"The Other! The Other!": Conrad, Wilson Harris, and the Postcolonial "Threshold of Capacity"

I am a king of oceans and skies," said Proteus to Rose. "I swam, flew the Atlantic through Middle Passage Africa, India, Greece, Rome, multiple Christian/Pagan motherhood of carnival. I reached the margins of the world, I came to El Dorado, all in jest. What a golden jest colonialism and postcolonialism are. What untold riches! He knows as he dreams in his cradle. What a gift for a newborn child. . . .
—Wilson Harris, *The Four Banks of the River of Space*

It is thus not a matter of opposing another discourse on the same "things" to the enormous multiplicity of traditional discourses on man, animal, plant, or stone, but of ceaselessly analyzing the whole conceptual machinery, and its interestedness.
—Jacques Derrida, " 'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida"

I

In this chapter I will address at length a question frequently raised regarding emergent postcolonial discourses, but seldom more directly than in a recent essay by Ella Shohat: "When exactly . . . does the 'post-colonial' begin?"[1] a question that presupposes a certain type of antitheoretical or 'empirical' interrogation, a question that already posits the postcolonial as a sign contained by the customary signifiers used to denote first sightings ("when," "where"—time, place, and the notion of "origin" itself). What I offer here, however, is not an originary location or moment but what we might for now call a limit

or *boundary*. The boundary at stake here is not a generic or historical demarcation (as the question would seem to allude) nor of national borders (a limit respected much more often, it is worth noting, by literary critics than guerrilla fighters), but of a certain kind of capacity or fullness—a "threshold of capacity"[2] from which we may begin to glimpse the emergence of a postcolonial textuality. It is such a boundary, then, which may provide a space from which to begin the task of reading the postcolonial.

My chosen point of departure for reading such a space, while in no way essential to the task, provides us with a particularly rich body of texts from which to begin. As I have indicated elsewhere, the work of Joseph Conrad is especially valuable as a writer credited in many circles with opening a door for writers of the so-called developing world, credited with finding, whether deliberately; that is, *consciously* or not, a sort of fissure in Western colonial thought through which postcolonial texts have since grown and flourished. And yet at this very moment of fissure, within this gesture through which the postcolonial achieves its apparent extrication or (as we must say provisionally, carefully—yet we must say it) "freedom," *something else* emerges. Something that has always already complicated, *contaminated* the higher (because ostensibly "purer") state of Being to which such a freedom aspires. Such a freedom is an irreducibly teleological one; it carries within it the righteousness of the inevitable, of the destined people and their God (this already, of course, a calculated and even strategic move, what we might call a *theo-logistics*), of progress, of an e-*man*-cipation (which in its very articulation betrays its own profound phallogocentrism); and yet despite all of this, it is a word we must write, if only provisionally and in the form of a 'freedom from—.' We must ask, then: Is this "freedom from—," which the careful analysis of the deconstructive gesture would enable the subjugated discourse to enact, a "freedom *to*" as well? And what would be its (national/international? ontological?) horizon or heading: freedom to . . . what? One possible response to such queries is that the deconstructive activity creates a space or condition of freedom without necessarily producing it in its presence, in the form of an acting agent (such, of course, is the archetypal hero or messiah or Leader-of-the-People, the one who would destroy all barriers, answer all questions, resolve all doubts and contradictions (or render them irrelevant), and generally establish his earthly kingdom, under the banner of which all would thrive—in other words, not only an onto-theology but the seldom-examined metaphor of the master narrative: philosophy as Final Solution). So that after the attentive reading, after the analysis that lays bare the hierarchies and unresolved tensions that always underlie the violence (epistemic and otherwise) of empire, there lies the task of *re*-positing, of *re*-constructing, however provisionally or advisedly, the structures of agency—of the active individual and collective subjectivity, the "I am" of a people.

This is because there exists a danger, or rather a question of responsibility, which arises whenever we "raise the banner" of deconstruction. When in the manner of those theorists who implore us to "Always!" do this or that, we invoke the efficacy or inevitability of the deconstructive activity, we always run the risk of uncritically turning motion into method, of reifying and delimiting the very play that we make possible: theory-as-*techne,* critical virtuosity performed for its own erudite sake. Let us say further, in a cautious and preliminary way, that this fissure is the space of this incipient freedom, of this possibility of agency and extrication from the exigencies (discursive and otherwise) of empire, if it is anything at all. It is this, or it is nothing at all.

Let us, then, give this fissure a name; let us say that it is more than an alterity or a margin. Let this fissure become for us, through a certain metaphoric displacement, something else: the mark or signal or index whose referent or exterior is that of a *frontier.* As for this loaded word being a fantastically overdetermined term, bearing a history of meanings of which we cannot but be suspicious, we can for now only say that it is itself a metaphoric displacement ("frontier" for "margin," "threshold" for "limit") which we use advisedly, and whose efficacy will become later on. Let us nevertheless, then, speak of a *frontier*, which one novelist encountered or defined and another (among others) has gone beyond. We may begin with this favorable introduction to the work of the former:

> Conrad's books, I say it without fear of contradiction, have no counterparts in the entire range of English literature. . . . The manner, as opposed to the matter, is even more striking, more original. [Conrad's work] is wholly unlike that of any writer who has hitherto used the English language as his vehicle of expression, and may indeed be regarded, in some sort, as embodying a discovery of yet another use to which our tongues can be put.[3]

Sir Hugh C. M. G. Clifford's assessment is less relevant for its praise of Conrad (he was hardly alone in his admiration) than for what it praises: "the *manner,* as opposed to the matter," more the language than any thematic or ideological element of the texts; it is clearly the language of the texts that Clifford finds innovative, even "exotic" (HC 12): "yet another use to which our tongues could be put." This early (and mostly specious) distinction between the discursive forms and thematic content of Conrad's fiction, with its implicit privileging of the former, may be found in even the harshest of his postcolonial critics. Chinua Achebe, whose ideological aversion to Conrad is well-known ("Conrad was a bloody racist"[4]), recognizes him, albeit grudgingly, as "one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good storyteller into the bargain" (CA

120); and Edward Said is likewise compelled to admit that the language of Conrad's texts "was far in advance of *what* he was saying."[5] Whether Conrad's discursive talents functioned in the service of morally or ideologically questionable interests, whether he was a knowing accomplice in what Said calls "the duplicity of language" (ES 171), or indeed whether he could have done otherwise, is not of immediate consequence here.

Just as clearly, however, it is not enough for us to simply say "Conrad was not a racist," or "Conrad did not mean that," or worse, to wash our hands of the entire question and say "What if he was a racist, does that diminish the value of his work?" as if we were under some obligation to choose between two moral or ideological contents, each essential and unchanging. When Wilson Harris says that *Heart of Darkness* is a "frontier" novel, he is not so much creating a place for Conrad alongside postcolonial texts as he is acknowledging a space from which such texts emerged. This space is not a delimiting line, but rather a fissure or fracture of a line; it is the "threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself,"[6] a capacity, in the most general terms, for language—or more specifically, for a discourse with the capacity or capability of representing *difference*. In opposition to homogeneous cultural imperatives, radical critiques of colonial discourses—*postcolonial* discourses—must themselves be manifold, heterogeneous; that is, they must help create the structures of which they speak. This is what Harris tells us in "The Frontier on Which *Heart of Darkness* Stands," an essay in which he defends Conrad's "strange genius" against Achebe's aforementioned attack:

> As I weighed this charge in my own mind, I began to sense a certain incomprehension in Achebe's analysis of the pressures of form that engaged Conrad's imagination to transform biases grounded in homogeneous premises. By form I mean the novel form as a medium of consciousness that has its deepest roots in an intuitive and much, much older self than the historical ego or the historical conditions of ego dignity that bind us to a particular decade or generation or century. (Wha 161)

Harris amplifies this statement a little farther on: The capacity of the intuitive self to breach the historical ego is the life-giving and terrifying objectivity of imaginative art" (Wha 162). The undoing of homogeneous premises here is the undoing of a historical ego: "This interaction between sovereign ego and intuitive self is the tormenting reality of changing form, the ecstasy as well of visionary capacity to *cleave the prison house of natural bias within a heterogeneous asymmetric context* in which the unknowable God—though ceaselessly beyond human patterns—infuses art with unfathomable eternity and grace" (Wha 162, emphasis added).[7] The psychoanalytic terminology chosen by Har-

ris for his analysis—this interrogation of a "historical" or "sovereign" ego—apparently corresponds with the absence of a fixed and "knowable" God, or of any otherwise stable center for this "heterogeneous asymmetric context" from which he reads *Heart of Darkness*.

By its appearance, such a context would posit the epistemological or ontological necessity of a center as a monolithic cultural imperative—that is to say, as a historical illusion belying the heterogeneity of the discourses it systematically suppresses. Two immediate consequences of such a reinscription of suppressed discourses merit particular attention:

1. The apparent opposition 'intuitive self/historical ego' signifies an attempt to establish a self (not necessarily a subject in the narrow sense) outside of a linear-historical temporality, one of the "heterogeneous asymmetric contexts" through which Harris seeks to disrupt Western colonial notions of center-origin-unity-History (and so on, terms or signs constituting the chain of signifiers that has always bound colonized subjects everywhere), with the novel form generally and *Heart of Darkness* specifically as both tool and space or index of that irruption (or in Harrisian terms, 'transformation').

2. The act of invoking colonial discourses in terms of a "historical ego" is a preliminary gesture that calls forth a deconstruction of the colonizing subject as constituted by a history, a governing principle—in short, a body of law, conditioned historically by a homogeneous cultural logic driven to identify natural justice (the self-presence to itself of the subject's "moral right"), and natural *justification,* for the actions of a culture.

The beginning of the dismantling of the historical-colonial ego is, for Harris, already glimpsed in *Heart of Darkness,* as manifest in a constant if implicit questioning of what Harris calls the "monolithic absolutes or monolithic codes of behavior" (Wha 162) that invariable govern imperialist discourses, thus opening or pointing toward a space or index through which the process of questioning may continue.

Before moving on to *Heart of Darkness* we should perhaps look a bit longer at Clifford's essay, as we seek traces or symptoms of this Conradian fissure in texts written about him; for once the irruption is written it creates a space or index (for Harris, a "doorway"), a destabilization that makes new subject positions possible—and which, once realized, will inevitably be read and written by others. Consider Clifford's reflection that "Mr. Conrad had seen [nonwhites] and known them, but he had seen as white men see—*from the outside*. He had never lived into the life of brown people" (HC 16). Clearly a recentering has already taken place here; for despite Clifford's comments later in

this same essay about the Congo (including a reference to "the incomprehensible savage life upon its banks" [HC 18], he has qualified all such comments in advance with the acknowledgment of his own—and Conrad's—positional bias: both see "as white men see—*from the outside*." This, more than anything else, is the meaning implicit or latent in this fissure over which *Heart of Darkness* presides: the realization that whiteness is not all, that the colonized other cannot be explained away by a simple opposition of "civilized" subject and barbaric object. If Conrad's fiction cannot itself cross over the threshold, cannot itself achieve a parallel intersubjectivity with its others, it at least—to a far greater extent than colonial fictions (Forster and Kipling come to mind)—realizes this condition as being deeply problematic. In Conrad we see acknowledgment, however ambivalent or even latent, that colonial discourses not only severely limited the play of differences within the symmetrical form of a 'liberal' society; but they also provided the form from which to construct a mandate of conquest, a "civilizing mission" given the lie by the heterogeneous bodies and tongues of the conquered. It is to the expression of this problematic in *Heart of Darkness,* and Harris's transformation of it, that we will now turn.

<center>II</center>

William W. Bonney's assertion that Conrad's fiction "probes the limitations of the English language,"[8] which Bonney develops at some length in his poststructurally informed study of Conrad entitled *Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction,* is a useful enough place to begin; it is especially relevant both for its articulation of the "frontier" to which Harris refers and for its own inability to cross over into a postcolonial discourse. Seen in this context, Bonney's take on the phrase "heart of darkness" is particularly instructive, for its incompleteness; that the image is "founded not upon anything that exists empirically either for Marlow or the reader" but rather based upon a metaphoric vehicle ("heart") and tenor ("darkness") which are themselves tropes for a tenor that neither Marlow nor Conrad can produce (WB 195) is an observation which, while largely accurate, does not account for what that "heart of darkness" might be or Conrad's inability to articulate it. Like Conrad, Bonney probes the *frontier,* the limitations that inevitably surface in the language, without going beyond them.

Grammatically, it would be correct enough to say that "heart of darkness" is an absurdity—a metaphor without a referent, a contradiction only compounded by the phrase's position as the title of the novella. Conrad's text would reveal—or more literally *illuminate,* shed light upon—the "heart of darkness," that we may "see" it; but in literal terms, such an illumination is clearly impossible. To shed light upon darkness is necessarily to change its in-

trinsic makeup. To render it no longer that which it was; the darkness can remain dark only if untouched by light, making any attempt at illumination a contradiction in terms: darkness cannot be 'illuminated,' and neither Conrad nor Marlow can 'illuminate' the darkness for us. Rather, the text, paradoxically works against itself to reveal an *absence* of clarity, the impossibility of providing, on its own terms, such an illumination; *Heart of Darkness*' act of 'revealing,' then, lies paradoxically in the revelation of its own self-concealment—a revelation of the *absence* of light, of a matter that cannot be produced in its presence: *lichtung* (clearing, *clariere*) rather than Aufklärung (illumination, E/enlightenment).[9] That the phrase "heart of darkness" was nevertheless conceived as a metaphoric vehicle *for something*—something that neither the critical nor literary text ultimately illuminate (or illuminate ultimately)—is instructive not only of Conrad's limitations but also those of a particular kind of deconstructivist analysis. For it is not enough to say that "*Heart of Darkness* is absurd" or that it "is about an absurdity," or as Bonney more qualifiedly puts it, that in *Heart of Darkness* "only a process of indeterminate imaginative regression survives the suicidal figurative inflation of the original grammatical unit" (WB 195). Bonney's assertion that readers of the text must remain "bereft of direction and any possibility of fulfillment" and "are thus rendered even more powerless to achieve a definitive orientation than are his most sensitive characters" (WB 195) is finally inadequate, not only of the implied universality of such a claim but because of the suspect standard by which readers are being judged. It is significant, if arguable, that by Bonney's standard the closest thing to a "sensitive character" in *Heart of Darkness* is Marlow himself, however much his reliability may be qualified by the fact of his first-person narration (he is, after all, representing himself more directly than anyone else in the text). If we nevertheless provisionally accept Marlow as a "most sensitive character" despite this caveat, we would still have to account for his own biases, his own situatedness, as a character within the events of the narrative; or in other words, we would need to determine what kind of a standard Marlow represents, and critique in a rigorous way the kind of discursive structure that would claim him as a standard of judgment or center.

Marlow's character is generally referred to as a kind of modern English "Everyman"; and certainly the earnestness of his work ethic, and strong sense of what we might call an English 'order' or morality (he is, by his own account, "one soul in the world that [is] neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking"[10]) are qualities constantly emphasized throughout the text. Also unquestioned by Marlow (at least before his tenure in the Congo) is his belief in the work of empire; even after all he experiences, he can still claim a belief in the "power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business" (*HoD* 65). Marlow's lengthy encounter with the ruthless, predatory

realities of the imperialist project clearly do some damage to these sensibilities. But while he may recoil in horror from Kurtz's anarchic, avaricious thirst for power and the "unspeakable rites" (*HoD* 65) over which he may have presided, Marlow nevertheless remains safely within the confines of his English rationality. But although Marlow clings tenaciously to his 'Englishness' and his Europocentric vision, he cannot help seeing through the "hollow sham" of imperialism, a pose embodied by Kurtz as the voice of the empire's 'civilizing mission.' It is this ambivalence in Marlow—this discrepancy between what he sees and what he can allow himself to tell—which fuels the narrative tension in *Heart of Darkness.* More importantly, however, we can see Marlow's ambivalence as the realization of a certain *lack;* that is, as symptomatic of the irreducible inadequacy of his language when faced with a crisis of perception (a crisis shared, I think, by Conrad). Marlow, in his encounter with colonial Otherness, can intuit a threshold, a frontier, which, as we shall see, he cannot bring himself to cross.

Marlow hints at the ambivalence of his own moral distinctions between good and evil from the narrative's opening pages; from his opening words, he is already attempting to undo the implications of the text's title. Marlow's observation that "[England] also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth" (*HoD* 19) clearly challenges the hierarchical oppositions around which imperialist civilizing missions are invariably constructed: binaries such as 'light/darkness,' 'civilization/savagery,' 'white man/black man,' the implicit privileging of the former terms over the latter, and the subsequent conflation of these and other oppositions under the mate-opposition 'Europe/Africa.' By invoking Europe's "dark" past, Marlow blurs the boundary between the opposing terms, thereby implicitly calling into question the validity of the other oppositions— views shared, no doubt, by his immediate audience on the ship: Europe as a place of civilization, E/enlightenment, and so on.

Soon after this initial interrogation of terms, however, Marlow qualifies himself; no sooner has he begun his comparison of ancient Roman and contemporary British empires than he constructs his own hierarchical opposition, apparently in the latter's defense:

> Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this. What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these were not much account, really. *They were no colonists;* their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. *They were conquerors,* and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of. (*HoD* 21, emphasis added)

But this opposition of 'colonists/conquerors,' with its implicit privileging of a European 'civilizing mission' over the mere plundering of invaders, is one that

Marlow already knows to be inadequate; hence his immediate undermining of his own just-constructed terms:

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than our-selves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What re-deems it is *the idea only*. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pre-tense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . (*HoD* 21, empha-sis added)

Here Marlow effectively gives the lie to his own construction, to his own com-plicity in the lie of empire. By erasing the opposition between colonist and conqueror, Marlow reveals the only difference between the terms to be that of "an idea"; the sacking of another culture is "redeemed," in other words, only by the idea of the 'civilizing mission,' of spreading E/enlightenment to the "dark places of the earth"—in short, by the same hierarchical logics that he has just called into question. Thus the deconstructive double-bind: Marlow accepts the discourses of empire into his narrative *in the very act of denouncing them,* reveal-ing a state of ambivalence that permeates the narrative.

Seen in this context, it is no wonder that Marlow's immediate audience shows little enthusiasm at the prospect of "hear[ing] about one of [his] incon-clusive experiences" (*HoD* 21). It is perhaps in response to his circuitous style of storytelling that one listener (the nameless narrator) chastises Marlow for appearing "so often unaware of what [his] audience would best like to hear" (*HoD* 21); if so, then this passage from Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is worth reading carefully:

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts; encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand; and, perhaps, *also that bit of truth for which you have forgotten to ask*[11] (emphasis added)

Without returning to previously mentioned contradictions inherent in this task of illuminating "darkness," we can nevertheless begin to understand the problematic of this task as it applies to Marlow's story. Certainly Marlow's "truth" in *Heart of Darkness* is at best a difficult one, rendered ambivalent as it struggles against the awareness that it is decidedly *not* that for which its audi-ence has asked. Yet Marlow is nevertheless revealing something, if less an

illuminating truth (*Aufklarung*) than an interrogation of his own self-conceal-
ment (unconcealment [*aletheia*]); that is, what Marlow's (and by extension,
Conrad's) tale signifies is less a self-evident truth (*Enargeia*) than the opening
of a space or index where such truths may yet be thought. Given the absence of
the implicitly promised revelation, then, Conrad's awareness of the possibility
of an antagonistic relation with his audience, and the representation of such a
relation in the text, should not be taken lightly. It is significant in this regard
that Marlow is often referred to as an "unreliable narrator," one whom a reader
must be careful not to trust entirely. To the extent that any first-person narra-
tor is always more or less situated within the text, thereby making their as-
sumed authority as witnesses problematic, such a critical point is well-enough
taken. But Marlow does not necessarily aspire to such trust from his immedi-
ate listeners on the boat, and is, at times, quite bewildered by his experience, a
state apparent from his numerous admonishments to his audience about the
opacity of his tale. It is, then, Marlow's self-reflexive, digressive way of story-
telling that marks him as unreliable:

> to [Marlow] the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but
> outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out
> a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made
> visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (*HoD* 20)

Although this is among the most oft-cited passages in *Heart of Darkness,*
it is especially relevant here as an illustration of the text's awareness of its own
inability to deliver on the title's promise. There is no inner essence or "kernel"
of truth, of darkness or otherwise, to be revealed or illuminated in the telling;
it is, rather, precisely in the telling—on the level of signifiers, *of narrativity it-
self*—that the text gropes for a definitive meaning that continually escapes it, as
the passage's reliance upon simile amply attests: the meaning is "not inside *like*
a kernel but outside," appearing only "*as* a glow brings out a haze, *in the likeness
of* one of these misty halos." Meaning in Marlow's tales is not merely indeter-
minate, but restless, never content to reside in a single metaphor but constantly
moving on, as each successive image proves insufficient to reveal its referent in
its presence; what illumination Marlow is able to provide is qualified: "spec-
tral," we are told in a final metaphoric displacement, as is the "illumination of
moonshine." The narrator's critique of Marlow's tales, then, might itself serve
as a useful metaphor of the slippage that constantly occurs along the signifying
chain throughout *Heart of Darkness,* as the text's promise of truth in the form
of an illumination [*Aufklarung*] constantly falls prey to the impossibility of that
promise. The resulting and unresolved tension between the text's force (what it
moves toward asa referent, what it *would say*) and its signification (what it is

able to say, the limits of its articulation as what it must leave out) is what disturbs and disrupts Marlow and his audience throughout the telling of his tale.

This assessment of Marlow's storytelling, shared by the text's narrator and by Marlow's immediate audience, emerges more forcefully in Marlow's various asides to the latter throughout the text. Marlow's interruptions of his narrative to directly address this audience accomplish little in terms of narrative progression or clarification, save to make explicit for readers of the text the "faint uneasiness" (*HoD* 42) the developing tale inspires in his immediate listeners, and thus to mark the space or index of a tension or symptom within the text requiring further attention. This economy or unresolved tension comes closest to antagonism, however, as Marlow grows increasingly frustrated over his audience's apathy: "Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! Mustn't a man ever—"(*HoD* 63), and so on. Marlow is unable to satisfy their impatience with his narrative, however; all he can muster by way of protest is an exasperated "Absurd be—exploded!" (*HoD* 63), confirming, as Bonney correctly observes, Marlow's frustration at trying to share an experience that he cannot adequately articulate.

But beyond this apparent tension, however, Marlow's most profound sense of contradiction remains internal, locked as it is within the confines of his discourse—or rather, of his growing realization of its inadequacies when faced with the nightmare of empire. Marlow's belief in the 'noble cause' of the imperialist project, already qualified from the text's opening pages, becomes increasingly complicated as Marlow attempts to articulate his experiences. Even before his arrival in the Congo, Marlow already feels ambivalent about the prospect, explaining his own "slight uneas[iness]" at entering what he sees as "some conspiracy—I don't know—something not quite right" (*HoD* 25). Caught between his complicity in "the possession of such a magnificent dependency" (*HoD* 26) and his aunt's errant enthusiasm for the 'civilizing mission' of empire ("weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" [*HoD* 26]), Marlow grows increasingly uncomfortable with a rhetoric he already suspects of being delusory.

Marlow's suspicions about the imperialist project—and his own complicity with it—intensify with his increasing proximity to the 'dark' continent. Additionally, Marlow's ambivalence about the 'noble cause,' and his own role as an agent of it, becomes full-blown upon his first close encounter with the indigenous other:

> A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps . . . but these men could by no stretch of the imagination be

called *enemies.* They were called *criminals,* and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (*HoD* 30, emphasis added)

For Marlow, the discrepancy between signifier and signified is irreconcilable. The terms 'enemies' and 'criminals' are clearly inadequate to describe what is happening, what is being done to the black men in the name of the 'noble cause'; yet he cannot bring himself to comment on the scene other than elliptically, and not because he lacks the appropriate words: terms such as 'slavery' and 'oppression,' although certainly known to Marlow, represent concepts that cannot enter any discussion of empire without the necessity of confronting its true nature—a truth which, if the imperialist project is to succeed, must be suppressed. Having thus encountered this frontier of language and empire, Marlow's ambivalence here hints toward his complicity. And then he sees this:

> Behind this raw matter one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work, strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle. He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity. This was simple prudence, white men being so much alike from a distance that he could not tell who I might be. He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, *I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings.* (*HoD* 30, emphasis added)

As regards his uncritical or naive view of empire, this moment is for Marlow the beginning of the end; this moment of self-reckoning, in which he was caught in the knowing gaze of the "reclaimed" guard, confirms his fears: not only is the business of empire, this "conquest of the earth," as monstrous as he had suspected, but his own synonymity with it is unmistakable—whether or not he believes himself so, he is clearly seen by the guard as "a part of the great cause." Marlow's insight here, his recognition of the law as a legitimating discourse for exploitation and violence, is all the more terrifying for his own complicity with it; he has, after all, been identified as an agent of the "outraged law" come from the sea, a force only thinly veiled by its authenticating discourse of "high and just proceedings"—and a discourse more or less inaccessible to those subjected to the force of the "bursting shells," those for whom the law is little more than a wielding of power.[12] Seen in this context, the bitter sarcasm of Marlow's final words (especially the emphasized words) is palpable; it is the self-mockery of one who has seen not only the monstrousness of the hollow

sham of empire but his own unwitting role as accomplice. It is this moment of self-discovery, this realization of his own coincidence with the "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (*HoD* 30), the necessity of articulating his intuition of the imperialist horror combined with the impossibility of exposing it outright, which fuels Marlow's growing sense of ambivalence. Small wonder, then, that his immediate response is one of paralysis: "For a moment I stood appalled, as by a warning" (*HoD* 31): to acknowledge the horror explicitly would be, for Marlow, to completely undermine not only his sense of moral propriety—of good and evil—but the entire system of discourses upon which those beliefs are based. Despite Marlow's self-professed hatred of lies, then (significantly, he hates lies because they "appall" him [*HoD* 41]; hence his moral dilemma here), the "merry dance of death and trade" (*HoD* 28) continues unabated, as does Marlow's ambivalence—a psychic paralysis that is paradoxically also an oscillation, the ceaseless tracing of a movement between poles of a seemingly insoluble contradiction. It is the space or index of this oscillation, of this failed gesture of illumination that succeeds in revealing only its own complicity of concealment ('unconcealment,' *aletheia*)—it is this space or index (so troublesome to Conrad) which comes to constitute the clearing *(lichtung or clariere)*, which in turn makes possible the emergence of the postcolonial, the possibility of thinking such a thing. What is for Marlow/Conrad a limit becomes, for Harris and others, a *threshold.*

<center>III</center>

There is much in Wilson Harris's prefaces to his novels that may prove useful as we begin to read the postcolonial frontier, that "threshold of capacity" to which *Heart of Darkness* points yet does not itself attain. We can begin to understand what Harris values about Conrad's "strange genius" (Wha 161) by reading the former's prefaces and criticism, in which he is primarily concerned with the ontological and metaphysical questions addressed in his fiction; the prefacing note to *Palace of the Peacock,* his first novel, is especially relevant for his notion of the "mixed metaphysic,"[13] a concept that stands in sharp opposition to the monolithic prerogative of Marlow's outlook. The dismantling of oppositional logics that is so problematic in *Heart of Darkness* is for Harris a condition to be desired, as he seeks to constructs a fiction "that seeks to consume its biases through many resurrections of paradoxical imagination" (*PP* 9). For Harris, then, to seek paradox is to invoke contradiction without surrendering to the reconciling impulse, without attempting to account for it in terms of oppositions and hierarchies; it is, in other words, to find a space within the monolithic categorizations and taxonomies of Western thought in which to

reinscribe the alterity always suppressed with such systems—to find a place, in other words, in which to begin to address the Other.

The question may be suspiciously raised at this point: But what is the object that Harris wishes to illuminate, to render *present?* Or more crudely: What precisely is it that Harris "sees" and can tell, which Conrad cannot? Is this "threshold of capacity" to reveal, paradoxically, the 'absence of light,' that is, empire, to expose imperialism as a simultaneously self-affirming and self-concealing method of justification for its laws and cultural imperatives? Or is it rather in illumination (Aufklärung) of an essential or universal truth, that of the Other, of Other-ness itself, in opposition to the hegemony of colonial discourses, thus perpetuating the oppositional colonial model?

We will address these and other questions primarily by looking closely at both Harris's texts and *Heart of Darkness,* and examining their situatedness in relation to both a history of Western empire and dominion and a certain space or index of fissure (or by now, *clearing*) of writing. In order to better articulate our inquiry, however, I will make two preliminary statements:

1. This gesture of clearing implied in the first question is not a simple clearing of presence, allowing what is posited as presence (exploitation, slavery, etc.), to appear in its presence, as self-evident. Rather, it is an *unconcealment (aletheia),* a clearing not of presence as such but of presence *concealing itself,* or in Heideggerian terms "the clearing of a self-concealing sheltering" (MH 448); and

2. Implicit in this critique of colonial discourses as homogeneous constructs and imperatives is the reinscription of heterogeneity, of the radical alterity of the Other. Given the relative ease with which we could construct an entire history of Western domination as constituted through the comprehension and incorporation of its others, we might also produce another more recent (one might call it an 'alternative' or 'subaltern') history as constituted by a series of attempts to reinscribe a space or clearing or index for the Other *as Other,* to be written outside the oppositional logics of 'mastery/slavery,' 'colonizer/colonized,' and so forth, and thus implicitly beyond metaphysics in general—thus, for instance, Harris's positing not only of "multiple existences" but of an "unknowable God" who is only revealed outside the realm of "symmetrical contexts." For Harris, then, the threshold in question is one of 'freedom' (again, we will use the word advisedly, in spite of the ideological baggage inherent in this loaded word); not only freedom from an imperialist oppression, one that would perhaps simply substitute one dominant ideology with another (this is, e.g., the quandary in which traditional Marxist accounts of a single 'world history' invariably find themselves; the 'Third World' in such cases becomes itself a homogeneous entity, an unassimilable surplus or supplement to

Western narratives of empire), but a 'freedom *to*'—, in this case, a freedom to construct forms of being and knowledges that celebrate Otherness without absorption into or of the same.[14]

A useful enough way to begin reading this disruption of the discourses of empire, this fundamental shift from the problematic paradoxes of Conrad's fiction to the *meaningful* paradoxes of Harris's, is to look closely at the differences in narration between two otherwise very similar series of events. By way of a general introduction to Harris's novel *Palace of the Peacock* (which, like *Heart of Darkness,* is often considered a novella because of its relative brevity), I will attempt to present it alongside *Heart of Darkness* in precisely such a strategic manner, as a text that portrays a journey into the unknown territories of a jungle (in Harris's case, it is the Guyanese rain forest), for purposes of business and trade, a journey undertaken by a crew of mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Soon after Marlow's first encounter with the African other comes this well-known passage, Marlow's description of native workers dying in a grove:

> They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. . . . These moribund shapes were as free as the air—and nearly as thin. (*HoD* 31)

Clearly this is, for Marlow, a horrible sight. But more relevant for our purposes here is the way in which the dying figures are described: they are "nothing earthly," but rather mere "black shadows" of life that are as free and thin as air. Life is, in this context, represented as being *earthly,* as having a certain vigor of substance that the "moribund shapes" in the grove clearly lack; the binary logic at work here, represented by the oppositions 'substance/shadow,' vigor/listlessness,' active/passive,' and so forth, again implicitly privilege the former terms over the latter, culminating in the conflation of oppositions under the overarching binary 'life/death.' Under this model, then, what horrifies Marlow is not only the physical condition of the workers but also their deviation from a state he, a European, would associate with life.

In this context, Harris's portrayal in his fiction of extra-earthly manifestations of life, his depiction of various transubstantiations and transmutations of life-forms considered by conventional Western logics to be "nothing earthly," is representative of his project of moving beyond the logic of empire, of crossing the Conradian frontier in search of a suitably "mixed metaphysic." To illustrate this point more concretely, we might turn to descriptions from

Palace of the Peacock of events not far removed from Marlow's experience in the grove:

> In this remarkable filtered light it was not men of vain flesh and blood I saw toiling laboriously and meaninglessly, but *active ghosts* whose labour was indeed a flitting shadow over their shoulders as living men would don raiment and cast it off in turn to fulfill the simplest necessity of being. (*PP* 33, emphasis added)

And later:

> [Vigilance] rubbed his eyes since he felt he saw what no human mind should see, a spidery skeleton crawling to the sky. . . . Vigilance could not make up his bemused mind whether it was Wishrop climbing there or another version of Jennings' engine in the stream. He shrank from the image of his hallucination *that was more radical and disruptive of all material conviction than anything he had ever dreamt to see.* (*PP* 82, emphasis added)

  I have cited two separate passages here to illustrate a difference, not only between Harris's description and Conrad's but also between moments in the former's own text. As regards the first passage, we can say that its imagery bears a more than passing similarity to that in *Heart of Darkness,* with one strategic difference: unlike Conrad's listless shadows, Harris's ghosts are "active"; that is, Harris's figures, however unearthly, are not only not (yet) casualties of work but also carry a certain sense of agency—they retain the ability to "cast off" the burdens of labor, apparently at will. That the crew members retain the properties of active life in their otherworldly state serves to effectively undermine the oppositional logic prevalent in *Heart of Darkness.*
  The second passage represents a more radical departure, yet also illustrates a certain relation to Marlow's appalled narration. Arguably what Vigilance sees—a hallucination (maybe) of his dead coworker's skeleton "crawling to the sky," is more shocking than even Marlow's vision of shadowy death in the grove. Let us note here also that even the name of Harris's character, Vigilance, already signifies a different posture or attitude toward events than shown by Marlow: namely watchfulness, a *willingness* to see; and that this watchfulness also stands in opposition to Marlow's own reluctant observation—and halting narration of—events (and certainly this trait would also separate Vigilance also from Conrad's audience, upon whom the author assumes he must force such vision: "to make you see"). Yet given the opportunity, Marlow would likely contend that he too experienced something that "no human mind should

see"; and indeed, the horrific nature of events in *Heart of Darkness* is to a great extent what fuels Marlow's ambivalence and that of the narrative. Once again, however, there is an important strategic difference: whereas in Conrad's text the lack of "earthly" substance is a sign of weakness, exhaustion, and defeat, in *Palace of the Peacock* Wishrop's metamorphosis into a "spidery skeleton" is depicted as a "transubstantiation" (*PP* 83), if not a triumph, then certainly an escape or liberation from the physical trials of the journey into another existence, another realm of possibility. Additionally, this blurring of boundaries between the dead and the living is not limited to Wishrop; by this point in the text, not only has the first-person narrator inexplicably disappeared, but other characters are experiencing profound transformations as well: Vigilance's "immateriality and mysterious substantiality" (*PP* 82), Donne's suspicion that he is no longer "in the land of the living" (*PP* 83), and the crew boat's transformation into a "skeleton craft" (*PP* 83) are all representations of a reality alien to Marlow and, by extension, to *Heart of Darkness* itself—the frontier of a world whose multiple existences are hopelessly beyond the bounds of Marlow's English rationality. Harris's novel, then, emerges as less another entity among entities that we could simply oppose to *Heart of Darkness,* than a signpost of possibility for the multiple or quantum realities of the postcolonial. Which is not to say that Marlow as a character is in any way static; as we have already seen, however much in passing, the processes by which he encounters the frontier of Otherness; but while Conrad, through the experiences of his characterized narrator, steps back from the brink, Harris takes us across, fissuring oppositional lines as we breach the multiple realities of a postcolonial world.

To better understand the nature of this frontier, this opening into the postcolonial, we might consider Harris's own first encounter it; the passage is from Harris's own account of his first expedition into the interior of Guyana:

> I had penetrated 150 miles. It seemed as if one had traveled thousands and thousands of miles, and in fact had traveled to another world, as it were, because one was suddenly aware of the fantastic density of place. One was aware of one's incapacity to describe it, *as though the tools of language one possessed were inadequate.*[15] (emphasis added)

Certainly the resemblance to the crisis of language we see in *Heart of Darkness* is striking; like Marlow, Harris here lacks "the tools of language" to adequately contain the reality of his experience. Yet faced with this and other encounters with the Guyanese interior, Harris is eventually able to construct fictional narratives that can begin to represent the "fantastic density," what for Marlow is clearly the daunting difference, of this other reality. Which is not to say that Harris's fiction can remotely be called 'realism'; on the contrary, it

is paradoxically to the extent to which Harris's fiction diverges from Western conventions of realism that it succeeds in representing Guyana's reality of place: "All this seemed less to do with the medium of place and more to do with the immediate tool of the word as representing or signifying 'place'" (Whb 58).

The impossibility of homogenization or suppression of the Other, then, can sometimes be seen as threatening and sometimes as liberating, depending of course upon context, subject positions (who is doing the suppressing or liberating or whatever), and so forth; and both of these possibilities coexist more or less simultaneously in *Heart of Darkness*. There are, accordingly, at least two ways to articulate this limit, this threshold of 'same/Other': in the empirical sense, the taxonomic sense of a field or area that is too large or unwieldy to adequately address under a given heading; and in a poststructurally informed sense of play, in which totalization is meaningless not because of the inadequacy of a finite discourse to cover or delimit and infinite area or field, but rather because of the infinite substitutability of a finite field. Or in Derridean terms, totalization is useless not because an area is too large, but because it is *missing* something: a center or transcendental signified that would arrest and limit the play of substitutions/differences. It is precisely this burgeoning realization in *Heart of Darkness* of a decentering of the discourses of empire, and the subsequent oscillation between desire and fear, interrogation and withdrawal, which places the text on the postcolonial frontier of Harris's title.

In the essay from which I cite this passage, Harris goes on to discuss his interest in critiquing what he calls the "static cultural imperative" (Whb 65) of Western thought; what this project entails, he tells us, is the constant calling into question of established (or rather imposed) modes of thought, structures that deny the polyglot nature of postcolonial reality. There is much in this very valuable essay (much more than I am able to include) that could be usefully discussed here; the passage I will cite, however, is especially relevant for Harris's reference to texts that contain the seeming roots or origins, if we may be given leave to make provisional use of such a problematic term, of such a cultural critique:

> One would have to turn to Melville to sense the beginnings of this kind of thing in the novel, to a poet like Coleridge, *or a novelist like Conrad*. It is something that is impertinent to the homogeneous novel, though immensely consistent with the subjective crisis of twentieth-century man [*sic*]. (Whb 61, emphasis added)

Here we may begin to read, if not anything so naively fixed as an essential origin (a "without-Conrad-none-of-this-would-come-to-pass" type of

origin, with its implicit privileging of Conrad's fiction at the expense of those postcolonial writers who followed), then at least a place or instance where a frontier may have been breached; we may, that is, begin to glimpse the general location or event where this rupturing of the ontological frontier of the post-colonial may have occurred. If this is so, then questions of homogeneity and those elements that might be "impertinent" to it assume a most radical significance: Why, for instance, assuming the existence of such a thing as a "homogeneous" novel (for even in Harris's example of Jane Austen a case may be made for any number of subsumed others), is a critique of this type of fiction equated with crisis?

An answer to such questions may lie in the very terms 'impertinence' and 'heterogeneity,' in what such terms might imply. In Austen, to return to Harris's example, we find Otherness very carefully bracketed, subsumed within the patterns and premises of the narrative; by so doing, the text achieves a kind of sophistic homogeneity, specious because the monolithic exigencies of such texts attempt to belie or mask the existence of others who nevertheless are always already there. The success of any act of "impertinence," then, lies precisely in its interrogation of purportedly homogeneous texts, in its ability to call into question texts that attempt to conflate their others under the oppositional logics of sameness; it is a question, in other words, of *exhuming* difference, of producing or finding a fissure in the construction of sameness through which its previously interred others may emerge.

The fact that such fissures are more readily apparent in texts such as *Heart of Darkness* is illustrative of their latent heterogeneity—of their proximity, to the margins/frontiers of Otherness that the literatures of postcolonialism are now beginning to attain. It is, in short, simply not enough to say that "*Heart of Darkness* is overdetermined" or "*Heart of Darkness* is too 'loaded' to work with"; that is, it is not a simple matter of opposing some other, more contemporary or less studied discourse to the 'less enlightened' work of a Conrad or Kipling (to name another similarly maligned body of work) in the name of a postcolonial canon or aesthetic, but of rigorously and constantly interrogating the concepts and conditions from which such texts arose. In order to better understand the situatedness of these texts, where they stand in relation to both each other and their shared frontier of Otherness, we might look to this instructive passage from another of the writers mentioned in Harris's essay, one whose engagement with Otherness, however inexpert, predates Conrad's:

> As it must not, so genius cannot, be lawless: for it is even this that constitutes it genius—the power of acting creatively under laws of its own origination. How then comes it that . . . whole nations have combined in unhesitating condemnation of our great dramatist [Shakespeare], *as a sort of*

> *African nature,* rich in beautiful monsters, as a wild heath where islands
> fertility look the greener from the surrounding waste, where the loveliest
> plants now shine out among unsightly weeds and now are choked by their
> parasitic growth, so intertwined that we cannot disentangle the weed
> without snapping the flower?[16]

Without embarking on a detailed dismantling of oppositions here (and there
are plenty: 'nature/culture,' 'domestic/exotic,' 'civilized/barbaric,' etc.), we can
see how far removed this language is from Harris's postcolonial sensibilities
(and even from Conrad's own colonial aesthetic). The most damning thing we
can say about such a statement, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's well-known
defense of Shakespeare, is that it denies Africa a teleology; that is, the most
striking opposition at work here is one privileging Shakespeare's 'ordered' (i.e.,
homogeneous: better because, contrary to the critics, Coleridge implies,
Shakespeare's discourse is *all* ordered green and flowers and *no* chaotic waste or
weeds) cultivated representations of a Western nature over an allegedly aim-
less, entropical African wilderness. The obvious premise, the subtext behind
Coleridge's analogy, is of Africa as a wilderness lacking order, wanting for the
'disentanglement' of an enlightened (because European) civilizing plan; and it
is precisely this kind of rhetoric that contributed to the founding of the notion
of the 'civilizing mission' of European imperialism, the "great cause" of which
Marlow, however sardonically, believes himself a part.

　　Upon confronting the wilderness himself, however, Marlow finds it to be
less passive than he may have originally believed:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of
> the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were
> kings. An empty stream, a great silence, and impenetrable forest. . . . And
> this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. *It was the stillness
> of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.* (*HoD* 48–49,
> emphasis added)

Marlow goes on to describe the jungle's "vengeful aspect" (*HoD* 49), a dimen-
sion of silent rage that is coherent and palpable; for him, then, the jungle *does*
have a sense of purpose—and it is decidedly malevolent. That Marlow experi-
ences the force of an African nature in this way, moreover, aptly illustrates both
his realization of a representative Otherness and his perceived oppositional re-
lation to it. Because although Marlow has, by this point, realized a
margin/frontier of Otherness, he remains wedded to one side of an opposi-
tional 'rational' mentality, and thus cannot but shrink back in foreboding at the
possibility of rupture.

Finally, we come to Harris's Guyanese forest, where the vital multiplicity of Marlow's fears (and of which Coleridge cannot even conceive) begins to manifest. This passage comes relatively early in the text, before the boat crew's own experiences of transformation:

> The solid wall of trees was filled with ancient blocks of shadow and with gleaming hinges of light. Wind rustles the leafy curtains through which masks of living beard dangled as low as the water and the sun. My living eye was stunned by inversions of the brilliancy and the gloom of the forest in a deception and hollow and socket. (*PP* 28)

And:

> A sigh swept out of the gloom of the trees, unlike any human sound as a mask is unlike flesh and blood. The unearthly, half-gentle, half, shuddering whisper ran along the tips of graven leaves. Nothing appeared to stir. And then the whole forest quivered and sighed and shook with violent instantaneous relief in a throaty clamour of waters as we approached the river again. (*PP* 28)

Clearly there is a profound transformation, one of both mimesis and teleology, which takes place between Marlow's narration and this one. Unlike both Coleridge's perception of mere disorder and Marlow's vision of a monolithic brooding, Harris's depiction reveals a multiplicity of life that contains the previous descriptions as it surpasses them; for while this forest is, certainly, at least as perilous as the one portrayed in Conrad's text, it represents with equal clarity the possibilities for a new and heterogeneous community—one that surpasses binary perceptions of the world in order to embrace all manner of paradoxical realities. Indeed, the characters' reactions of "surprise and terror" (*PP* 29) are fleeting ones, and by the text's final pages they embrace "the inseparable moment within [them]selves of all fulfillment and understanding" (*PP* 116) that comes with the overcoming of fears and the crossing of frontiers. To call this an 'ending,' however, would be misleading; for the breaching of frontiers—and the accompanying irruption or emergence of discourses once kept suppressed—is always a provisional, open-ended business, and we must, after all, continue to resist the monolithic imperatives of completeness and closure. What now remains addresses, however cursorily, is the future of the frontier, of this postdeconstructive moment of fissure.

Let us end with a more informed, a more useful pair of questions than the question with which we began: What form(s) can this postimperialist literature yet take? Can we, after all, write and read a new and radical postcolo-

nial literature that moves beyond the oppositional logic of the Western *natio,* which escapes the self-defeating reductions of 'us' and 'them'? We can begin to address these questions by saying that the fissure to which I have been referring must begin not in the center (as the center is infinitely substitutable) but on the margins. But even this is not enough, for what has in the history of empire been written and read as the margin must come to be known as something else:

> To think of ourselves as marginal or marginalized is to put us forever at the edge and not center stage. The word *margin,* however, has another meaning which I prefer to think of when it is used as a descriptive term for managed peoples—it also means frontier. And when we think of ourselves as being on the frontier, our perspective immediately changes. Our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead which we are about to uncover—spaces in which we can empower ourselves.[17]

The substitution of 'frontier' for 'margin' seems, as Marlene Nourbese Philip points out, harmless enough; it would seem, additionally, to represent a mere continuation in what has been an endless series of substitutions of center for center. The implications inherent in such a radical shift, however, are both profound and inescapable; for what it implies is nothing less than a complete reinscription of positions, literally a *turning away* from the homogeneous totalizations of the past. And if we cannot yet see where the frontier may lead us—what this "undiscovered space and place up ahead" might turn out to be— we have at least found a place to begin, a space or index from which to start reading and writing a future for Africa, the Caribbean, and the rest of the postcolonial world which may reconcile Harris's term 'meaningful paradox' to its contradictorily coherent parts.