CHAPTER ONE

Two cultures and an individual

Heart of Darkness and

The Ambassadors

The first rude act in this frequently wilful study is its opening act, the decision to place Heart of Darkness and The Ambassadors side by side and to introduce a problem in modern English narrative by passing from one to the other. Admittedly, it is an almost absurdly comic picture to imagine Strether among the alligators of the Congo or to envision Captain Marlow in a tête-à-tête with Marie de Vionnet. And yet the incidents of these narratives, like the works themselves, belong to the same historical moment, and it is instructive to imagine that just as Marlow was pressing deep into the jungle, Strether was crossing the Tuileries, and that while Strether was lounging on a Parisian balcony, Marlow dodged arrows on an African river. The incongruity of these pictures gives us some feeling for the incongruities of the nineties, when the middle classes had perfected both the habits of leisure and the methods of colonialism. To enjoy the delicacies of a long cultural tradition and to overstep the boundaries of that tradition, to witness civilization at its most finely wrought and to confront its rude origins, to contemplate the refinements of social convention and to watch such conventions dissolve — these are concurrent historical possibilities that will allow us to locate modernist character within the expansive context that it demands.

Two novels so unlike in subject, tone and style should generate a warm friction when they are brought close together, and part of the point of this opening chapter is to take advantage of some marked dissimilarities in order to establish the range of issues that the rest of this study will pursue. But a deeper point is to show where dissimilarity yields to likeness.
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These works that so decisively brought the English novel into the modern century contain frequent improbable echoes of one another, echoes so persistent that they establish the sound of literary change.

A man leaves his native country to travel to another, where he hopes to retrieve an unaccountably estranged member of his community. He finds himself entering a much older culture which deprives his own of its moral inevitability. With some difficulty he finds the object of his quest only to discover that a startling change has occurred in the man he seeks, who has taken on the manners and the morals of this alien community. As his own certainties waver, he finds himself drawn into unanticipated solidarity with the renegade, and his original errand seems to lose its point. Obliged to make a choice between the values he has inherited and the values he discovers, he chooses the latter; but having renounced his old measures and standards, he is still unable to live among these new ones. He decides to return home where he will live as a stranger among his neighbors.

This, in outline, is Marlow’s story — and Strether’s. And lest it seem my own unwarranted abstraction from imaginative detail, James’s early description of The Ambassadors may be recalled. In his first notebook entry on the novel James decides that his hero will travel abroad in order “to take some step, decide some question with regard to some one, in the sense of his old feelings and habits, and that the new influences, to state it roughly, make him act just in the opposite spirit — make him accept on the spot, with a volte-face, a wholly different inspiration.” From this situation of high generality James begins a slow descent into particularity. Suppose this man’s mission involves “some other young life in regard to which it’s a question of his interfering, rescuing, bringing home.” Suppose our protagonist promises to restore the young man to his family, and then suppose that under the new influence he “se range du côté du jeune homme.” With only a few more details this outline will give the plot of The Ambassadors, but what is more significant is how readily it might have given the plot of Heart of Darkness. James’s synopsis applies, with very little discrepancy, to Conrad’s tale. As we shall see, Con-
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rad did not derive the principles of his plot so systematically, but the final consequence is that Marlow too sets out to interfere, rescue, bring home; he too finds that old feelings yield to new influences; like Strether he accepts a different inspiration, makes a volte-face and forms a surprising alliance.

The formal congruence of these two plots should get us started. It should remind us that the difference between an African canoe and a French rowboat is not a final difference and that beyond their manifest contrasts the two works share certain primary features, most notably, the confrontation between cultures, the “sharp rupture of an identity,” and the transvaluation of values.2 To recognize these submerged parallels is to identify a shared narrative paradigm whose finer points it will be my task to elaborate.

Still, if the works met only on this plane of abstraction, their relationship would have a limited interest. The large issues that will be pursued through this study — the connection between character and form, self and society — will oblige me to move continually from such austere structures to concretely thematized detail. As a first instance, we may turn briefly to Marlow and Strether themselves in order to recall some homely facts that will gain in importance as we proceed.

One is a sea captain, the other an editor. No doubt if we could look at their hands, we could quickly tell them apart. And yet neither of them would have dirty hands — which is to say that both Marlow and Strether take exceptional pains to preserve their integrity within morally suspect contexts. Both find themselves entangled in the unrestrained economic activity of the period; the “great industry” of Woollett, a “big brave bouncing business” (I, p. 59), finds its complement in the immense trading concern that arranges Marlow’s journey to the Congo. And each work places a single profitable commodity in the foreground: the notoriously unnamed object manufactured at Woollett and the ivory pursued so obsessively in Africa. Indeed, it is tempting to fancy another subterranean connection, a secret unmarked trade route that brings Kurtz’s ivory to Woollett where the Newcomes fabricate it into their vulgar domestic artifact.

“I don’t touch the business” (I, p. 64), Strether points
out, and while Marlow cannot be so fastidious, he too keeps his distance from the eager pursuit of private fortune. Surrounded by great wealth and economic opportunity, neither seeks personal gain, and their own labors have distinctly pre-industrial pedigrees, stretching in the one case back to an heroic naval past and in the other to a tradition of humane letters. At the same time it is evident that they owe their positions to those who pursue profit without such fine scruples. Strether’s journal is financed by Woollett’s “roaring trade” (I, p. 59), and Marlow, who conceives his journey in a spirit of uncalculating adventure, can only carry it through by hiring himself to that Company for which he professes such contempt.

They are, if you will, members of the lampenbourgeoisie who retreat to the interstices of the community even as they are conditioned by its values. Strether enters the novel with a “New England conscience” but a “double consciousness” (I, p. 5) and Marlow endures the old English version of this self-division. Neither romantic exiles nor revolutionists, the two figures are rather “aliens” in Arnold’s sense — of, but not with, the cultures they inhabit. Possessing little authority and no power, they place themselves in the service of others; they are indeed portable sensibilities whose essential passivity makes them susceptible to change. James and Conrad are interested in those who can still move within a rigidifying social order, but this interest accompanies a recognition of the weight and inevitability of communal norms.

We may set out the opening problem of the study by bringing together these structural parallels and these thematic analogies in order to ask what relation obtains between individual experience and collective representations. This is the general form of a question that has many particular aspects, but as an initial step we can usefully divide it into two parts. The first concerns the integrity of personal values as set against the integrity of culture; the second concerns the relation of collective forms, especially language, to the form of individual character. These issues must be separated in order to keep their contours distinct, much as James and Conrad must be separated if their rapprochement is to be meaningful. I turn first to Heart
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of Darkness, then to The Ambassadors, then alternate between the two, hoping in this way to establish the harsh lights of contrast by which surprising similarities may be seen.

II

During the trip upriver just before the attack on the steamer, a dense fog settles upon the water, with the result, recalls Marlow, that “What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her — and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.” And later, when Marlow remembers his desperate attempt to prevent Kurtz from returning to jungle savagery, he remarks that “There was nothing either above or below him — and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone — and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air” (p. 65).

These two instances signal a condition that persists all through Conrad’s work, a radical disorientation that obliterates any stable relation between the self and the world, and that raises the question of whether there is a world to which the self belongs. The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value — these great Conradian (and modern) motifs appear most often in terms of a sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below.

In the face of this dizzying formlessness, the first word of Conrad’s title has been a reassuring spatial index, a signpost directing readers inward. Whatever ambiguity stirs and confuses the surface of experience, the heart promises a center of meaning (however dark), a psychological source, an inner origin. And in the view of Heart of Darkness that has prevailed until recently, the fiction has been regarded as a paradigm,
almost a defining instance, of interior narrative. Within this conception Marlow’s journey only incidentally involves movement through physical space; in essence it represents a “journey into self,” an “introspective plunge,” “a night journey into the unconscious.” The African terrain is taken as a symbolic geography of the mind, and Kurtz as a suppressed avatar lurking at the core of the self.

Certainly the tale offers abundant metaphoric support for this standard line of interpretation. Marlow is first attracted to the Congo because it stands “dead in the center” (p. 13) of the map; he wonders what lies behind the coast and beneath the sea. When he arrives in Africa he travels to the Central Station, but it then happens, comically, cryptically, that the center is not near enough to the core. Marlow must travel hundreds of miles farther on until he reaches the Inner Station, where he meets a man whose soul “had looked within itself and ... had gone mad” (p. 65). Kurtz’s own passage into the wilderness is described as a “fantastic invasion” (p. 57) — a phrase that applies equally well to the received way of reading this fiction, according to which selfhood is seen as a central essence, a deep interior, a concealed core that must be penetrated before it will yield its meanings. As a first appraisal of modernist character we may begin with this familiar picture, sketched in the very phrase “heart of darkness,” which renders the self as a kind of oblate sphere whose deceptive surface encloses the inwardness which gives the truth of personality.

In the last several years, however, a reaction has set in against the prevailing introspective approach. A number of readers have asked just what Inner Thing lurks at the mysterious center. The heart, after all, is a heart of darkness; Kurtz is “hollow at the core” (p. 58); the Manager suggests that “Men who come out here should have no entrails” (p. 25); and when Marlow listens to the venomous brickmaker it seems to him that “if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe” (p. 29). Confronted with images such as these, some critics have begun to argue that Heart of Darkness dramatizes no confrontation with an inner truth but only a recognition of the futility of truthseeking.

In an essay called “Connaissance du Vide” Todorov has...
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claimed that the tale addresses a problem of interpretation rather than action and that having meditated on the nature of knowledge it concludes that knowledge is unattainable. He emphasizes how little we know about Kurtz, who is eagerly anticipated and vividly remembered but scarcely ever present. Marlow seeks to interpret, to understand, to know Kurtz, but “Que la connaissance soit impossible, que le coeur des ténèbres soit lui-même ténèbreux, le texte tout entier nous le dit.” Marlow journeys to the center only to discover that “le centre est vide.” Meisel concurs, arguing that Heart of Darkness enacts a “crisis in knowledge”; “Rather than a psychological work, Heart of Darkness is a text that interrogates the epistemological status of the language in which it inheres.” The conclusion of that interrogation, the real horror in the tale, is “the impossibility of disclosing a central core, an essence, even a ground to what Kurtz has done and what he is.” In this view Conrad’s representation of character is the representation of an absence.

The introspectivist identifies the heart as an emotional plenitude; the sceptical epistemologist looks in the same place and finds an emptiness. Both are preoccupied with this one site of meaning, this one region of experience; and while its importance cannot be doubted, more is necessary to account for the intricacy of Conradian characterization. Indeed Heart of Darkness draws another diagram of experience that is just as prominent and just as necessary to its interpretation. In the description of Kurtz’s final moments Marlow notes that he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; 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. (p. 69)

Here then is a second way to understand the crux of character: to cast it in terms of the end, the limit, the threshold, the edge, the border. Alongside the figures of penetration and invasion the tale offers these figures of extension, a reaching towards some distant point on the limit of experience.

Early in the tale the frame narrator describes the Thames waterway as “leading to the uttermost ends of the earth” (p. 8),
and when Marlow begins to speak, he describes the terminus of his journey as “the farthest point of navigation” (p. 11). “I went a little farther,” says the Russian, “then still a little farther—till I had gone so far that I don’t know how I’ll ever get back” (p. 54). Kurtz, who has passed “beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations” (p. 65), understands the consequences “only at the very last” (p. 57). And when Marlow visits the Intended, he hears a whisper “speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness” (p. 74).

This second imaginative emphasis must be recognized for the distinct alternative it is. Suppose truth does not lie submerged in the deep interior; suppose it stands on the far side of a permanently receding horizon. Suppose that Africa was the “dark continent” not only because it was seen as a mirror of the darkness within but because it was seen as a window to the darkness beyond; and suppose that Kurtz’s last words have their extraordinary effect on Marlow because they indicate the scarcely conceivable point that connects the “inside” of life to the “outside” which is death. Such considerations suggest that it is insufficient to look towards the center and to ask whether it is psychologically replete or epistemologically vacuous. Too much in Heart of Darkness occurs over the edge, at the last, across the threshold, at “the end—even beyond” (p. 65).

Early in the work, in a much-quoted remark, the frame narrator describes Marlow’s peculiar method of narrative.

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (p. 9)

The representation of meaning as outside, “like a haze,” awkwardly overlays the picture of a dark heart beating within the world’s body. These conceptions are more than rival metaphors; they give two ways of orienting the ego, two ways of understanding the crux of character. Unlike the images of penetration, the images of extension suggest that the secret
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of character must be sought at the antipodes; only at the most
distant extreme of navigation, on the point of death, in the
utterance of one’s last words, is the truth of the self disclosed.
Center and edge identify decisive moments in individual expe-
rience — confrontation with its source or its end, accession
to the innermost core or the outermost boundary — and in
any description of the modernist temper these two moments
must figure prominently. Still they remain in important
respects antithetical: what is further from a center than an edge?
And in order both to broach the problem of modern character
and to illuminate Heart of Darkness, it is necessary to ask how
such incompatible forms of representation can be accom-
modated within a single imaginative structure.

In the tale’s opening descriptive passage the frame narrator
notes the nautical instincts of the Director of Companies and
observes that, “It was difficult to realize his work was not out
there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the
brooding gloom” (p. 7, my emphasis). This conjunction
of the two motifs within a single sentence establishes their in-
timacy, but here, in this first example, the relations between
them are perspicuous and undisturbing. “Out here” lies in
one direction; “within” lies in the other. All through this pro-
logue London appears as the originating interior, “the biggest,
and the greatest, town on earth” (p. 7), a moral source from
which emanate “messengers of the might within the land,
bearers of a spark from the sacred land.” The narrator invokes
the English naval past which he represents as an heroic move-
ment “from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith” and “into
the mystery of an unknown earth” (p. 8, my emphasis).

As soon as Marlow begins to speak, he inverts this stable
and heroic relation of “from” and “to.” He invokes the
memory of a Roman soldier in Britain, “Imagine him here
— the very end of the world” (p. 9); and suddenly London,
which had been the generating center, becomes the distant fron-
tier. Moreover, the specific formulation of this point is
highly disquieting. “Here” always locates a perceptual center,
the place one presently occupies, the standpoint from which
one looks onto the universe. To speak of “here” as the “end
of the world” is to unsettle the categories of perceptual
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experience, a task at which Marlow excels. Thus he represents the Congo as both the end of the world and the center of the earth; when he arrives in the very heart of darkness he finds himself “on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy” (p. 37); and he claims that it is when Kurtz steps “over the edge” that he is able “to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness” (p. 69). The relationship between center and edge grows obscure, and the distinction between inside and outside unsteady, with Marlow at one point confusing the beating of the native drums with the beating of his heart. The ambiguity culminates in the tale’s final image when the narrator entangles his original spatial perception within the figure that he has learned from Marlow: “the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky — seemed to lead one into the heart of an immense darkness” (p. 76).

Within the uncanny geography of darkness these two antithetical images fuse into a spatial paradox. A tremendous sensation of movement informs Heart of Darkness, a hurrying towards some fateful destination far removed from customary haunts, but what makes the journey so confounding is that movement outward and movement inward coincide. To travel to the end of the earth is to find oneself at the heart, and to occupy the inner core is to stand on the outer edge. Faced with the claim that Heart of Darkness represents a journey within, one must respond that it does so only by representing a journey without; the “introspective plunge” only becomes possible in the act of crossing a frontier. Contrary to all logic, the center is on the circumference; the middle is on the periphery; the heart of darkness lies on the border of experience.

It is possible to situate, if not to explain, this paradox, by connecting it to a particular moment in the history of the European mind. One of the unintended consequences of neocolonial expansion at the end of the nineteenth century was the accumulation of anthropological insights. The search for new commodities inadvertently uncovered new cultures. Marlow travels to Africa as part of the new economic imperium, but his own deportment, as James Clifford has pointed