

Narrators and Readers: 1902 and 1975

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IN HIS BOOK *The Conditioned Imagination from Shakespeare to Conrad* Michael Echeruo discusses the idea that "literatures which were originally conceived of in tribal (ie. national) contexts have now become international and cross-cultural" (10). He is writing of the spread of the English language; once the language of England, it has become the mother tongue of many other groups and the literary dialect of still more. Echeruo claims that writers who conceived of their readers as members of their own group characteristically demanded of them, as well as what structuralists call "literary competence," a second area of awareness which may be called cultural competence; that is, a knowledge of the beliefs and attitudes common to the tribe, which is regarded by such writers as their primary audience.

In the present essay I have chosen to discuss two works: one, *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, published in 1902, and conceived of as "tribal" in Echeruo's sense; that is, addressing itself primarily to a group of readers with similar beliefs and attitudes; the second, *Heat and Dust*, published in 1975, when literature, as Echeruo suggests, had become international and cross-cultural.

The position of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, the author of *Heat and Dust*, is unusual: Polish born, educated in England, married to an Indian and resident for most of her adult life in India, she writes in English. Her awareness of vast cultural differences in her readership must prevent any possibility of conceiving, in the way that Echeruo suggests, of a primary audience. But her case is only an extreme example of that of all novelists who write in English outside of England and America: even those who seem to address their own "tribe" must be aware that their actual readers will be

of many different cultural backgrounds and have little cultural competence in common.

The different assumptions of Conrad and Jhabvala about their readers' willingness to assent to particular cultural assumptions have deeply affected the way in which they have conceived of their narrators. Conrad's narrator, Marlow, seems to feel reasonably sure that his readers will at least feel at home with his approach to the world: Jhabvala knows that no one set of attitudes can be taken as typical of or acceptable to her readers. *Heat and Dust* has two narrators: a minor one, Olivia Rivers, whose letters, either quoted or summarized, describe her life in Satipur and Khatm in 1923, and a major one, Olivia's stepgranddaughter, who is unnamed. She comes to India, to Satipur, presumably in the seventies, to try to understand her relative, and India. Both the major narrator and Olivia are English, but they are alienated and deliberately alienating to the reader. Olivia leaves her husband and the Anglo-Indian community for the Nawab, a local ruler. She knows she cannot and in fact does not wish to become part of a palace life which is on the point of disappearing. The union into which she enters, however partial and interrupted by the Nawab's obligations elsewhere, is truly a union with an individual and she herself, having left the Anglo-Indians, the group to which she could have belonged, exists outside of any group.

The major narrator, Olivia's stepgranddaughter, appears to have found life in her own country unsatisfactory: on a visit to a shrine, she cannot make a wish:

Not that my life is so fulfilled that there is nothing left to ask; but on the contrary, that it is too lacking in essentials for me to fill up the gaps with any one request. (127)

Although she says little about her life in Europe, she appears to feel that the value of its comparative comfort and order (her dismay at areas of life in Satipur, like the hospital, suggest that her life in England has had these characteristics) has not been sufficient to compensate for spiritual or emotional inadequacies. In India, her friendship with Maji, the wise woman, and other contacts allow her some sense of the different ethos which informs life there, and which she wishes to understand, sufficiently to decide to bear her child in India.

Bruce King, in his book *The New English Literatures*, asks:

Is the narrator simply another of the neurotic English women, often found in Jhabvala's novels, who have sought in the myths of India a solution to their own emotional disturbances. . . ? Indeed, by any commonsense standards she has been driven to India by failure and inadequacy and the novel shows her disintegration as she confuses romantic myths with the poverty, indifference and cruelty of actual Indian life. (227)

King clearly finds disconcerting the implied verdict on his own culture which her willingness to value India suggests. Without necessarily agreeing with him that she is neurotic, the reader cannot but perceive that the major narrator is a very cool fish, especially in the area of sexual experience. The spirit of enquiry which brought her to India controls her choice of sexual partners; she is neutral and observant in a way which makes it clear that she has severed any earlier group loyalties and for most of the novel is unwilling, or unready to take on any others.

In *Heart of Darkness* there are also two narrators: the first, a member of a group of friends on the deck of a yawl on the Thames, observes Marlow and records the story which he tells. The assumption of both narrators is that it can properly and fully be told from where they sit, and it is an assumption which validates the subject matter of the novel as Conrad defined it and as many critics have been willing to accept it. Lionel Trilling may be taken as representative of them: for him, *Heart of Darkness* is a story about "a hero of the spirit,"

. . . the man who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring the reality of this hell to the bland lies of the civilization which has overlaid it. (33)

To write of the novel in this way is to assume that "civilization" can be taken as synonymous with western civilization, an assumption familiar and acceptable to British readers in 1902, the primary audience of the novel. The second assumption, that the black inhabitants of the Congo are at "the historical beginning of the human soul" is certainly made by Marlow and offered to the reader for his acceptance. Whether readers in 1902 would have

been equally willing to accept this idea may be questioned. In 1883, when Olive Schreiner published *The Story of an African Farm*, she believed Bushmen, Hottentots and Xhosa (Kaffirs as she called them) to be at an earlier stage of evolution than white men. By the 1890s, when she was working on *Thoughts on South Africa*, she had not revised her opinion of the Bushmen (whom she called "a race caught in the very act of evolving into human form" [107]), because by that time they had almost died out in South Africa, but her opinion of the Xhosa was then very different. She writes from observation of their skills, their social organization and their "aptitude for abstract study" (112). In her day, Schreiner was regarded as dangerously liberal in her views and she was of course obliged by her residence in South Africa to grapple with questions about the innate capacities of the black peoples of Africa in a way that Conrad and Marlow, both merely visitors, were not. It is at least possible that Conrad believed black men to be at an earlier stage of evolution, since he certainly allows Marlow to make use of the idea.

Patrick Brantlinger has discussed nineteenth-century views of Africans and reminded us that these views generally served the interests of the perceivers. The anti-slavery campaigners presented Africa as an Eden from which the innocent inhabitants were dragged by slavers:

explorers usually portray them as amusing or dangerous obstacles or as objects of curiosity, while missionaries usually portray Africans as weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light. Center stage is occupied not by Africa or Africans, but by a Livingstone or a Stanley, a Baker or a Burton. (177-78)

Both Conrad and Marlow are aware of the limitations in the explorer's and missionary's sense of Africa: it is clear that when Kurtz first arrived in the Congo, he was strongly influenced by both, but the realities of life there have seduced him into abandoning such views and he has allowed himself instead the dangerous "knowing" of the Congolese which implies an indulgence of terrible areas of himself. In the 1923 sections of *Heart and Dust*, the Anglo-Indians, and especially Douglas Rivers, Olivia's husband, are determined, like the missionaries, to see the Indians as children who will need the benevolent rule of the British for a long time to

come. In the seventies, however, although the modern narrator registers strongly what disconcerts her in India, she knows that there is no alternative into which she can move: the British have gone, and the institutions which they established have either disappeared or altered. All that is left of them is "British cemeteries everywhere! they have turned out to be the most lasting monument" (127). Even in 1923, it is apparent that the Anglo-Indians are finding it difficult to believe in their superior role; their fears and self-doubt appear in their characteristic aggression, the women's refusals really to "know" anything Indian and their angry fear of imagined disrespect amongst their servants. Comparable difficulties can be assumed from the equally aggressive and determinedly ignorant behaviour of Fresleven, in *Heart of Darkness*, who tries to administer a severe beating to an old chief surrounded by his people, because he believes himself cheated in the purchase of two hens, and in the fat man who after being dropped by his bearers has skinned his nose and is, says Marlow, "very anxious for me to kill someone" (49).

Marlow's manner of reporting both incidents suggests that Conrad is as aware as Jhabvala of the absurdity of this kind of egocentricity. He is equally aware of and much less amused by another kind, also described by Brantlinger, who claims that both explorers and later, would-be entrepreneurs were attracted to the view of "Africans as a natural labouring class, suited only for performing the dirty work of civilization." Brantlinger relates this view to

a nostalgia for lost authority and for a pliable, completely subordinate proletariat that is one of the central fantasies of imperialism. For opposite reasons, that fantasy also appealed to explorers from working class backgrounds like Livingstone and Stanley: their subordinate status at home was reversed in Africa. (181)

Not only Kurtz himself, but all the employees of the Company, with the possible exception of Marlow, are determined to acquire wealth and status from their activities in the Congo, and are equally determined that the African inhabitants must serve them docilely. Marlow can see that the "white man in new clothes and tan shoes" on the donkey, "bowing from that elevation right and left to the impressed pilgrims" is followed by "footsore sulky niggers" who loath what they are compelled to do (61); he records

the fact that the immaculate linen of the chief accountant is kept in that condition by a black woman who "had a distaste for the work" (46); indeed all his perceptions of the labour of blacks are conditioned by the fact that on his arrival in the country he has passed through the Grove of Death, where the exhausted black employees of the Company are dying of disease and starvation.

But although Conrad and Marlow are consciously critical of the typical assumptions of Europeans in Africa, they are not completely free of them. Abdul R. JanMohamed touches a vital spot when he says:

Since the object of representation — the native — does not have access to these texts (because of linguistic barriers) and since the European audience has no direct contact with the native, imperialist fiction tends to be unconcerned with the truth-value of its representation. (63)

Whether or not Conrad believed that the Congolese were at the beginning of the evolution of conscience does not matter so much as the fact that he felt that for a European readership, they could be presented in this way. Though he was aware that views of Africans held by Europeans were far from disinterested, yet he availed himself of the habit of perception that JanMohamed records: "That world is . . . perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable and ultimately evil" (64). Although in the main Marlow is a neutral perceiver, perfectly willing to be critical of members of his own group, he is determined not to know the dancers on the riverbank, as determined as are the English ladies of Satipur not to know the Begum of Khatm and her court, and he has no doubt that the beautiful woman on the riverbank who stretches out her arms towards Kurtz represents a sinister possibility for which Kurtz has opted. He admires the restraint of the crew members who refrain from killing and eating the pilgrim, though they are very hungry, yet he has no doubt that the wilderness (a term in the novel for a type of human life, though it is related to its forest setting) is unspeakably dangerous.

It is because Marlow is determined to limit his analysis to the lives of Whites that when Blacks appear before him as individuals they are virtually incomprehensible. When he encounters the dying man in the grove of death, the beaten labourer of the Central

Station, the fireman on the riverboat — he refuses to probe into their reactions, though he does not ignore them. In the case of the helmsman, in whose dying glance he recognizes “a kind of partnership” (87), what he is touched by is a man who appears to have moved, however briefly, from his own lifestyle into Marlow’s ethos of work. Marlow’s commitment to this ethos is, he admits, non-moral: he admits that he does not join the “savages” on the bank because he has accepted the task of keeping the riverboat and its cargo of Pilgrims afloat, although he recognizes that they and their projects are evil. But although he calls his work “surface truth” the assumption which permeates his narrative is that *for him*, as for Kurtz, involvement in the life of the Congolese would be base. It is in his commitment to an ethos that Marlow differs from the unnamed narrator of *Heat and Dust* who is nevertheless aware of the difference between her norms and those of the people of Satipur. The Indian whom she knows best is Inder Lal, her landlord, and though she is quite willing to recognize that her own English appearance and manners are disconcerting to him as an Indian, her perceptions of him also relate to expectations she has formed in England. He and his family live in “poky rooms crammed at the back of a yard,” his relationship with his colleagues is one of mutual dislike and suspicion, he regards his wife as feeble and stupid and feels, at least at times, a sense of angry inferiority to Westerners. She sees Karim and Kitty, the Nawab’s heirs, as pretty parasites, thinks that the troupe of singing and dancing eunuchs look sad, though everyone laughs at them, and that the hospital is a nightmare of overcrowding and inefficiency. For most of the novel, in fact, the norms of British culture shape the narrative; powerful over the consciousness of the narrator, they therefore control what we see and how we see it. Her pity for the eunuchs who earn their livings by displaying themselves in public is eventually counterbalanced by a perception of the town of Satipur which reveals that Indian society can accommodate and value all kinds of people, including the insane, mentally retarded and physically deformed. She sees that though it cannot — or does not try to — relieve the poverty of the beggar woman Leelavati or save her from death, it places a value on her life of suffering. And though she does arrive at a value for India, it may be that the

strongest influence on the narrator when she makes her decision to stay is her sense that her own life in England has been so empty.

The fact that she differs crucially from Marlow in her relationship with the group into which she was born is all-important here: the change which takes place in her values may be — and the end of the novel invites us to believe that it is — the first step in a process by which she commits herself to India. Neither the narrator nor Jhabvala expects readers to understand fully, much less to undergo, such a process. Marlow on the other hand returns with new understanding to his own group; the understanding however is only of himself and his fellow Europeans.

The primary readership of 1902 has necessarily passed away, and in the last quarter of the twentieth century it has become difficult for a British or American reader and impossible for readers in the third world to respond exactly as Conrad intended us to. Chinua Achebe, an Ibo with a strong sense of his people's social and cultural achievements before the arrival of the white man, is deeply offended by the "dehumanization of Africa and Africans" which is undeniably a feature of *Heart of Darkness*. In his essay "An Image of Africa" he writes regretfully, even angrily, about the fact that

... it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here.

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely, that Conrad was a bloody racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected. Students of *Heart of Darkness* will often tell you that Conrad is concerned not so much with Africa as with the deterioration of one European mind caused by solitude and sickness. . . . Of course, there is a preposterous and perverse kind of arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the rôle of props for the breakup of one petty European mind. . . . The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot.

(9)

Ethnic sympathies notwithstanding, we must understand that *Heart of Darkness's* inability to sweep Achebe along with it relates to the techniques of the traditional novel as they are discussed by Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*. The traditional novel, he reminds us, presents a world tied to the world which the reader himself knows, and recognizably so. Ironically enough, it is the ties between Achebe and the real world of West Africa, of which *Heart of Darkness* is in his eyes a fictional distortion, which create the problem. Whereas Conrad's point is that this world is unknowable, except to a man like Kurtz, who is prepared to die of his knowledge, Achebe's recognition is quite different — he sees and understands there the persons and actions of his own ancestors, or rather of his close relatives — he reminds us in his essay that Conrad sailed down the Congo in 1890 when his (Achebe's) own father was still a baby in arms. Culler has put his finger on the difficulty when he writes:

Precisely because the reader expects to be able to recognise a world, the novel he reads becomes a place in which models of intelligibility can be "deconstructed," exposed and challenged. (190)

The "models of intelligibility" contained in *Heart of Darkness* depend heavily on the acceptance by the reader that the narrator, Marlow, has a right to tell the story.

In *Structuralist Poetics* Culler draws attention to a tactic common in the novel: the use of language which suggests that the world of narrator and reader are the same or similar, and that they have both experiences and attitudes in common. He comments that Balzac's novels insist

that the narrator is only a more knowledgeable version of the reader and that they share the same world to which the language of the novel refers. The demonstratives followed by relative clauses (she was one of those women who . . . ; on one of those days when . . . ; the façade is painted that yellow colour which gives Parisian houses . . .) create categories while implying that the reader knows them already and can recognize the kind of person or object about which the narrator speaks. The hypostatized observers act as personae for the reader and suggest how he would have reacted to the spectacle which is being presented. (195-96)

Heart of Darkness is very clearly a novel which invites the reader into this kind of complicity with the narrator. The effect of Marlow's narrative is to make the reader one of the group of listeners on the deck of the yawl on the Thames. His language is full of appeals to experience and attitudes which, it is presumed, are common to the group: when he speaks of the fascination of savagery, he says, "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency — the devotion to efficiency" (31). It is the crucial attitude for the novel's view (which is to say, the view that the reader is persuaded to share with Marlow) both of the European employees of the Company and of the native inhabitants of the Congo; it keeps Marlow the irritated, alienated spectator of the one, and despite this fascination, resistant to the appeal of the other. The assumption of his language as he tells the story is that his hearers/readers will understand and agree that the obligation to gainful toil, however odious one's employers, will exclude the possibility of abandoning ship for an investigation of life on the river bank. His words, especially at crucial moments in the narrative, are full of "yous" and "ones" which involve his hearers/readers in the strange particularity of his own experience in the Congo and especially in his own reactions to that experience which we are to see as something which we might well have shared. Often the analogy between his work and that of the hearer/reader becomes explicit, as when he speaks of his own work on the ship and compares it to that of his hearers:

"I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks: I watched for sunken stones: I was learning to clap my teeth smartly, before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up in the night for next day's steaming. When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality — the reality, I tell you — fades. The inner truth is hidden — luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for — what is it? half-a-crown a tumble —"

"Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew that there was at least one listener awake besides myself.

"I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed what does the price matter, if the trick be well done?" (66-67)

This is a finely calculated piece of writing: it manages to imply that the everyday routines of Marlow's hearers (middle-class British professional men, as far as we are allowed to know them) are essentially similar to Marlow's demanding duties on the steamship, and that both are noble in their way, though they oblige one to ignore "the inner truth" which Kurtz, we gather, dared to contemplate. If the passage is to persuade the reader at the same time, he must be prepared to acknowledge in himself the existence of a similar work ethic and perhaps also that he is middle class and English. It is one of the subtleties of Conrad's strategy that he does not offer Kurtz, the "hero of the spirit," to his reader as the figure with whom he is to feel affinity. It is Marlow, benevolent, dutiful but unheroic, whom we are to feel we resemble, and Marlow's attitudes are recognizably those of a man who has adjusted to the economic realities of the western world. Work is for him "monkey tricks" but he does not fail in it. Nor is he taken in by the propaganda of "the gang of virtue," as the brickmaker of the Central Station calls them. Of his naïvely idealistic aunt, who is taken in by these ideas, he says:

"It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over." (39)

This last sentence has the purpose of manoeuvring his readers into agreement with him, though he will eventually admit that there is nothing queer about women's ignorant idealism, that it is deliberately preserved by men for their own purposes. When speaking of his lie to Kurtz's fiancée, he says:

"Oh, she is out of it — completely. They — the women I mean — are out of it — should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse." (84)

In fact this idealism is not confined to women; Kurtz himself when he arrives in the Congo shares it. But Marlow does not, because

he is neither naïve nor wilfully ignorant, and nor, he ventures to presume, are we. The testing and breaking down of these ideas in Kurtz and his course after he has discarded them to investigate what Trilling calls "the primal, non-ethical energies" is a process we are persuaded to understand but never, even imaginatively, to participate in.

It would of course be absurd to suggest that Balzac or Conrad wrote only for readers whose historical and social placing was so similar to their own that the idea of the narrator as "a more knowledgeable version" of the reader was reasonable; rather, the persuasions that this is so, embedded in the text, work on the reader so as to make the narrator an acceptable guide for him. In Trilling's case, Marlow as narrator was easily acceptable, partly because the civilization to which he belonged was the immediate ancestor of Trilling's own. When Trilling writes of Kurtz as "going down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul" he feels no reluctance to see the people of the nineteenth-century Congo as living at that beginning. Conrad has put them to such a use; unable, because of his historical placing, to know what the anthropologists of the twentieth century would tell later-born men and women, he has seen them as without culture of any kind; pure, unmitigated and undisguised impulse. Achebe's position is very different: the narrator's efforts to generalize his attitudes and experience over his readers seem to him to point to a sinister tendency of Europeans which Conrad is both supporting and extending.

Writing about the difficulty of teaching "ancient or culturally removed material," Jerome McGann comments that although the difficulties of such works can be avoided if they are dealt with in their present context only (that is to say, the context of the reader's own present) to do so is merely to recapitulate and objectify the reader's own ideological commitments. Achebe, writing energetically and persuasively against what he calls the "dehumanization" of Africans, is most certainly recapitulating his own ideological commitment. He knows that Conrad's historical placing made it unlikely that he would respond to the inhabitants of the Congo with anything more than "the liberalism" which "touched all the best minds of the age" but which "almost always managed to

sidestep the ultimate question of equality between black people and white people" (8). But an historical sense is, properly, I think, insufficient to reconcile him to the assumptions about the relative positions of the races implied in the novel. Forgiving Conrad, the man of the nineteenth century, for his views is not the question. It is the continued currency and influence of *Heart of Darkness* in the late twentieth century which is the problem. Achebe claims that "the image of Africa which we find in his book . . . was and is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination" (13). I should myself be willing to go further and say that despite the late twentieth-century movements which celebrate the capacities and achievements of Blacks, it is an image which still has a powerful and damaging hold on the minds of many Blacks.

Is it not possible that without rejecting the work, we can refuse to be co-opted into that complicity with Marlow which is necessary if we are to share his judgements on the Congolese? What happens if we become what Judith Fetterley has called a "resisting reader"? Fetterley recognizes as her first premise that "literature is political," that is to say, that it has a design, often "impalpable" upon its reader. That design is to manoeuvre the reader into the acceptance of a vision of reality, as Culler might say, a world tied to the world which the reader himself knows. Fetterley's concern is with the fact that the vision of reality presented by American literature is male-affirming: "to read . . . classic American literature is perforce to identify as male," she writes (xii). To read *Heart of Darkness* as Conrad intended it to be read, as I have shown, is to identify not only as male but as White and Western European, in a sense which precludes sympathy with or knowledge of other races. Fetterley suggests that the "political" designs of such literature may be resisted without its being necessary to discard the works: the problem, as she sees it, is that these designs tend to be "impalpable" to the reader, and the solution is to reveal them.

She writes of the "powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified and legitimized in art" and "more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male — to be universal, to be American — is to be *not female*" (xiii). This kind

of powerlessness is as well known to Third World readers as to White women, since much of the literature on the syllabuses of secondary and tertiary educational institutions has until recently been of the kind which invites one to see oneself as white.

Achebe's essay is not perhaps sufficiently aware of its own power: determined though it is by revealing the narrative strategy to create a new understanding of *Heart of Darkness*, it can only suggest that the proper fate of so offensive a work is to drop out of the canon. Fetterley, on the other hand, can find a value for works which offer "ideas and mythologies" (xx) which have become offensive to us. She can envisage the possibility that we might, by refusing to become complicitous with narrators, or even authors, identify and resist pervasive attitudes within the works, and finally become better able to change similar attitudes which we encounter in our daily life. There can be few works of the past to which a degree of resistance is not necessary; to resist is not to avoid the problems of an "ancient or culturally removed" text in the way which McGann condemns, though it contributes to a clearer understanding of our own present as well as of the world of the novel.

Novels of the Third World generally show awareness that they must allow for different kinds of reading: *Heat and Dust*, by insisting on the rootlessness of both its narrators, has refused to allow any reader the sense that he or she shares a cultural competence with them. The result, to judge from criticism of the novel, is a kind of freedom for the reader within the text. I have already quoted from Bruce King's discussion of it; what is remarkable in the assessment as a whole is that there is no acknowledgement by the critic that it is partial and focused on a single aspect of the work. For him, the subject of the novel is British culture, 1923 and 1975, made the more arresting by its positioning in front of the exotic backdrop formed by India. It is a reading of the novel which strikingly reassembles that desired by Conrad and given by Trilling to *Heart of Darkness*, in its assumption that what is knowable, that is, Western civilization, may constitute a subject, and may be the better judged by being seen against the unknowable, represented in the case of *Heat and Dust* by India and the Indians. And there is no doubt that Olivia Rivers, whose letters, sometimes

quoted and at other times summarized, form our only source of information about life in Satipur and Khatm in 1923, knows almost nothing about Indians. She remains ignorant during the period of the novel not only about the unregarded Hindu masses who can indicate their wishes only by rioting but also to a great extent about the character and involvements of her lover the Nawab. And the present-day narrator, despite her will to see and know India and Indians, never systematizes her perceptions in order to arrive at a verdict.

Nissim Ezekiel, who might be described, at least in this example of his criticism as "Indian post-colonial" describes the novel as

. . . worthless as literature, contrived in its narrative structure, obtrusive in its authorial point of view, weak in style, stereotyped in its characters, and viciously prejudiced in its vision of the Indian scene. . . . Is there not a demeaning motive in this characterising of a country and its culture in terms of its climate and the least valuable element lying on the physical territory designated?

(138-39)

The anger felt by Ezekiel at what he sees as a partial and prejudiced portrait of India comes from an assumption which he makes earlier in the essay, that when two cultures are in contact, as portrayed in a literary work "the cultures cannot be 'equal' — one is in some crucial ways more powerful, while the other is treated as confused, ineffective or unbalanced" (137). It seems evident that he believes that in this case British culture is offered, without qualifications relating to the differences between 1923 and 1975, as superior, and entitling the present-day narrator, and through her, Olivia, to offer perceptions of India to readers who would on this basis arrive at an unfavourable verdict on the country and its people. Although, as I have argued earlier, Jhabvala is at pains to indicate that neither narrator can be seen as representative of her culture, nor, presumably of Jhabvala's, yet both necessarily write from outside Indian culture and with a set of expectations formed by their English upbringing. Ezekiel has registered and resented the way in which the accounts of India both in 1923 and 1975 come from foreign consciousness. His is a "resisting" reading in something like the sense that Achebe's is, insofar as it insists on the inadequacy of the perceivers to give a fair and

complete account of their subject, and in the second sense, that this inadequacy is produced by a wilful ignorance or unfairness on the part of the author, who was or could have been capable of knowing India as Indians know it, as well as it appears to visiting English.

A third reading, by a critic who may be described as a penitent colonist, sees the subject matter differently from King and the attitude of the author differently from Ezekiel:

Heat and Dust, or at least the 1923 areas of it, records the fading years of two coexisting régimes in India, the Muslim princes and the British Raj. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that neither the Nawab nor the British realise what will supplant both — they imagine that the danger to each comes from the other. The reader can see, with the help of the seventies areas of the novel, that the people, who were and are Hindu, must have lived their lives virtually unaffected by either. . . . Jhabvala does not weigh the Raj against Hindu India and decide that the one is better or worse than the other. Hindu India, in 1923, does not speak to its rulers except through riots which they ignore or misunderstand. In the seventies, the narrator, whose strongest impulse is to see and understand, can perceive what is to Olivia in 1923 invisible, but at the end of the novel she is still hoping for clear understanding of the whole pattern.

This discussion of the novel, my own, is taken from a lecture written some years ago, when I had no doubt that the principal subject of *Heat and Dust* was the continuance and survival of an indigenous culture through two waves of colonialism.

An easy verdict on these three readings would be that each critic has responded to the novel according to his own interests and sensitivities: in the words of Jerome McGann, each has recapitulated his or her own ideological commitment.¹ The question must be asked, however, of whether, when a narrator offers no overt guidance as to the attitudes and judgements which a reader ought to bring to bear on the text, readers have been made intentionally “free” by the author. Is it legitimate for them to turn to their own interests and inclinations, as the extracts offered show three critics in the process of doing?

It is difficult and perhaps unnecessary to find a reason for preferring one critic’s reading to the others to the extent of discount-

ing the others in favour of the reading preferred. The three critics have in fact picked their ways through the text, attracted strongly by certain areas of meaning and indifferent to others. Probably none of the three would deny the existence of the meanings which have not attracted them: the strange passivity of the modern narrator, for example, which so interested the "British" post-imperialist, was mildly intriguing to the penitent colonist. Nevertheless what is most significant is that the refusal of the novelist to provide within the novel a single or compelling ideology makes the activity of reading it into the arrangement and assessment of its content in terms of some scheme, moral or historical or what you will, but originating in the reader's self.

How different from the reading experience of *Heart of Darkness*, one might be tempted to say. The difference, however, as Achebe would argue, is less than it seems: the *Heart and Dust* narrator is aware and makes her readers feel her fallibility and the limits of her understanding, but although Conrad and Marlow seem to have made different assumptions, which readers of our own day may understand, those readers must know that their own positions *vis-à-vis Heart of Darkness* are now to be defined by themselves. Third World readers may be especially conscious of this, since the position of "resisting" readers has so often been forced on them, but it must to an extent be an awareness common to all.

NOTE

¹ I am aware that I have been somewhat unjust to Jerome McGann in representing his critical position by an essay published in 1981, on *The Ancient Mariner*, a text which was certainly directed at a "primary audience" whose cultural assumptions were familiar to Coleridge. McGann's words represent in my essay a position once seen proper for the reader of any text: that he or she ought, as far as possible, to achieve "cultural complicity" with its author for the duration of the reading.

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