very different writers, but they share a willingness to offer solutions to stultifying patterns of behavior that can be detected both in the colony and in the colonial centre.

Fundamentally, Lessing's fictional concerns have remained the same throughout her career. However, her literary approach to the problem of schisms between self and Other has changed. She has never been afraid to test generic boundaries, nor to deflate the wishes of those who have wanted to 'read' her work in the light of a particular ideological struggle. Lessing's

Londoners are people separated by prejudices and discriminations, by 'a darkness' that alienates them from each other and consequently from themselves. Lessing's considerable grasp of colonial sensibilities has enabled her to furnish fresh insights into the imperial centre, insights that have matured as London has been changed by immigration and the decline of the Empire. She has observed the rise of an empire within London, and this has buttressed her comprehension of the paradoxes that complicate identity politics in a post-imperial age.

These same paradoxes are featured in the works of three other Commonwealth writers—Selvon, MacInnes, and Phillips—who have also chosen to write about London. They share Lessing's concerns but have tended to write more realistic depictions of transcultural tensions and immigrant anxieties. They avoid Lessing's psychological musings on the origins of racism, yet they share Lessing's deeply ironic sense of the British imperial legacy. While we can ponder the question of whether these authors are more successful than Lessing at illustrating the particularities of British racism, perhaps a more judicious understanding of the relation between these authors is that they complement each other; taken together, their fictional representations of London expose the complexity of identity politics in Britain during the decline of the British Empire and the dawn of the post-imperial age.

Chapter 7

Mike Phillips: Reporting from the Centre of Britain's Post-war Immigrant Experience

> As I turned left at the river I caught a glimpse of Big Ben, and it reminded me of a Conservative minister I had interviewed in his room at the Commons....He'd answered all my questions in courteous detail and when I left he shook my hand powerfully, towering above me. "Go back," he said, to my astonishment. "Go back and tell your people that we bear them nothing but good will." For a moment I almost replied, "Yes bwana." But that was the kind of joke that might blow the whole story. Besides, there was something touchingly transparent about the old imperialist.[1]
>
> —Mike Phillips

In recent years, Mike Phillips's fiction has become very popular in Britain; his first novel, *Blood Rights*, was adapted for the BBC in a production well received by the press. Indeed, the reception of Phillips's fiction in Britain has proven so positive that he recently served a term as writer-in-residence at

[1] Mike Phillips, *Blood Rights* (London: Penguin, 1989) 13.

London's Royal Festival Hall. As well, his second novel, *The Late Candidate* (1990), won the prestigious crime writers' Silver Dagger award.[2] He has written for many London-based newspapers on black culture in Britain and America as well as on the future of crime fiction as a literary form.

Although Phillips's novels owe more to the American tradition of fast-paced urban thrillers than to the British whodunit, they cannot easily be placed within either fictional category. In a recent newspaper interview, Phillips stated that "[t]he whodunit bores me...I'm interested in what is happening in society."[3] He uses the generic conventions of both categories in order to investigate the complex state of race relations in contemporary Britain. The hard-boiled black investigator Sam Dean has been the protagonist in five of Phillips's novels. The London that Dean inhabits is multicultural and still stratified along class lines, yet vibrant and alive with difference. Phillips's London is a cosmopolitan city, a place where tourists mingle with citizens whose origins reflect their Commonwealth heritage. Sam Dean, like Phillips himself, emigrated from Guyana during the fifties and has a son born in Britain—the product of an interracial marriage. We quickly learn that Dean attended London University, was involved in local politics, and then became an investigative journalist—a skill he puts to good use as he takes on the role of detective.

There are three main literary concerns that add complexity to Phillips's fiction and help it to rise above the conventions of the detective genre that

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[2] Mike Phillips, *The Late Candidate* (London: Penguin 1991).

[3] Qtd. in "Taking the Law into their Own Hands." *The Independent*, 12 April 1997, 3rd ed.: 'Features.' 4.

Phillips has regularly denounced as both tedious and overdetermined: (1) He has an interest in illustrating how London's urban landscape has changed as a result of immigration; (2) he depicts and appraises the politics of recognition in contemporary London as understood by a first-generation post-war black immigrant; and (3) he wonders how insights gained through the observation of racial politics in Britain since the early fifties are to be passed down from generation to generation, or as in Dean's case, from father to son. Having come to Britain from the West Indies, Africa, and Asia, the first wave of ethnically diverse immigrants has raised sons and daughters who, because of their 'British' upbringing, frequently lack attachment to and knowledge of the culture of their parents.

Multicultural London

London is clearly a fascinating subject for Phillips, and his protagonist exemplifies this curiosity, marveling at the capital's cultural diversity and acknowledging moments of beauty in the daily life of the metropolis.[4] Indeed, as one interviewer remarked, Phillips believes that the city holds a special appeal for the immigrant:

> When I recently interviewed the Guyana-born novelist Mike Phillips for a Radio 4 programme, he was effusive about the

[4] The following is a typical example of Phillips's depictions of the city: "It was one of those warm summer evenings when the city trees were suddenly shiny and green, and the sun danced on the river, and even through the blue petrol haze, London looked beautiful and strange, as I imagined a tourist might see it" (*BR* 7).

> magnetism of the city: "You must understand," he told me, "we never had the myth of the rural paradise. We embraced the city because it meant progress—material progress, intellectual progress and educational progress."[5]

Sam Dean refers to London as a "book" and as a "strange map," which he learned to read as a child. It is a captivating map full of "danger and interest" where "everything meant something" (*BR* 54). True to his role as detective, Dean inevitably reads charts, scrutinizes clues, and solves puzzles as he goes about his investigative work. In contrast to the Congo, a place that intrigues the young Marlow since it is left largely blank by European cartographers, London provides a comfortable setting for Dean and is full of local significance. Despite his constant feeling of nostalgia for Guyana and his almost daily experiences of racial prejudice, Dean feels at home in London. He knows the city well, and he shows a pronounced interest in examining the ways in which London has evolved since his arrival in the early fifties.

At times, London appears strangely unfamiliar to Dean; perhaps this is because his early impressions of the city are so strong that he can look upon contemporary London in the same manner as a stranger or tourist would. Nevertheless, having lived in the city for most of his life, Dean has a knowledge of London that allows for comparison and for contemplation of how the metropolis has changed to reflect its new multi-ethnic character while managing to maintain references to its long history:

> In twenty years the look of the buildings had changed and some of

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[5] Ken Warpole, "We Must End This War of Town V Country," *Independent* 23 Oct. 1995: 13.

> the names, but the basic patterns stayed the same. When I saw pictures of London in magazines or brochures I recognized the familiar landmarks like Big Ben, but they had little to do with the city I lived in. To me London was an endless succession of streets like this, their features continually altering and reforming, grimaces on the face of a toothless old man. (*TLC* 32)

This description evokes a London that, in accomodating new inhabitants, can both yield to change and—although old and decrepit, wrinkled and toothless, its expressions continually altering— remain unique. Dean believes that the London of his childhood, the London of the first generation of racially diverse immigrants, has acknowledged their presence and allowed them to leave their own peculiar trace on the face of the old metropolis:

> The street had become an avenue of shops, Greeks and Indians, open for business and trading furiously. Aubergines and big peppers; vegetables as far as the eye could see. The colour and bustle of a festival. I'd seen it like this dozens of times before, but the sight always did something to me. When I lived there as a boy Sunday used to be drab and grey, nothing to do till the pictures started in the evening. My memories were of a different place. (*TLC* 110)

The infusion of colour into the drab streets of austerity England is something to celebrate. In *An Image to Die For* (1995),[6] China Town, next to London's tourist-filled West End, makes an impression on Dean with its "restaurants" spawning "bustling blooms of colour all over the narrow streets" (*AIDF* 109). The

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[6] Mike Phillips, *An Image to Die For* (London: Harper, 1995).

expression of ethnic difference and the potential the immigrant had to transform the staid, war-weary London of the late forties and early fifties were celebrated by Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City* and by Colin MacInnes in his London novels, especially *City of Spades* (1957). Sam Dean, while walking along the very London streets that had proven so hostile and forbidding to the early generations of black and Asian settlers, also acknowledges the considerable economic progress made by immigrants since those early days. Nevertheless, he remembers the past—a past in which black immigrants were deemed problematic by British Governmental officials—and harbours few illusions about the present difficulties faced by ethnic minorities in Britain.

In the course of his investigative work, Dean visits the conservative upper-class areas of London, yet, not surprisingly, he spends most of his time in poor, working-class areas. *An Image to Die For* opens in a grim, labyrinthine council estate and exposes the less pleasing aspects of London's poorer neighborhoods:

> It was when you got to the central blocks of flats through the zigzag mosaic of alleyways and internal courts, that the increasing murkiness of the walls, the vandalized shrubs, and the overturned dustbins began to tell the story of the place. Even without those clues I already knew that the estate had the usual problems: drugs, adolescent delinquents, and a general air of municipal depression. (*AIDF* 8)

Phillips's depictions of London's urban landscapes are carefully put together, and this scrupulous attention to detail reveals an author keenly aware of the power of literary observation as a form of social commentary. In a recent

interview, Phillips claimed that Charles Dickens, because of the "frankness and sincerity of his rage," exerted a pronounced influence on the formation of his political beliefs.[7]

Phillips's anger, however, has a different origin than that evident in Dickens's work. Dickens was deeply affected by the plight of the Victorian poor and the dire social consequences of the Industrial Revolution. In contrast, Phillips's novels are rooted in his belief that the black man in Britain is not fully recognized by society and that the white majority's treatment of the black minority reflects at best ambivalence and at worst outright racial hostility. This misrecognition of the black man is evident in even the most trivial gestures of refusal, in commonly held racist assumptions, and in the rising tide of senseless racial violence. In the final analysis, then, Phillips's fiction is an entry into the long ledger of literary works whose underlying passion is to expose racial

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[7] Mike Phillips Interview, "Influences," *New Statesman and Society* 29 March 1996: 13-14.

injustice and therefore aid in the continuing struggle for black recognition.[8]

Portraying the Politics of Recognition in Britain Today

Even if an ideological struggle fuels Phillips's writing, his works are not overburdened by didacticism. The requirements of the detective genre work against this possibility; readers would reject lengthy political commentary on the grounds that it interferes with action. Phillips is not unaware of this, and therefore he resists *telling* us about racial problems and instead *shows* them to us. He illustrates in the most minor narrative details the prevalence of a corrosive fear of the Other that inflects relations not simply between blacks and

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[8] See Yasmin Alibhai Brown, "My Heritage is Your Heritage," *Independent* 29 May 1997: 10. The following observation shows that the struggle for black recognition in Britain still has a long way to go: "Last year [Phillips] was a writer-in-residence at the Royal Festival Hall. At the party to celebrate this, Peter Bottomley, (husband of Virginia Bottomley ex-Conservative minister for health) at his patronizing best, said: 'So, Mike, you have become an insider at last.' He wasn't to know it, but he had ignited the spark that makes Phillips's creativity blaze: 'There you have it. What did he think I was until then? Forty years after I have been here, I was still an outsider until the Festival Hall gave me shelter? You know I am still described by many as "British based" as if soon I shall be returning to the Caribbean.'"

whites, but between members of various ethnic minorities.[9] Indeed, as the following examples indicate, when people see Dean walking along the street, they tend to avoid him—fear of the black man triumphing over curiosity:

> She looked and sounded nervous, but that meant nothing. In a street like this, the advent of a black man would make a woman like this nervous. (*AIDF* 73)
>
> On the other side of the railings three Indian women stalked past, their trousers billowing, the tight cuffs showing off their delicate ankles. They didn't look at us, not even the flash of an eye. (*AIDF* 111)
>
> Back in the car, the street where I 'd parked was silent, almost deserted. Two teenage girls came along, their high heels rapping sharply against the pavement, and crossed to the other side of the street when they saw me sitting there. (*BR* 78)

These signs of caution and reserve may seem quite natural in a modern city where violence against women is all too prevalent, but when taken in the context of Phillips's novels they speak volumes about the way in which everyday encounters disclose important assumptions about race. As we become more familiar with Sam Dean, we realize that as a black man in Britain,

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[9] More attention is being paid in the British media to the prevalence of prejudice between racial minorities. For example, the *Independent* reported that a recent national opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research suggested that "large numbers of Asian, Afro-Caribbean, and Jewish people have racist views about each other." Jason Bennetto, "Prejudices Run Deep Among Ethnic Groups," *Independent*, 5 Feb. 1997, 3rd ed.: 5.

he will regularly be projected upon by those made uncomfortable by the colour of his skin. However, we also see that Dean's keen mind and university education enable him to disturb and occasionally break through the prejudices and stereotyped assumptions of others. Phillips obviously enjoys writing about meetings in which racial categories are challenged, and he treats these encounters with humour as well as deep irony.

Such a moment is furnished by the novel *The Late Candidate,* in which Dean is hired to search for a missing woman. After he has finally located the building where she may be living, he finds that nobody will answer the front door. Hoping to confirm whether the young woman is staying in the building, he rings the bell of the lower apartment. The German man who answers the door looks at Dean like a "cautious mole." As Dean attempts to gather information about the residents of the building, he hears the music of Schumann coming from inside the German's residence:

> The music paused while he stared at me, and started again. I'd been working on it while we talked, and suddenly I got it. As he made to shut the door I raised my finger and looked thoughtfully into his faded blue eyes. "*Die Rose, die Lilie, die Taube, die Sonne*," I said slowly. His head jerked up and a shocked expression crossed his face. "*Was*?" "Schumann," I said. "Not so?" "You know his music?" "Of course." He stared at me for a moment, then he smiled widely. "You are a very strange black man," he said... "Come in. Come in. You can wait." (*TLC* 167)

This exchange illustrates the appeal of Phillips's works. His protagonist can comprehend the "danger and interest" of the immigrant's London and at the same time decipher the thoughts of the white majority as it confronts a 'strange'

black man. Dean's hard-won knowledge enables him to take charge of his destiny. He is aware that his understanding of the politics of recognition in contemporary Britain is an advantage in that he can manipulate the fears and stereotypes of others to take them by surprise, a technique that allows him time to gain more information. More significantly, Dean's ability to utilize white preconceptions and prejudices to his advantage not only provides Phillips's readers with a chance to consider their own possibly racist assumptions (especially since the majority of his readership is undoubtedly white) but also opens up completely new territory in the detective genre. The most compelling aspect of Phillips's fiction is not his artistry, nor the intricacy of his plots, but rather his subject, which he handles with deep psychological insight. Although lacking the complex philosophical and ideological frameworks developed by other writers examining the politics of recognition in London (like Lessing, for instance), Phillips nevertheless tackles similar territory but in a way that achieves a greater sense of immediacy. While his fiction lacks the profundity of Lessing's best work, he has nonetheless succeeded in breathing new life into a genre in need of new ideas.

Where Race and Gender Intersect

In a recent article on "the rise of black crime fiction," John Williams notes that "Phillips is intent on exploring the ramifications of miscegenation, fraught territory that many more 'serious' writers have shied away from."[10] In Williams's

[10] John Williams, "Crime Fiction/Moving out of the Ghetto: John Williams Traces the Rise of Black Crime Fiction and Talks to Writers Mike Phillips and Gar Haywood," *Independent* 9 Aug. 1989, 'Arts Section' 11.

analysis, black British writers have instead turned to more consciously 'literary' writing in an attempt to establish their cultural credentials and have chosen to treat subjects that have the potential to upset readers in a deliberately ambiguous and indirect manner.

Phillips's fiction is not limited by such prudish misgivings; he tackles head-on the theme of sexual attraction between races and reveals that sexuality is often a component of racial tension. Phillips made his views about this kind of racial tension refleshingly clear in a particularly revealing interview:

> You would think that racism is something Margaret Thatcher invented. In fact, it is a part of every relation between races. Racism takes place in society, but in the end it's about what people feel and a lot of time that's connected with sex in one way or another. A lot of radicals shy away from individual racism, the idea that it's to do with things like sex. (Williams 11)

Blood Rites, yet another Sam Dean detective novel, provides commentary on the intrinsic connection between sexual and racial politics. The novel begins when Dean is called in to investigate the disappearance of Virginia, the daughter of Grenville Baker, a prominent Tory MP. She has been involved with a young man called Roy—a half-caste who, as it turns out, is her father's illegitimate son from an affair the MP had during his student days. Perhaps because Dean himself has a half-caste son, he becomes obsessively involved with the case, which involves blackmail and eventually murder. During the course of the novel, Dean helps Roy secure a new future and brings about a rapprochement between Grenville and his son. We are also introduced to Tess Baker, who is perhaps the book's most compelling character.

Tess is a truly horrifying and yet pathetic individual who is both repelled

by and attracted to black men—including Dean himself. Her feelings turn to fury when she learns that her daughter has been kidnapped and raped by a black man. The mother successfully carries out a plan to entrap the culprit by seducing him; after having sex with him, she shoots him dead. No doubt the lurid nature of *Blood Rites* occasioned Phillips criticism; Joan Smith, for example, writing in *The New Statesman,* entitled her generally unfavourable review of *Blood Rites* "Politics and Porn."[11] There is no doubt that the final pages of Phillips's novel make for difficult reading. Phillips claims that "at the end [of *Blood Rites*] I wanted to rip the mask off it and shock people with what prejudice is about" (Williams 11). Tess Baker stages the murder of the man responsible for kidnapping her daughter so skillfully that the police (only too ready to assume the culpability of a black man) conclude that the man—who is unknown to them—was a thief and a rapist. Only Dean knows that she had set up the kidnapper in order to murder him. When Dean finally confronts Tess, they are able to come to an uneasy understanding, but this is only reached after she has revealed her true feelings about race:

> "If you want the truth, I loathed him. He made my flesh crawl and the thought of what he'd done to my daughter sickened me. Sickened me. He was an animal. I've got horses more human than that." "You're crazy," I said involuntarily. "Nuts." Her face now was a grinning red and white mask, and I didn't think she heard me. Then she started again, quietly, but speaking with an intensity that was ferocious. "You're so clever," she said. "Who do you think

[11] Joan Smith, rev. of *Blood Rites, New Statesman and Society* 20 Jan 1989: 37.

> you're talking to? You're exactly the same kind of scum. And my husband had a child with one of you. When he told me I was sick for days. I couldn't eat for disgust." (*BR* 196-97)

When Dean remarks that Tess must have gained some pleasure from having sex with a black man, she lunges at Dean with a knife and he retaliates by hitting her across the face. While before this violent exchange she had seemed "extraordinarily malevolent and evil," after the violence, to Dean, she "seemed only an ordinary person, curdled and corrupted by circumstances she couldn't control, and passions she didn't know how to live with" (*BR* 198). The transformation of Tess from the dominating and careerist Tory MP's wife to a woman torn apart by contradictory emotions over race is an interesting subject, but unfortunately Phillips fails to delineate her character sufficiently, and the novel consequently fails to fully engage our sympathies either for Dean or for Tess.

Fathers and Sons

Phillips's works bring to light another subject which until recently has been almost wholly absent from British fiction. Perhaps the theme finds its most lucid expression in the relationship between Dean and his son:

> I was black and I'd always be an immigrant, exiled from paradise, full of complex and contradictory loyalties. Half of him was white, and he'd grown up knowing he was an Englishman. The only bit which made any sense was that we loved each other. (*TLC* 91)

To say that the immigrant experience has been explored by novelists is something of an understatement. The literary examination of the complexities of the immigrant's experience of Britain, while for obvious reasons less prevalent than in the United States, has been treated variously by writers such as the late

Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Colin MacInnes. However, what makes Phillips's work thematically different from the writings of his literary antecedents is that he directly confronts the inter-generational consequences of immigration in a way that they do not.[12] Phillips's protagonist is divorced from a white woman, and his son lives with his mother. Dean is able to see his son and to talk with him on the telephone frequently. Phillips utilizes the father-son relationship to examine the various stresses and strains that exist between the first generation of immigrants and their British-born offspring. In Dean's particular situation, his son's mixed heritage serves to heighten this

[12] Colin MacInnes excepted—his *City of Spades,* which was far ahead of its time, features a child of a mixed marriage and is unequivocal in its depictions of sexual attraction between people of different races. His work (apart form *Absolute Beginners*) seems to be little known outside of the United Kingdom, which is difficult to understand as he furnishes one of the most important chapters in the history of literary response to the influx of immigrants to Britain since the Second World War. Perhaps his fiction has largely been overlooked by critics because, although he is concerned with representing the difficulties of transculturation for the immigrant, he is equally concerned with the adjustments necessary for those who are confronted with difference and with new immigrant populations. It seems that this question has been of only marginal interest to critics eager to attest to the victimization and prejudice that are experienced by many new visibly different immigrants. Nevertheless, MacInnes's fiction is perhaps more relevant than ever if we consider, for instance, the recent reactions of French and German populations to immigration from Algeria and Turkey.

tension between the generations.

The most compelling feature of the relationship between Dean and his son is displayed when Dean endeavors to instruct him on the state of race relations in Britain. To do this, Dean inevitably revisits his past, examining the charms and challenges that faced those coming to London in the fifties and reflecting on the hard lessons he was to learn as a result of prejudice against blacks. His thoughts evoke Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), which depicted the occasionally comic exploits of a panoply of black immigrants as they attempted to make their way in Britain, a land where Selvon considered prejudice to be covered by a thin veneer of British 'politeness'. Albeit lacking the lyricism of Selvon's noted work, Phillips's laconic prose exerts its own kind of influence on the reader, and we share Dean's anger, an emotion that in Phillips's literary world is closely followed by melancholy. This latter feeling is sometimes evoked by Phillips when Dean remembers with nostalgia his boyhood in Guyana but is most prominent when Dean is faced with the sad task of informing his son about the racial inequality and injustice he will inevitably encounter as he enters adulthood.

In *Blood Rites*, some Gypsy teenagers steal the bicycle of Dean's son. On the telephone he tells his father that they called him nigger and half-caste. Their conversation moves on to what must be learned from this situation:

> "I hate those gypsies," he said suddenly. "You're angry with them, and that's all right. But hate is different. They're probably miserable to do what they did. You don't have to hate them." "I still hate them," he said. "You don't know what they're like, Dad they're vicious." "Maybe they are," I said, "But that's not what you have to learn. You have to learn that things and places have meanings

> like words and you can read them as you would a book. Think of a car coming fast down the road, and you're standing behind a parked van. That's like a sentence that has meaning." "Right," he said. "I've got it. If there's a gypsy camp near the cycle track, and there are no adults around, that means a stolen bike." From the tone of his voice he was teasing me. (*BR* 54)

After their conversation, Dean considers whether he can really help his son. Even though he wants to instruct him on how to read the signs of the society around him, he wonders whether the map itself, the great book of London life, will in the future bear any resemblance to the one he currently knows so well. In *The Late Candidate,* Dean acknowledges his son's "lack of interest" (*TLC* 90) in his father's past; the novel portrays the frustration of the father and the incomprehension of the son, who both want to understand each other but labor against the divide imposed by the inexorable workings of time. Positioned on the opposite side of a stark generational divide, Dean wants to help his son navigate the more unpleasant aspects of the politics of recognition but instead finds himself questioning his insights and wondering whether they still apply to the descendants of the initial black immigrant population.

An Image to Die For tentatively suggests some answers to Dean's self-doubts. Near the end of the novel, Dean's son goes to visit a prospective university for an interview, meets with some lecturers, and trails around the campus with other potential candidates. It is clear that this university is not in London. During the course of the day, Dean's son is set upon by a fellow candidate who treats him as though he were a repository of Afro-American pop culture. His son becomes very angry and tells Dean that he wants to leave England after he has graduated. Attempting to find out more, Dean asks him

what in particular upset him about his trip to the university. His son replies that people treat him differently outside London:

> "But it's not like London. They're all like that out there. They look at you like you've showed up in the wrong place. And when you talk to them they can't seem to have an ordinary conversation with you. It's not that they're trying to be unfriendly. It's like they can't conceive of a person like me having the same interests or intelligence or ambitions as them. I mean, they're talking about A levels and books and that, and when I come up they start talking to me about drugs." (AIDF 211)

Dean's son goes on to say that these students appear to have an image of what it is to be black, one largely created by media representations of blackness. Dean replies:

> "Your whole life I've been telling you about racism. It's more than people shouting nasty names, or trying to beat you up. It's the way that they construct our lives in their heads. What we are is what they're comfortable with, so they prefer to forget that you're real. But the important thing is to decide for yourself who you're going to be and how you feel about yourself." (*AIDF* 212)

Dean understands the harm that can be inflicted by the majority in their misrecognition or nonrecognition of the minority. He realizes that there are psychological ramifications of internalizing the image projected onto ethnic minorities by the society at large. He, however, has been able to move beyond the limitations imposed on him by the fear of others and finds ways to manipulate these prejudices. His advice—to find value within oneself and to forge one's own fate without dwelling on the misconceptions of others—still

holds true and is of undoubted value to his son. And yet the anger that Dean's son feels has a slightly different source from that which from time to time afflicts his immigrant father. After noting his father's advice, he remarks:

> "That's easy for you to say, Dad. In your day it was all out in the open. You never expected anything from them, so you didn't care. But this is my country. All of them looked like people I'd grown up with. You couldn't tell them apart from my cousins. It shouldn't be like that." (*AIDF* 212)

Phillips's works manage to combine the action of the hard-boiled investigative thriller with poignant insights into the situation of the black man in Britain. His fiction reflects the fact that London has become host to a diverse population, and as Dean's son's experience attests, the politics of recognition in the city are very different from those of the surrounding country, which lacks London's ethnic diversity. As the city has changed, the realities of the black and Asian experience have also changed. Nevertheless, unfortunately there are some melancholy truths that have retained their relevance. Phillips's works are not overly pessimistic about the future of race relations (he draws his reader's attention to the economic progress made by immigrants in London), but there is no mistaking the underlying tone characterizing much of Dean's analysis of the daily incidences of misrecognition and of the outright racial hostility that he must undergo on a daily basis. Perhaps one day, when Dean's son and the future generation of ethnically diverse British citizens come to instruct their own children in what it means to be ethnically different from the white majority, Dean's reflections on his past will seem wholly outdated and irrelevant. However, if Phillips's fiction really is a good indication of the state of race relations in Britain today, then this hope may ultimately prove to be sadly

unfounded.

Conclusion

"And This Also Has Been One of the Dark Places of the Earth": The Place of London in Postcolonial Studies

When he returns to London after his adventures in the Congo, Marlow finds that he has changed and that he cannot forget Kurtz. This transformation is reflected in his lie to Kurtz's Intended. Marlow, who had formerly associated the act of lying with corruption and death, conceals Kurtz's dying words from the Intended and, in an act of empathy and imagination, saves her from further pain. Marlow has seen Kurtz and understood the horror of one man's Faustian journey from officer of empire to supreme master, to victim of a terrible egotism. He had come to understand the futility of Kurtz's attempt to claim the world and his inadvertent surrender of it. Kurtz had become like a king of the indigenous inhabitants of the Congo, but in his mastery of them he had found himself alone. It was his profound loneliness that ultimately destroyed him.

Marlow absorbs the lessons of Kurtz's tragedy. Not only does he become a wiser man but, like Coleridge's ancient mariner, he also feels compelled to tell his story. On board the *Nellie,* anchored on the Thames in the heart of London, he provides his shipmates with accounts of colonial excess and imperial rapacity. Almost a century later, Marlow continues to weave his spell, and Conrad's most memorable protagonist conveys insights about Kurtz, a

figure who claims our undivided attention although he rarely speaks. Whether we choose to view Conrad's tale as a "journey within," a "Manichean allegory," or the literary offering of "a bloody racist," we must admit that we have let *Heart of Darkness* get under our skin. Indeed, Conrad's work has cast a long shadow across the twentieth century. In a period when the ethos of the imperial endeavour has been shown to rest upon racist assumptions, we note with interest Marlow's comparison of the black Africans in *Heart of Darkness* with ants, and we wonder about his total inability to connect with these victims of one of the worst excesses of European imperialism.

While recognizing that Conrad's vision of the black inhabitants in the Congo can be construed as a representation that demeans them and denies them equal recognition, we cannot ignore his equally grotesque vision of the European imperialists. Marlow returns to London after witnessing Kurtz's death, after seeing himself in Kurtz, and for a moment it seems as if the Congo itself has been brought to the metropolitan heart of empire.

Conrad captured the fears of Britons on the cusp of the twentieth century as they contemplated the costs of maintaining and policing their geographically dispersed empire. But he captured more than this. He was able to foresee that the empire would have profound consequences for the development of the British nation, and that the British people would somehow be transformed by empire as Marlow was by his encounter with Kurtz. Conrad believed that these changes would be wrought by those imperialists who, like Marlow, witnessed firsthand the deprivations and corrupting temptations of imperial mastery, and who returned home with greater empathy for others.

In other words, Conrad was writing about things of which he had direct knowledge. He knew the difficulties of transculturation, of the potential of

Otherness to disturb one's sense of self, and of the peculiar ethos underlying empire. He realized that advocates of this ethos would neither rise to the challenge of racial and cultural difference nor understand that imperial domination would only result in a Pyhrric victory.

What if Marlow had never met Kurtz? What if he had instead stayed in the Congo and become an official in a so-called outpost of progress? Such a predicament frames Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. After many years of doing the work of empire, the Magistrate is confronted by the Colonel and unequivocal evidence of the empire's cruelty and injustice. What fate awaits the colonizer who refuses? The costs of assuming such a position are high, but the rewards are perhaps higher. Just as Marlow returns to London shaken to his very depths, the Magistrate loses his faith in empire and confronts his own liberal hypocrisy. Immersed in profound uncertainty, both Marlow and the Magistrate become their own "victim and executioner" and attain a certain amount of ethical maturity. Their dialectical progression in confronting an aspect of themselves in the Other illustrates the manner in which the topos of the double continues to be an important metaphor in the history of colonial and postcolonial literature.

Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* also portrays a confrontation with the self, but her work, unlike Conrad's and Coetzee's, explores the consequences of racial injustice from the perspective of what we normally think of as the victim. She internalizes the images reflected to her by the white minority in South Africa and is able finally to cleanse herself of them, but only by leaving the land of apartheid. Coetzee and Head illustrate the effect of colonization on what was once the margins of empire and suggest ways to move beyond the limitations of imperial self-Other dichotomies. In startlingly distinct ways, these two writers

indicate the potential for ethical and spiritual development through a dangerous journey into the self, one that liberates the self from claustrophobic modes of being where the Other can only be perceived as master or servant, victimizer or victim.

To learn from the past one must not forget it. Doris Lessing brought a deep understanding of the colonial mentality to her depictions of post-war, post-imperial Britain. Having made the physical transition from the periphery to the centre of empire at the very time when the process of decolonization was gathering momentum, she was able to observe the changes faced by British society in the aftermath of empire. For a period of four decades, various British post-war governments hoped to maintain a remnant of Britain's imperial privilege and corresponding economic and trade advantages by keeping Britain open to 'citizens' of the Commonwealth. The spectacle of Londoners facing the challenge of accommodating immigrants from Africa, the West Indies, and Asia has provided Lessing with reminders of her upbringing in Southern Rhodesia and fueled her meditations on the politics of recognition and the nature of the social and psychological mechanisms alienating cultures from one another. Increasingly, Lessing's work has tested generic boundaries in an effort to dissect these self-Other dichotomies and expose the universal foundations of injustice and inequality.

Mike Phillips works within the firmly established literary tradition of the hard-boiled detective novel. He uses the conventions of his chosen genre in a way that reflects his particular concerns as a black immigrant from Guyana who has made London his home. He reveals the less wholesome aspects of the British imperial legacy: the superior and condescending attitudes of upper-class white conservatives and the violent insults of working-class racists.

Nevertheless, he also acknowledges the economic success of ethnic minorities within London and celebrates the explosion of ethnic difference into what had been the rather dour streets that greeted the first generation of immigrants from the Caribbean. Phillips also contemplates the future of race relations in Britain and wonders how the succeeding and often racially mixed descendants of his generation will fare. The problems they will face will inevitably be different from the ones that afflicted the generation of immigrants to which Phillips himself belongs.

The long shadow of Britain's imperial past continues to diminish in importance. A recent Gallup poll in Britain found that the "great figures of British imperial history are now largely forgotten." However, "some 70% of people express[ed] pride that Britain had an empire...[while] 50% think Europe means more to Britain than the Commonwealth."[1] Even though the British have become ambivalent about the meaning of their past empire, the results of an imperial history are still being felt and will inevitably continue to shape the literature and social climate of the British nation.

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[1] "The British Empire: Imperial Amnesia," *Economist* 28 Mar. 1998: 52.

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