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A Picture of Europe: Possession Trance in Heart of Darkness

NIDESH LAWTOO

Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray.

—Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa”

*It is the same picture . . . [a]nd there is a bond between us and that humanity so far
away.*

—Joseph Conrad, “The Congo Diary”

This title may appear slightly provocative. It mirrors what is probably one of the most famous, most often quoted, and, above all, most controversial essays in Conrad studies, and by doing so inverts some of its terms, suggesting that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* does not function as “an image of Africa” but as “a picture of Europe” instead. Much has been said about the race debate since the appearance of Chinua Achebe’s “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*” in 1977, so much that one may wonder about the need to add yet another essay to what appears to be if not a closed, at least an excessively discussed, case. If initial responses to Achebe’s critique of Conrad as a “bloody racist” emphasized how *Heart of Darkness* functions as a thoroughgoing critique of imperialism, subsequent critics informed by the burgeoning field of postcolonial studies have done much to further this line of inquiry, unpacking the historical, political, narratological, psychic, and discursive forces that transect Conrad’s problematic and highly ambivalent account of racial otherness.¹ And yet, as often with intriguing, complex, and passionate cases, the unexpected discovery of a new perspective to revisit central evidence to the case can not only justify a reopening of the dossier; it can perhaps also reframe the very terms upon which the debate rests. “A Picture of Europe” is concerned with such a reframing.

I would like to thank Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Jonathan Dollimore for reading a draft of this essay and for their helpful suggestions. Many thanks to Nancy Armstrong for her careful editorial advice. This essay is dedicated to Jonathan—for dissident inspiration.

¹ For strong initial responses to Achebe’s critique, see Sarvan and Watts. For a representative sample of subsequent postcolonial critics who have addressed the race quarrel, see, in alphabetical order, Olusegun Adegoya, Paul B. Armstrong (“Reading”), Hugh M. Curtler, Robert Hampson, Hunt Hawkins, and Caryl Phillips. For a good summary of the theoretical stakes (and fallacies) of this debate, see Padmini Mongia and Inga Clendinnen. For recent book studies that consider the race debate in the larger, transnational context of postcolonial studies, see Terry Collits and Nicholas Harrison.

In what follows I turn to reconsider the textual evidence in Conrad's problematic image of Africa, which, in Achebe's view, functions as the smoking gun that proved Conrad to be "guilty" (338) of racism: namely, his dehumanizing representations of rituals wherein African people dance, collectively, to the sound of drums in a state of intoxicating frenzy.² It is true that in the wake of Achebe's virulent critique of Conrad as a "purveyor of comforting myths" (339) that set up Africa as the "antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (338), the anthropological meaning of these rituals has tended to remain unexplored. But it is equally true that such enthusiastic outbreaks of ritual dances cannot simply be dismissed as the product of Conrad's so-called mythical imagination whose purpose, as Achebe puts it, is to induce "hypnotic stupor in his readers" via "fake ritualistic repetition" of images of "frenzy" (338). These images of Africa are by now known outside literary studies; they are especially well known among religious anthropologists specializing in collective rituals of sub-Saharan Africa that have the function of inducing altered states of consciousness for religious and social purposes. Extending a recent anthropological line of inquiry in Conrad studies,³ I argue that this realization does not simply provide us with a new anthropological referent with which to approach Conrad's enigmatic tale; it also gives us an insight into the driving telos of Marlow's experience, a ritual experience that *in-forms*—in the aesthetic sense of giving form to—the narrative as a whole. As we shall see, Conrad's representations of frenzy cannot simply be dismissed as a distorting "image" of African reality but, rather, emerge out of a carefully crafted artistic "picture," a mimetic picture that struggles to make us "see," in a self-reflexive turn, the horrors that ensue when massive forms of ritual frenzy break out, not so much at the heart of Africa but at the heart of Europe. It is my contention that the terms of the race debate, as well as the uncanny picture of Europe that emerges from Conrad's tale, need to be reframed in the light of this mimetic realization.⁴

Reframing the Picture

This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

If we approach Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* from an anthropological perspective, Achebe's affirmation that "Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray"

² As Achebe puts it, the problem with Conrad's mythical "method" is that it "amounts to no more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy" (338).

³ See Marianna Torgovnick, John Griffith, and esp. Armstrong, who considers that "Conrad offers key guidance to anthropological knowing" ("Reading" 430).

⁴ This essay extends my mimetic line of inquiry initiated in an earlier article (Lawtoo, "Horror"). It is the second of a trilogy of essays that intends to open up Conrad studies to the field of mimetic theory, a field as old as Plato and Aristotle but that has recently been reinvigorated by the theoretical work of René Girard, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen.

(348) will ring true at some point—perhaps even truer than Achebe originally intended. Marlow, in fact, seems to share the evolutionary belief that Africa represents an earlier stage in human evolution, a primitive, barbaric, and thus inferior stage equivalent to the prehistoric past of Europe. We can thus understand why in “An Image of Africa” Achebe denounces Conrad’s representations that reduce the African other to an atavistic version of the European self. If the Nigerian novelist compares Conrad’s picture of Africa to Oscar Wilde’s picture of Dorian Gray, it is thus in the specific sense that, for Achebe, *Heart of Darkness* represents the projection of Europe’s “physical and moral deformities” onto its African counterpart (348). This also means that for Achebe, this mirroring “image of Africa” does not entail any true aesthetic or ethical realization. On the contrary, the function of this mimetic representation is, as he says, to allow the European original to “go forward, erect and immaculate” (348), leaving Africa behind once the cathartic projection has taken place. Hence the conclusion Achebe draws from Conrad’s novella, that “Africa is something to be avoided just as the picture has to be hidden away” (348).

And yet, in the wake of Achebe’s severe condemnation, the exact opposite has taken place. Conrad scholars have, in fact, continued to be haunted by *Heart of Darkness*, feeling compelled to return repeatedly and to unveil Conrad’s disquieting image of Africa in order to find out what exactly it reveals about the horrors at the heart of Europe. Even from this antithetical perspective, Conrad’s representation of Africa continues to function like Wilde’s picture of Dorian Gray. In fact, *Heart of Darkness* not only entails an unfaithful deformation of the racial other but also serves as a rather faithful mirror that reveals the ethical horrors lurking behind so-called civilized souls.⁵ Not surprisingly, then, scholars interested in the critical dimension of *Heart of Darkness* have tended to emphasize Conrad’s untimely attack on colonialism and imperialism in order to reveal the devastating effects so-called civilizing missions produce in the name of a blind faith in progress and evolution.⁶ This shift of perspective entails a radical shift of focus that modifies the perception of what critics see, analyze, and theorize. We move from Conrad’s image of Africa to his account of what Europe was doing to Africa, from Conrad’s uncritical portrait of African subjects to his critical account of the ethical blindness of European subjects, from the racist horrors of the text to the horrors of colonialism that the text denounces. Figuratively put, we move from Marlow’s picture of the African frenzy to Kurtz’s picture of the “blindfolded” woman with a “sinister” face, “carrying a lighted torch” (25)—a representation of the uncanny side of the project of *Aufklärung*.

⁵ This is, of course, how this image operates in Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*: the aesthetic picture does not simply distort Dorian’s features but magically “mirrors” the moral degradation of his “soul” (89).

⁶ For a representative sample of this second position, see Cedric Watts, C. P. Sarvan, Olusegun Adekoya, Hunt Hawkins, and Inga Clendinnen, who recently reminds us that in *Heart of Darkness*, “[t]ime and again we are made to look, then see the injuries of empire: to feel the pain of injuries inflicted and the pain of being implicated in their infliction” (17).

This critical shift of emphasis from a racist image of Africa to a critical image of Europe has been immensely effective in unmasking the moral and political “darkness” that informs the ideology of progress once it is put into practice; it has also had the benefit of placing the horrors of colonialism at the center of critical debates. Thanks to Conrad’s tale and Achebe’s critique of it, Africa is indeed far from “something to be avoided” but is something to be explored instead—at least in the field of modernist and postcolonial studies. And yet, in this dialectical inversion of perspectives, the specific terms of Achebe’s pictorial equation have been altered somewhat and the strength of his fundamental critique deftly avoided. Notice, in fact, that in this second critical scenario it is no longer *Africa* that is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray, but, rather, it is *Europe* itself that turns out to have a self-referential function. Hence the moral degradation of the European colonists in Africa is seen to mirror the moral degradation of European souls in Europe. Clearly, in this shift of perspective, something fundamental is left out of the picture: namely, Conrad’s problematic representation of Africans as irrational, savage, uncivilized, and potentially violent people. Or, better, what is left out of the picture is the disturbing, self-referential mirroring function of the “primitive” other as a portrait of the “civilized” self, an aesthetic representation which, like the picture for Gray, is supposed to reveal something both *true* and *fundamental* about the moral horrors of modern European souls. In short, if we take Achebe’s simile concerning the picture of Dorian Gray seriously (and I think we should), it seems that neither Achebe nor his critics have fully explored the theoretical implications of this provocative pictorial analogy—the former too busy denouncing the painter, the latter too busy defending the painting.

Though it does not offer the promise of a grand synthesis, this essay attempts to articulate such competing perspectives by focusing on Conrad’s picture of Africa (and not of Europe), in order to emphasize what this picture reveals about the horrors of Europe (and not of Africa). I argue that no matter how problematic the picture, *Heart of Darkness* shows that there is something fundamental to learn about Europe and Europeans from Conrad’s representation of Africa and Africans. An approach informed by contemporary anthropological developments that is attentive to the formal dimension of the text demonstrates that the much discussed notion of frenzy cannot simply be dismissed as an expression of Conrad’s “racism” (Achebe), nor can it be left in the background in order to foreground Conrad’s critique of imperialism (his critics). Instead, Conrad’s picture of Africa illustrates an anthropological phenomenon that appears to be quite common in sub-Saharan Africa, a ritual phenomenon that Conrad was probably one of the first to give aesthetic form to: Conrad called this state “frenzy”; modern anthropologists now call it “trance” or, alternatively, “possession trance.”⁷

⁷ On the question of possession and/or trance, I found the contributions of French anthropologists Georges Lapassade, Bertrand Hell, and Luc de Heusch particularly useful (I would like to thank anthropologists Mondher Kilani and Ilario Rossi for these references). On the relation between music and trance, see Gilbert Rouget. On the question of trance in sub-Saharan Africa, see Marie-Claude Dupré. On the relation between trance and mimetic theory, see Girard and Borch-Jacobsen.

Despite its evolutionary assumptions, I argue that *Heart of Darkness* moves beyond ethnocentric accounts based on a hierarchical distinction between “us” and “them,” the “civil” subject and its denigrating “image,” in order to make us see—in a self-reflexive turn that, as James Clifford argues in *Predicament of Culture*, characterizes the modern anthropological project itself (113)—the murderous frenzy at the heart of European souls. More precisely, Conrad’s picture of rituals of possession trance in Africa reveals how sacrificial forms of ritual frenzy continue to take possession of modern souls in Europe and are responsible for the ethical and political horrors that ensue as this collective frenzy reaches massive proportions. My thesis, in a nutshell, is that Conrad’s specific brand of mimetic anthropology is ahead of its time because it allows him to anticipate, explain, and denounce, in an untimely critical move, the murderous frenzy generated by charismatic leader figures à la Kurtz who reenact archaic rituals to take possession of the modern masses and commit unspeakable atrocities. That such figures will soon haunt the entire European body politic is not indicative of African horrors but, rather, of what the French philosopher and theorist of mimesis Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has recently called “the horror of the West.”⁸

As we now unveil Conrad’s disquieting picture of Europe, we shall progressively realize how untimely his artistic representation actually is—a self-reflexive, mimetic representation that makes us see, with uncanny clarity, the horrors of ritualized forms of possession trance we so often fail to confront, in the name of what Achebe would probably call an “immaculate” image of Europe.

Paradoxes in Evolutionary Theory

The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Conrad’s account of African people in *Heart of Darkness* is informed by a striking combination of rhetorical and theoretical double movements that are both complicit with and subversive of racist expectations about racial otherness. From part 1 onward Conrad explicitly relies on an evolutionary frame in order to set up a temporal distance between modern and prehistoric subjects that is in line with the ethnocentric tendencies of evolutionary theory. For Marlow, as for religious anthropologists before him, traveling in space brings modern people back in time, to an earlier stage of human evolution. Thus, he infamously states that “[g]oing up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (33) and that the type of “prehistoric man” (35) he encounters there belongs to the “night of first ages” (36). Moreover, in order to make clear that he considers this temporal distance in evolutionary terms, Marlow establishes a direct and rather crude continuity between the human and the animal world. Thus, he links African subjects

⁸ “The Horror of the West” is the title of Lacoue-Labarthe’s philosophical reading of *Heart of Darkness*.

to dogs, hyenas, bees, ants, going as far as imagining “tails” “waggl[ing] to and fro” (15) behind their backs, a distorting projection of monkeylike features onto African bodies. Needless to say, such a racist representation of the primitive other does not allow for any form of self-recognition to take place but, as Achebe forcefully pointed out, only reinforces the violent distance between a “civilized” image of Europe and a “primitive” image of Africa.

This said, we should also notice that Conrad implicitly grants these subjects a cultural, religious tradition that situates the primitive other in a paradoxical relation of distant proximity with the modern self.⁹ This paradoxical double movement is characteristic of late nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology and, as John Griffith has persuasively shown, informs Conrad’s “anthropological dilemma” (30).¹⁰ If we want to pursue this line of investigation, we should notice that in order to frame his encounter with the ritual practices of “primitive cultures,” Marlow repeatedly relies on Edward Burnett Tylor’s theory of animism (from Latin, *anima*, soul).¹¹ According to Tylor’s brand of evolutionary anthropology, animism is considered to be a rudimentary form of religious practice that leads cultures that have not yet achieved the status of civilization to attribute life (or a soul) to inanimate, natural elements. Thus understood, animism is based on the anthropocentric belief that humans can influence the spirit of nature through incantations and rituals. References to the language of animism are pervasive in *Heart of Darkness* and account for Marlow’s multiple personifications of nature as well as for his reliance on the language of magic and witchcraft.¹² As a ritual practice, however, animism is perhaps most clearly exemplified by Marlow’s description of the “fireman.” We are told that this member of the crew relies on a “charm” in order to magically influence the “evil spirit inside the boiler” (37), a clear expression of the primitive belief that inanimate objects—especially objects that are invested with emotions—are living, spiritual entities who possess a soul. Marlow’s characterization of the bond that ties him to this animistic figure in terms of “distant kinship” (51), then, confirms the paradoxical double movement toward/away from the primitive other and the “pre-religious” practices he enacts.

Nineteenth-century religious anthropologists like Tylor were primarily interested in offering a general evolutionary account of different stages in the system

⁹ It should go without saying that all references to “primitive” or “civilized” subjects and cultures, as well as other evolutionary distinctions, are reproduced here in order to be deconstructed.

¹⁰ Griffith is particularly attentive to the debate between the “degenerationists,” who argued that the primitive represented a “regression from a previous state of civilization,” and the “progressionists,” who “argued for the steady advancement from primitive to civilized” (77; see also 76–80).

¹¹ In *Primitive Culture* (1873), Tylor argued in favor of an evolutionary approach to culture that considered humans as passing through different stages, moving from “savagery,” to “barbarism” and “civilization.” Tylor’s evolutionary model introduces a hierarchical distance between modern humans and primitive humans that has long been dismissed as a scientific fairy tale; at the same time, this evolutionary model also emphasizes an underlying unity and continuity between cultures as well as a “general likeness in human nature” (108).

¹² Throughout the narrative, Marlow speaks of “propitiatory act” (17), “charm[s]” (37), “men chanting” (63), “weird incantations” (65), and so on.

of beliefs of primitive cultures. Conrad, on the other hand, is much more fascinated by the *affective impact* of animistic practices on the members who partake in them. And it is in the exploration of the emotional effects of animistic rituals on the psychic life of the subject that Conrad's anthropological originality lies. The first, most memorable, and above all most problematic encounter with the affective life of African people is introduced toward the beginning of part 2 and is worth reconsidering, since it informs all the subsequent descriptions of African rituals and brings us very quickly to what I take to be the heart of Conrad's anthropological dilemma. After restating the assumption that they were "wanderers on a prehistoric earth," Marlow offers the following, infamous description of "prehistoric man": "suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy" (35). It is an understatement to say that in the wake of the race debate these lines have been at the center of considerable critical attention. And not surprisingly so. In fact, Conrad's representation of African rituals triggered by the repetitive rhythm of drums wherein subjects dance mindlessly, clapping their hands and rolling their eyes, involves an account of the Fang people and, by extension, of African people as a whole, as savage, irrational, and potentially violent creatures—a view in line with the dehumanizing tendencies of evolutionary theory. This is indeed the "mindless frenzy of the first beginnings" (338) that so infuriated Achebe that he denounced it as an expression of Conrad's personal racism as well as of a larger Western anxiety to set up a distance between "civilized" modern souls and their "primitive," degenerate image.¹³

Achebe's reading of Conrad has been much critiqued and his one-sided evaluation corrected, but when it comes to this particular passage, even Achebe's most severe critics tend to agree that Marlow's account of frenzy is problematic and should not be taken as a faithful representation of African people when they dance.¹⁴ An exception to this tendency can be found in one of the earliest and most incisive responses to Achebe. Toward the beginning of the race debate, Cedric Watts made the controversial point that "[t]he passage is patently justified on realistic grounds" (199). Twenty years and many articles later, Nicholas Harrison, in his recent and informed *Postcolonial Criticism*, returns to this passage to challenge Watts's realistic (mimetic) point. Drawing on Gérard Genette's (antimimetic) narratology, Harrison suggests that we should not simply consider what these words represent but rather "how these words *work*, or *how* they *make sense* and what sort of sense they make, for the narrative as such and for the reader (27). Now, if we want to reconsider Conrad's specific account of ritual frenzy from a mimetic perspective that is not naively realistic but is attentive to the formal structure of Conrad's self-reflexive narrative, perhaps we do not need to choose between Watts's

¹³ For a brilliant and concise analysis of modern anxieties of degeneration triggered by primitive images of frenzy, see Jonathan Dollimore.

¹⁴ See Adekoya, Armstrong, Curtler, and Hawkins.

and Harrison's competing theoretical perspectives. In fact, it is only if we consider *both* the anthropological referent of these words *and* their formal arrangement in the texture of the text that we can begin to reveal the aesthetic, ethical, and political function of these rituals as they appear in Conrad's narrative picture.

No matter how problematic, Marlow's account of the African frenzy is not as decontextualized as it initially appears to be. In fact, he begins to frame his picture of Africa against the background of a ritual context that endows this mysterious phenomenon with a cultural meaning. Right before telling us what he saw in the foreground, he refers to a ritual phenomenon in the background that seems to be in a relation of proximity to the hidden meaning of the "heart of darkness": "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . . At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads till the first break of day. Whether it meant war, peace, or prayer we could not tell" (35). This is, to be sure, just a passing reference to a ritual context in the background that remains, for the moment, "incomprehensible" (35). Yet it also suggests that, if not for Marlow at least for Conrad, this frenzy is not simply a spontaneous expression of primitive savagery. It is, rather, the direct outcome of collective, religious rituals in which subjects dance the whole night, to the point of exhaustion, to the intoxicating rhythm of drums. The narrative, in other words, suggests that the frenzy in the foreground must be understood in the light of the ritual drumming in the background, a drumming that, as we shall repeatedly confirm, *in-forms* (i.e., gives form to) the tale as a whole.

Over the past decades we have become so accustomed to reading Conrad's account of the primitive frenzy through Achebe's perspective that critics have failed to notice the potential anthropological implications of such a problematic representation. In fact, the religious, musical ritual Conrad describes has the power to induce a mysterious, psychosocial phenomenon that remains obscure to Marlow yet is well known in contemporary anthropological literature: clapping hands, rhythmic music, collective dancing, ritual frenzy, enthusiasm (from Greek, *entheos*, to be possessed by a god), rolling eyes, and the psychic dispossession that ensues. If we consider these lines in the light of contemporary anthropology, we notice that in addition to an evolutionary bias they also entail an attempt to describe, in clumsy, ethnocentric terms, a rather common ritual phenomenon. That is, an irrational, contagious, and thus essentially *mimetic* ritual phenomenon that is common in Africa and, as noted, is known among religious anthropologists under the names "possession," "trance," or, most often, "possession trance."¹⁵ *Heart of Darkness* represents one of the first novelistic accounts of possession trance in

¹⁵ Given that in *Heart of Darkness* the psychic alteration of consciousness (trance) is inextricably intertwined with ritual, musical dances that are part of a religious cult (possession), I will follow Rouget's combined notion of possession trance in order to define the ritualized psychic phenomenon with which Marlow is confronted. On the anthropological relation between possession and trance, see Rouget 60–102 and Lapassade, *Transe* 39–46. For a solid theoretical articulation between the problematic of trance and mimetic theory, see Girard 165–66 and Borch-Jacobsen 98–120. Unless specified otherwise, all translations from French anthropologists are mine.

modern literature, an account that anticipates contemporary developments in religious anthropology in intriguing and complex ways.

The “Frenzy” of Possession Trance

It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Despite the elusive dimension of “trance,” the multiplicity of its ethnographic manifestations, and the controversies it has generated among different schools of anthropology, specialists in the field tend to agree that this ritual phenomenon is found across different cultures, is “frequent” in Africa, and is “widely prevalent in the entirety of sub-Saharan Africa” (Lapassade, *Transe* 45).¹⁶ As the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget explains in his authoritative *Music and Trance*, this state is usually “obtained by means of noise, agitation, and in the presence of others,” and is often “considered to be the direct result of music and dance” (7, 62).¹⁷ Characteristic symptoms of “possession trance” (from Latin, *transire*, to pass) are “trembling, being overtaken by convulsions, frothing, having exorbitant eyes” (39), and so on.¹⁸ If we begin to read Marlow’s account of “frenzy” against the background of contemporary anthropological accounts of “possession trance,” we notice that his representation of participants dancing to the rhythm of drums, in a state of enthusiasm, rolling their eyes, clapping their hands, and stamping their feet all night long may have a referent in the African world that Marlow encounters after all.

This does not mean that Conrad’s mimetic text can simply be reduced to a realistic picture of Africa. Nor do I believe that an account of the enthusiastic outbreak that Marlow witnesses on the shore of the river Congo through the contemporary anthropological terms trance or possession trance diminishes the problematic dimension of Conrad’s representation. On the contrary, at this stage Marlow’s account of possession trance is predicated on ethnocentric, evolutionary assumptions that set up a multilayered hierarchical and thus racist distance between modern and prehistoric people, sane and mad subjects (35). We can thus understand why Conrad scholars interested in anthropology have pointed out that Marlow’s external and distant position is eventually responsible for his anthropo-

¹⁶ Hell confirms this point as he writes, “Black Africa appears as the true land of possession” (26) and “is presented as being the *domaine par excellence* of possession cults” (42).

¹⁷ Along similar lines, Hell writes that trance “involves the presence of a group, noise and music, movement and sensorial overstimulation” (37) and specifies that “the clapping hands of the chorus of musicians” is an additional source of stimulation. Similarly, speaking of trance in African cultures in particular, Dupré confirms this point as she writes, “This altered state of consciousness generates remarkable manifestations: hebetude, ecstasy, crisis, enthusiasm, mania, madness, delirium, convulsions” (8). Rouget also observes that one of the functions of music is to bring about a state of exhaustion in order to facilitate the trance and confirms that “participants can sing days and nights without interruption” (40).

¹⁸ For a visual (film), and not unproblematic, representation of possession trance in West Africa, see Jean Rouch.

logical failure. Griffith, for instance, stresses the limits of Marlow's anthropology as he writes, "Marlow's ethnographic curiosity never develops into genuine understanding" (62) insofar as his position is that of "an observer but not [of] a participant" (64). And Paul B. Armstrong speaks of Marlow's "touristic misappropriation of otherness" based on the fact that he "remains for the most part an observer who does not communicate with the objects of his observation" (432). These critiques are, indeed, justified and equally apply to Marlow's initial account of possession trance. At this stage, Marlow's emphasis is clearly less on proximity than on distance, less on participation than on observation. His evolutionary brand of anthropology sets up a distance from the "prehistoric" other that is physical, psychological, and methodological, a distance that seems to preclude any possibility of understanding the enigmatic ritual phenomenon he witnesses.

And yet, if we place this image of Africa in the general structure of Marlow's narrative picture, we notice that already at this early stage the evolutionary distance Marlow initially establishes between modern and prehistoric subjects turns out to be less stable than it first appears to be. That Marlow's emphasis begins to turn from distance to proximity, from discontinuity to continuity, is already indicated by the fact that he continues to rely on the ambivalent notion of "remote kinship" (36)—an oxymoronic notion that, once again, economically points to the paradoxical double movement that is characteristic of evolutionary theory. Moreover, in the subsequent lines, the narrative trajectory of his argument begins to swing in the opposite direction. Changing his tone of voice and challenging his modern, "civilized" listeners to acknowledge their own vulnerability to "the wild and passionate uproar" triggered by the frenzy of the first beginnings, Marlow exclaims: "[I]f you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (36). This passage marks a radical turn in Marlow's anthropology. After setting up a racist distance from the ritual "frenzy" of "prehistoric" times, Marlow begins to set his rhetoric to work in order to bring the modern, "civilized" self back in touch with the mysterious ritual phenomenon he initially disavowed as an expression of savagery.¹⁹

Marlow is here beginning to draw the antievolutionary implications internal to his evolutionary account of mimetic frenzy: namely, that with respect to strong, affective reactions generated by ritual phenomena wherein subjects dance in a state of trance, so-called modern humans might not be radically different from so-called primitive humans—if only because, according to the evolutionary theory Marlow relies on, affective responses generated by the ritual frenzy of the African "ancestors" continue to inform the minds of modern "descendants." To be sure, Marlow's Victorian listeners are not inclined to follow him down this evolutionary path. And in an ironic turn, which is perfectly in line with the (anti)

¹⁹ On the complex rhetorical situation of this passage and the underlying mimetic strategies that inform it, see Nidesh Lawtoo, "Horror" 56–59.

evolutionary implications of Marlow's affirmations, they express their rejection of Marlow's anthropological hypothesis with a "grunt"—an animal-like expression that confirms rather than invalidates Marlow's point. Clearly, the unflattering representation of the ritual of possession trance that Conrad has been sketching thus far—with Marlow as a brush, as it were—begins to function in a disturbing, self-referential way.

Now, if we do not let go of Conrad's anthropological account of rituals, we notice that as Marlow's journey progresses toward Kurtz into what is enigmatically called the "heart of darkness," he continues to rely on evolutionary assumptions in order to frame his representation of racial difference. But if his initial emphasis was on temporal and cultural distance (part 1), and this distance subsequently shifted toward a more ambivalent double movement toward/away from the primitive other (part 2), in the final and most obscure section the narrative radically turns, fully implicating the civilized subject into the anthropological frenzy that Marlow initially seemed to disavow (part 3). In fact, as we move toward the heart of darkness, it becomes progressively clear that the question of possession trance—and the dispossession of the self that ensues—cannot be limited to archaic, African people supposedly representative of "prehistoric times" but stretches in order to affect modern European souls. Conrad's picture of Africa and the frenzy it entails is thus not without effects of self-recognition, a mimetic recognition that blurs the hierarchical difference between the primitive and the civilized, the picture of Africa and its European referent.

In part 3, Conrad is careful to frame Marlow's final encounter with Kurtz against the background of the ritual frenzy we have already encountered, suggesting that the culminating events of his tale must be understood in a relation of *formal* continuity with the religious anthropology we considered in parts 1 and 2. This continuity is made visible if we consider the lines that immediately precede Marlow's final confrontation with Kurtz. The passage should ring a bell:

The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive, and had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses. I believe I dozed off leaning over the rail till an abrupt burst of yells, and overwhelming outbreak of a pent-up and mysterious frenzy, woke me up in a bewildered wonder.
(63–64)

That we are confronted with a structural repetition is clear. The same biological and cultural evolutionary assumptions are in place; the same rhythmic instrument is in the background; and the same terminology ("outbreak," "burst of yells," "frenzy," etc.) emerges in order to account for this mysterious, ritual phenomenon. This repetition calls attention to itself in order to suggest that the two accounts of ritual "frenzy" must be read as part of the same narrative sequence, a sequence continuously haunted by the same ritual "clamour" in the background. Moreover, this passage indicates that Marlow's fascination with the ritual phenomenon of possession trance was not an isolated, punctual instance but, rather, remains

central to understanding the climax of his tale; namely, his encounter with his so-called *homo duplex*, Mr. Kurtz—an indication that the anthropology of possession trance not only frames Marlow's encounter with the other but also informs his encounter with a picture of the self.

What, then, is the function of this structural repetition? And why does Conrad take the trouble to establish a ritual continuity in the background of his already densely textured picture of Africa? We could say that via this repetition Marlow offers his listeners (and Conrad his readers) a second chance to catch a glimpse of that incomprehensible ritual phenomenon that his civil listeners had initially disavowed with a not so civil grunt. Yet this is a repetition with a difference. In fact, the enthusiastic frenzy Marlow had initially perceived from a physical, temporal, moral, and methodological distance, as a vestige of the prehistoric past, is now experienced, felt by the modern subject himself, a subject who, we are told, "responds" to the affective "frankness" of this ritual "noise" (36). And why not? After all, this affective response is perfectly in line with Marlow's earlier assumption that "everything" is in the mind of modern men (36). Conversely, if we have seen that evolutionary theory frames Marlow's account of the other, we can now see that the opposite is also true and that an affective, interior experience informs his particular brand of religious anthropology—a paradoxical kind of evolutionary anthropology that no longer emphasizes temporal and visual distance but spatial and affective proximity instead.

Notice that Marlow's affective implication in the ritual phenomenon he describes does not diminish the anthropological interest of his picture of Africa. On the contrary, it marks what we could call a theoretical progress in his understanding of the slippery ritual phenomenon in the background. The internal narrator, in fact, no longer occupies what both Griffith and Armstrong skeptically called the position of the external "observer," the "tourist" who considers the primitive other from a distance; rather, he approximates if not the position of the active participant at least that of the moved bystander who is emotionally involved in the phenomenon he describes. Marlow's perspective is, indeed, in line with James Clifford's account of "new 'ethnographic subjectivity'" characterized by what he calls "a state of being in culture while looking at culture" (93). And as contemporary anthropologists often point out, this shift of emphasis from an exterior to an interior perspective is crucial to taking hold of an elusive phenomenon like possession trance, whose meaning, by definition, cannot be fully comprehended from without.²⁰

We should thus not be surprised to see that Marlow's interior, emotional response gives him a new insight into the ritual frenzy he had previously defined as incomprehensible, sharpening his anthropological understanding of the complex relation that exists between music and trance. Marlow had already insisted on the importance of nightlong ritual drumming that would last "till the first break of day" (35) as well as of collective dancing and singing for the ritual frenzy to

²⁰ As Lapassade puts it, "[T]he trance described in behavioral terms from the outside, without participating in it, is not the trance described from the inside, by the actors themselves, that is, by those who actually experienced it" (*États* 24).

ensue.²¹ But this time he demonstrates a much more nuanced, sensorial awareness of the psychosomatic *effects* of what we could call Dionysian music. Thus, he stresses its “monotonous” dimensions, the “shocks,” and the “lingering vibration” (63), as well as the association between “the throb of drums” and the “drone of weird incantations” (65), deliberately selecting a lexical field that attempts to translate on the page the affective response to what he had previously called “the terrible frankness of that noise” (36). Inga Clendinnen’s recent claim that “essential clues” to Conrad’s tale are to be found in the “‘vibration’ [words] leave trembling in the air” (9) is thus especially relevant for the problematic of trance in general and this passage in particular. Marlow’s affective participation, in fact, allows him if not to understand fully, at least to feel that this ritual music is endowed with a psychosomatic power to induce an altered state of consciousness. As he puts it, this “weird incantation . . . had a strange narcotic effect upon [his] half-awake senses” (63). Moreover, the passage makes clear that it is precisely in a state of half-sleep (or hypnotic trance), triggered by his proximity to the “narcotic” rhythm of the drum, that Marlow responds to the mysterious frenzy (or possession trance), he had previously described from a visual distance. What this association suggests is that the ritual “noise,” whose meaning he could not communicate to his listeners through language, can be communicated quite directly to him—through mimetic contagion.²² In other words, Conrad, via Marlow, gestures toward the anthropological realization that in matters of possession trance, no clear-cut distinctions can be made between the medium of communication (trance), and the message to be communicated (trance)—perhaps because the (mimetic) medium *is* the (mimetic) message.²³

What is sure at this stage is that the affective, mimetic communication implicates the narrator himself and goes, quite literally, to the heart of the mimetic experience he is trying to convey. After acknowledging his affective response to the narcotic noise of the drums, Marlow specifies: “And I remember I confounded the beat of the drum with the beating of my heart and was pleased at its calm regularity” (64). The drum that is beating in the darkness and is responsible for the ritual trance in the background is now literally confounded with the heart of the protagonist in the foreground; an experience that is initially projected onto the African other is now located at the heart of the European protagonist himself. This is indeed an interesting avowal in a text titled *Heart of Darkness*. It is thus no accident that the hypnotic power of the drum does not only affect Marlow’s senses and heart but also serves to frame what he calls “the culminating point of [his]

²¹ Rouget argues that possession “is associated everywhere with music and dance” (31) and stresses that trance can be “triggered not only by the rhythm of drum but also by singing” (149).

²² On the connection between the problematic of mimesis and the one of contagion, see Girard, Borch-Jacobsen, and Lawtoo (“Horror”).

²³ From the very beginning of mimetic theory in Plato’s *Republic*, *mimesis* is understood both in terms of visual representation (i.e., the painter of book 10 of the *Republic*) and in terms of mimetic impersonation (the poet of book 3 of the *Republic*). In Conrad’s picture of Africa, *mimesis* operates according to this dual Platonic register: *Heart of Darkness* attempts to mediate a ritual (Dionysian) *mimesis* via the medium of an (Apollonian) mimetic representation.

experience" (7); namely, his final encounter with Kurtz and the enigmatic horror he attempts to make us see. The experience of possession trance not only serves as a leitmotif in Conrad's tale but goes quite literally to the heart of the protagonist's experience and of the tale he is trying to communicate. We must now consider the mimetic frenzy that informs the narrative in connection with Marlow's enigmatic encounter with his mimetic double.

Mimetic Doubles and the "Perdition of One's Soul"

His own soul was looking out at him from the canvas and calling him to judgment.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Traditionally, critics interested in exploring the affective relation between Marlow and his double, Mr. Kurtz, have tended to rely on psychology in order to account for the multiple ways in which the two characters function as mirror images of each other. As Albert Guerard famously put it many years ago, this self-reflexive line of inquiry considers *Heart of Darkness* a "night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self" (329). This psychological approach helped to cast some light on both the impressionistic dimension of the tale and the disquieting mirroring effects with which we are concerned. Accordingly, Kurtz is reframed as a manifestation of Marlow's psychic life as well as of what Samir Elbarbary calls the "human 'primitive' duality" (115): a primitive double who, like the picture of Dorian Gray, unveils the atavistic tendencies at the heart of the modern self. And yet critics interested in the anthropological and political implications of Conrad's image of Africa have tended to be suspicious of such a psychological approach. Marianna Torgovnick, for instance, in *Gone Primitive*, finds the critical emphasis on Conrad's impressionistic style and the "psychological complexity" (146) it is supposed to represent problematic insofar as it "veil[s] not only what Kurtz was doing in Africa, but also what Conrad is doing in *Heart of Darkness*" (146).

In order to understand further the disquieting implications of Conrad's impressionistic representation of Africa (and the picture of Europe it reflects), one should not choose between these competing perspectives but articulate the complex interplay between the two. The complexity of Conrad's narrative requires an approach that is as attentive to psychological matters as to the anthropological, ethical, and political questions that are already internal to the formal structure of the narrative. Let us thus reconsider Marlow's psychological confrontation with his European (mimetic) double in the foreground in the light of the anthropological account of the African (mimetic) trance in the background, while at the same time paying careful attention to the formal movement of Conrad's (mimetic) picture. It is only if we reframe Marlow's moment of psychic self-recognition within the religious anthropology of possession trance that informs the narrative as a whole that we can continue to unveil both what Marlow/Kurtz was doing in Africa and what Conrad is doing in *Heart of Darkness*.

We have seen that it is precisely at the moment Marlow is emotionally affected by the ritual drums and the "frenzy" (or trance) in the background that he enters

an altered state of consciousness similar to a narcotic “half-sleep” (or trance) in the foreground of the narrative and then realizes that his mimetic double, Kurtz, vanishes in the background. This disappearance, we are told, has an inexplicable psychological and moral effect on Marlow’s mind and senses. He experiences it as something “monstrous,” as a “moral shock” which, he says, is “odious to the soul” (64). Importantly, it is in this state of psychic anguish that he decides to do what he had previously refused to do—namely, to “[leap] ashore” (64). The final confrontation with his psychic double, then, is not only directly triggered by the intoxicating noise of the drums and the anthropological frenzy in the background but also takes place “behind the curtain of trees” (66), in a textual topography that is formally linked to the ritual mysteries of possession trance we have been illuminating all along.

Anthropologists interested in “possession trance” tell us that this ritual phenomenon is traditionally understood in terms of loss of the soul, a soul that is possessed by another (usually a god, spirit, or demon) as well as an attempt to regain it in a ritualized, religious context.²⁴ Given what we have seen so far, it is thus perfectly consistent that Marlow repeatedly associates Kurtz with the notion of “soul.” We are told that Kurtz was an “unlawful soul” (65), that his “soul was mad” (66), that he “pronounced judgment upon the adventures of his soul” (69), that he was a “mystery of a soul that knew no restraint” (66). Marlow even exclaims, in a confessional mood: “Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul I am the man” (66). Could it be, then, that Marlow’s enigmatic encounter with his mimetic double, not unlike Dorian’s encounter with his uncanny, pictorial double, actually entails a confrontation with his own perverted, atavistic soul? That is, a soul that he has lost—perhaps by taking part in “ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (48) or “midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites” (50)—and that he is now struggling to regain, via another initiatory ritual that generates a state of possession trance at the very culmination of his journey? If this is the case, it is in an engagement with possession trance that we find the problem and the solution to the problem, the poison and the remedy.

To confirm this hypothesis, we need to take a closer look at Marlow’s notoriously opaque representation of his *homo duplex*. This enigmatic figure is not only consistently linked to the animistic concept of soul but is also described in ethereal, ghostly terms that do not seem to apply to a realistic character. Kurtz is consistently called a “shadow” or “phantom.” He is defined as “an initiated wraith” (49), “something altogether without a substance” (47), “hollow at the core” (58), and Marlow goes as far as comparing him to “a vapour exhaled by the earth” (65). These are opaque descriptions, and over the years they have not failed to spark controversy. Famously described as characteristic of Conrad’s stylistic failure (Leavis 204), they are most often read in terms of his impressionistic achievement (Watt 169) and continue to be dismissed as an expression of “vaporish posturings” (Torgovnick 153).

Now, if we reconsider these descriptions from the angle of Conrad’s religious anthropology in the background that gives form to the representations in the

²⁴ See de Heusch 77.

foreground, we notice that style is perhaps not the only issue here. These vague descriptions acquire a more transparent cultural meaning if we read them through the filter of religious anthropology that concerns us. Here is how Tylor, in *Primitive Culture*, describes the “ghost-soul” among primitive cultures that rely on animism. The soul, Tylor writes, is conceived as “a thin unsubstantial human image, in its nature a sort of vapour, film, or shadow” (387). And he adds: “mostly impalpable and invisible, yet also manifesting physical power, and especially appearing to men waking or asleep as a phantasm separate from the body of which it bears the likeness . . . able to enter into, possess, and act in the bodies of other men, of animals and even of things” (387).²⁵ A “vapour,” “shadow,” or “phantom,” a “thin” figure endowed with “physical power” to “possess” others. Far from being an expression of the vagueness of Marlow’s style, his portrait of Kurtz sounds like a literal description of the soul as conceived by primitive societies that rely on the animistic rituals of possession trance constitutive of the formal structure of *Heart of Darkness*: Kurtz neither as a real character, then, nor simply as psychic characterization of Marlow’s double but, rather, Kurtz as an anthropomorphic manifestation of Marlow’s soul, a soul he has lost and that he tries to recuperate via an initiatory journey that culminates in possession trance.

Marlow’s notoriously obscure experience acquires a much clearer meaning if considered against the background of the anthropology of possession trance that we have been sketching all along. We are told that Kurtz vanishes precisely at the moment Marlow is under the “narcotic” effect of the drum responsible for a ritual “frenzy” that takes possession of the “crowd” (66). We are also told that Marlow, this time, “leaps ashore,” perhaps for a dance and a howl, he does not say. What he does say is that he is “acutely conscious all the time” (66) of the ritual drumming in the background. He finds himself in an altered state of consciousness in which he is “strangely cocksure of everything,” “chuck[es] to [him]self” (65), has enigmatic, hallucinatory flashbacks, and goes as far as confounding the “beat of the drum with the beating of [his] heart” (64).²⁶ Further, as if to make it strikingly clear that this culminating scene should be understood in the context of a ritual of possession trance, Conrad inserts a direct allusion to a shamanistic figure who presides over Marlow’s final encounter with Kurtz: “A black figure stood up. . . . It had horns—antelope horns, I think—on its head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt” (65). Finally, as Marlow reaches (t)his soul, we are told that he tries to “break the spell” (65) that ties Kurtz (or the “soul” he struggles with) to—what? Neither to his “ivory” nor to his “station” nor to his “career” (48) but, rather, to the “less material aspirations” linked to what Marlow has been hearing all along, namely the “throb of the drums, the drones of weird incantations,” and the ritual “frenzy” characteristic of possession trance (65). Rhythmic music, ritual dances,

²⁵ Émile Durkheim comments on Tylor’s conception of animism in the following terms: “in each of us there is a double, another self, which under certain conditions has the power to leave the body it lives in and to go wandering. . . . This double is the soul” (49).

²⁶ These sensorial and psychological alterations of consciousness and the dissociation that ensues are all symptomatic of possession trance. See Lapassade, *Transe* 5.

altered state of consciousness, hypnotic spells, shamanic sorcerers, and the loss of the soul triggered by the throb of the drums. . . . Indeed, Conrad has been carefully framing Marlow's final encounter with Kurtz against the background of religious anthropology for which he has been preparing his readers from the very beginning of his narrative.

If we see this impressionistic tableau in the light of the anthropology of possession trance already internal to the text, Conrad's "vaporous" descriptions do not so much veil as expose both what Marlow/Kurtz was doing in Africa and what Conrad is doing in *Heart of Darkness*. What this text reveals is a fundamental vulnerability at the heart of the modern European self to violent states of entranced possession that the self disavows and projects onto African others. Speaking of the "spell" responsible for the awakening of Kurtz's "monstrous passions," Marlow says, in a confessional tone: "This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (65). This is why Marlow had previously warned his listeners against the power of ritual frenzy to affect the mind of modern people. What he discovers at the heart of darkness is not only that the racist evolutionary line dividing modern from primitive beings is permeable to the power of mimetic (dis)possession but also, and perhaps more importantly, that exposure to traditional forms of ritual possession entails a dispossession of the soul directly responsible for a regression to a form of European savagery and moral degradation. The culminating point of Marlow's experience is predicated on a direct, causal connection between the much discussed sacrificial horrors at the heart of the tale and the so far unnoticed experience of possession trance that frames that tale. Because Kurtz—and Marlow through him—is quite literally spellbound by mimetic rituals with the power to induce an altered state of consciousness, sacrificial horrors can ensue. It is no accident that back in Europe Marlow, thinking of Kurtz, will recall "the beat of the drum regular and muffled like the beating of a heart, the heart of a conquering darkness" (73). If at the center of *Heart of Darkness* is the experience of possession trance, then the enigma of the horror is perhaps the loss of the soul that ensues from such a mimetic (dis)possession.

It is important to stress that while the experience of possession trance is set at the heart of Africa, the horrors that the text reveals are *not* horrors perpetrated by primitive subjects (restraint, rather than savagery, defines them) but horrors embedded in civilized European souls (savagery, rather than progress, defines them). As Marlow puts it, it is Kurtz himself who is endowed with the "power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour" (50) and not vice versa. In other words, the self-reflexive turn in Marlow's particular brand of mimetic anthropology is concerned with exposing the fragility of the moral and psychic foundations of the modern soul once the boundaries of culture (with its police, neighbors, and public opinion) are stripped away. And what it finds at the heart of modern civilized humanity is someone "hollow at the core" (58), an "atrocious phantom" (59), a subject "without a substance" (47) who is responsible for the staging of rituals accompanied by sacrificial bloodshed.

Furthermore, Conrad's antievolutionary picture of modernity makes clear that *Heart of Darkness* is not simply an exploration of the process of individual psychic degradation concerned with an individual soul. As Marlow famously puts it, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (49). The uncanny figure at the heart of Conrad's picture of Africa does not only represent the "break-up of one pretty European mind," as Achebe claims (344). It is also a critical reflection of Europe that urges us to reflect on the larger moral and political degeneration responsible for the break-up of the West as a whole.²⁷

Picturing the West

The West is the horror.

—Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "The Horror of the West"

In a recent groundbreaking philosophical article titled "The Horror of the West," the influential French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe offers an insight that will allow me to complete my mimetic reflection on Conrad's picture of Europe.²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe agrees with Achebe that *Heart of Darkness* is a mythical text, but, unlike Achebe, he does not question Conrad's mythical imagination. On the contrary, he calls Conrad's mythical tale "one of the greatest texts of Western literature" (112). Nor does he suggest that this myth is about Africa or about the dissolution of one European soul but says that what is at stake in Conrad's myth is nothing more nor less than the "entire destiny of the West" (113). As he puts it in a dense passage that sums up his argument: "The myth of the West, which this narrative [*récit*] recapitulates (but only in order to signify that the West is a myth), *is*, literally, the thought of the West, is that which the West 'narrates' about what it must necessarily think of itself, namely . . . that the West is the *horror*" (112). For the French philosopher, then, what Conrad's mythical tale reveals is not the horror of primitive images of Africa but "the horror of the West" instead. Lacoue-Labarthe's thesis, in brief, is that *Heart of Darkness* reveals, with uncanny clarity, the horror of mimetic forms of (dis)possession at the heart of Europe. His claim is that as modern subjects capitulate to the power of charismatic leader figures à la Kurtz, endowed with a charismatic "voice" whose intention is to "exterminate all the brutes" (Conrad 50), the horror of the West is not far from being enacted.²⁹ According to Lacoue-Labarthe, then, "through the example of colonization" (117), Conrad's mythical tale manages not only to denounce the horrors of colonialism but also to foresee one of the most apocalyptic events in European history that

²⁷ As Dollimore reminds us, "Kurtz embodies the paradox which degeneration theory tries to explain but only exacerbates, namely that civilization and progress seem to engender their own regression and ruin" (145).

²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophical reading of Conrad is unique in its kind and escapes easy summaries. I shall not attempt to recapitulate his complex argument here.

²⁹ For his analysis of Kurtz's voice, see Lacoue-Labarthe 114–15.

also relies on mythical, collective rituals based on possession trance: the horror of fascist and Nazi politics and the Holocaust that ensues.³⁰

Conrad's theoretical intuitions concerning forms of mimetic dispossession that culminate in "unspeakable rites" in Europe emerge from the religious anthropology we have considered as the driving telos of *Heart of Darkness*. As the end of the tale approaches, it becomes progressively clear that Conrad's anthropology concentrates on ritual forms of possession trance in Africa only in order to better reveal, in a mimetic reflection that is both specular and speculative, how such collective (mimetic) rituals continue to operate, in a degenerate, murderous form, at the heart of the West. This cross-cultural connection implies that, for Conrad, modern European politics, far from representing an outpost of progress, continues to be haunted by forms of ritual frenzy that have traditionally been linked to archaic forms of religious practices, practices that originally had a cohesive and revitalizing social function but that degenerate once enacted on a massive scale at the heart of the West. Marlow hinted at the political dimension of Kurtz's will to power in Africa as he focused on his charismatic voice, a voice that he described as being "loud like a hail through a speaking-trumpet" (65) and that is disturbingly reminiscent of a political figure.³¹ As the narrative speeds toward its conclusion, it is clear that Kurtz's charismatic capacity to take possession of the masses is not confined to Africa but stretches to include Europe. Once back in Europe, Marlow finds out from a journalist that "Kurtz's proper sphere ought to have been politics, on the popular side." And he adds: "Heavens! how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings . . . He had the faith—don't you see—he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything—anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party" (72).

The theoretical implications of Conrad's picture of Europe are now coming into full light. The narrative introduces a direct continuity between Kurtz's anthropological rituals in Africa and his political rituals in Europe, suggesting that the so-called primitive rituals of possession trance in Africa find a disquieting equivalent in "modern" political rituals at the heart of the European body politic. What Conrad's picture of Europe reveals, if we look carefully, is a foreshadowing of mimetic rituals presided over by charismatic leaders of extreme parties with hypnotic voices that can take possession of the masses and are soon to enact sacrificial horrors on an unprecedented scale. As Marlow puts it, in a passage that is not included in the final version of the text but that has tremendous resonance with the rituals we have been unveiling all along: "You know how it is when we hear the band of a regiment. A martial noise—and you pacific father, mild guardian of a domestic heart-stone suddenly find yourself thinking of carnage. The joy of killing—hey?" (91). For Marlow, as well as for Conrad, modern subjects still respond to the "terrible frankness of that noise"—and when they do, unspeakable rites ensue. With

³⁰ On Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of the psychology of Nazism, see Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.

³¹ On the political implications of Kurtz's voice, see Lacoue-Labarthe 227–28 and Lawtoo, "Horror" 64–67.

the benefit of hindsight, we know that musical rites that have the power to induce massive states of dispossession in otherwise “pacific fathers,” inducing in them a “joy of killing” that leads to “carnage,” are not unknown in Europe.

At this stage, Conrad’s mimetic anthropology has reached a degree of self-reflexive sophistication that, as Clifford also noticed, aligns his theoretical project with the contemporary understanding of anthropology as a discipline that studies distant traditional societies in order to cast some light on the workings of the more familiar modern societies. What Conrad’s anthropology reveals is that modern politics reenacts massive phenomena of ritual dispossession that should be thought of in a relation of continuity with archaic phenomena of possession trance and thus studied through the filter of religious anthropology. This is a crucial insight. It not only anticipates contemporary understanding of anthropology in terms of “translation of cultures”³² but also more recent developments in the anthropology of possession trance. Luc de Heusch, one of the leading authorities on the question of trance, concludes a recent book devoted to this subject thus: “The behaviour of the charismatic leader on the political scene is related to it [possession trance]: those who contemplate his image and listen to his voice find themselves in a state close to possession” (216). That Conrad had foreseen this fundamental connection between possession trance and fascist politics at the dawn of the discipline and without the benefit of historical hindsight testifies to the sharpness of his anthropological sense as well as to the untimeliness of his aesthetic approach. His specific brand of mimetic theory allows him, well before the coming of fascism and Nazism, to come to a political realization that is literally prophetic in its theoretical implications. Kurtz as a political “leader of an extreme party,” “on the popular side” (72) endowed with a voice “loud like a hail through a speaking-trumpet” (65) with the power to “electrify” (72) the European masses and induce in “pacific fathers” the “joy of killing” (91). *Heart of Darkness* is an untimely text that warns modern humankind against the horrors that ensue as charismatic leader figures reenact religious rituals in order to take possession of modern souls. In short, Achebe is right in claiming that poetry should be “for the brotherhood and unity of all mankind and against the doctrines of Hitler’s master races” (344). What he does not see, however, is that even on this point, Conrad was not only on his side, but his prophetic picture of Europe revealed mimetic horrors that not even the most forward-looking of his contemporaries could imagine.

Has Marlow managed to convey his message to his listeners? Is his picture of Europe successful in revealing to the future the horrors of mimetic dispossession that he senses coming? His repeated interrogations at the opening of the tale mask his theoretical frustration: “Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you

³² On anthropology as “translation of cultures,” see Asad 141–43. As Armstrong points out, this process of “cross-cultural understanding” should be “dialogical” and should cut both ways—that is, from otherness to selfhood and vice versa (431). I shall therefore return to Achebe’s image of Africa (and the representation of frenzy that it entails) in order to supplement Conrad’s anthropological perspective from a postcolonial angle. The article that serves as a sequel to this one and that completes a trilogy on Conrad and mimetic theory is titled “A Picture of Africa: Frenzy, Counter-Narrative, Mimesis.”

see anything?" (27). Marlow's disillusionment is justified. At crucial moments in the narrative the listeners on the *Nellie*, bureaucrats in the colonial administration, manifest their refusal to recognize and acknowledge their own vulnerability to the anthropological experience of possession trance and to the potential frenzy that ensues as the modern subject capitulates to the intoxicating power of mimesis. For Lacoue-Labarthe, this refusal to acknowledge our own implication in the horrors we continue to generate is the real horror of the West. As he puts it: "To recoil from the horror is Western *barbarity* itself" (118). The horror, thus understood, is not only a reference to the political carnage that ensues from massive forms of mimetic dispossession in Europe but also to the much more general Western *disavowal* of such horrors once they have taken place. In short, the inability of the West to confront the atrocities that continue to be committed in the name of progress, freedom, and democratic ideals—a rhetoric that all too effectively masks regressive forms of totalitarian and authoritarian practices—is the horror that *Heart of Darkness* attempts to render visible.

To move toward a conclusion, let me return to the pictorial language with which we started. This theoretical insight is already revealed by Kurtz's "sketch in oils, . . . representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch" (25). Critics often notice that this painting is part of Conrad's suspicion of the ideology of progress embodied by the subject of *Aufklärung*, since this woman cannot see where she is going and thus cannot understand what she is doing. After this inquiry into Conrad's mimetic anthropology we should add that what the painting also reveals, in addition to the mimetic sexism I have denounced elsewhere (Lawtoo, "Horror" 47–51), is a deeper logic informing the blindness at work in Western ideology—namely, that as we bow down to either old or new beliefs that aim to confirm our cultural and moral superiority over and against other cultures, the veil of progress and the spiritual idea(l)s that go with it might, quite literally, *blind us* to our own implication in the horrors that such ideas continue to generate—for others.

Finally, we are now in a position to see that Achebe's comparison between Conrad's "image of Africa" and Wilde's "picture of Dorian Gray" is well taken. And yet the problem with this analogy is that it is more ambivalent than Achebe actually realized, and, as often with mimetic tricks, it ultimately inverts what it is supposed to represent. Conrad's picture is not merely an image (from Latin *imago*, copy; related to Latin *imitari*, imitate), that is, a distorted copy or imitation far removed from the "true" original reality. Conrad's literary text is also an artistically crafted picture (from Latin *pictura*, painting, from *pingere*, to paint), a praxis implying the formal mastery of an art, or *techne*. In this Wildean sense, Conrad sets his literary craft to work not so much to hide but rather to *reveal* the truth about the horrific side that Europe disavows by projecting onto others.

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