

Negation of Africa through Local Metonymy in Heart of Darkness

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a text that expresses concern with Belgian and British imperialism in the Congo Free State. While the work focuses on the mental and physical brutalization of the colonizer, and to a much lesser extent of the colonized, it also, perhaps unwillingly, participates in what David Spurr calls negation by metonymically approximating the exotic nature of the Congo to be representationally equivalent to the “natives” of that land. Some may identify the aestheticism of the narrative as impressionistic. Yet Conrad’s purpose in using anthropomorphic and dendromorphic tropes is to invent local metonymy between the s and the surrounding land. The blurry mixture of jungle and limbs creates an effect of negation where the people of Africa are indistinguishable from the creeping vines, the lingering mist, the shifting shadows of the foliage—that is to say, the dramatic backdrop of the story.

The frequent occurrence of anthropomorphic vegetation is an important building block of Conrad's rhetoric. Marlow will note in passing that a "bush began to howl" (132), or "as though the mist itself had screamed" (123), or "...the bush around said nothing, and would not let us look very far..." (116). These three instances of anthropomorphism share the common purpose of assigning a human mouth to the natural world, such that nature may “howl” or “scream” or “say”. In fact, nature's inclination for human communication is so pronounced in this world that when Marlow overhears two company men talking about Kurtz and the fate of the forest, he imagines the possibility of the forest verbally responding to the colonizers' appropriating claims:

I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river -- seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of

its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence. (112)

The passage implicitly claims that the land is in possession of a face and a heart, which implies animal life; that death lurks in the forest as a “hidden evil”, which implies intent; and that the forest is expected to respond to human taunts. This dialog with nature is also frequently linked with Kurtz: “But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know...” (152). Conrad understands the African nature as a sentient and antagonizing threat to the colonizer. Nature is a force that will gaze into the soul of men, uninvited.

Ill-intent dominates the attitude that this sentient environment generally assumes. For Marlow, the African landscape represents a journey back in time, “when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings”, and the water-bound traveler is lost in this foreign land trying to find his way through the “mob of wooded islands” (113). The words “riot” and “mob” assign aggressive anthropomorphic features to the natural landscape of Africa. The forest and the river, set on “terrible vengeance,” are physically plotting to destroy the white colonizers by threatening to engulf the steamer and by emitting arrows, limbs, and howls from their depths: “The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return” (116). Conrad is also concerned with the tendency of the forest to swallow things. As he describes the Inner Station, Marlow notes that “...the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background.” Here, the overgrown vegetation and the idea of burial create the desired effect. In describing the absence of an enclosing fence or railings, Marlow makes the matter-of-fact comment that “of course

the forest surrounded all that" (143). Whereas the forest's voracity is implicit in many of the passages, here, Conrad wants to make sure that nature's intentions to devour all things surrounding it are explicitly understood. In this sense, the natural features of the land are active participants in Marlow's passive communion with Africa. Given the consistent characterization of nature as an anthropomorphic force, it might not be hyperbolic at all to say that nature is a more prominent character in Marlow's vision of Africa than are all the indigenous peoples of the land that he encounters.

The existence of the aboriginals in Marlow's vision of Africa is closely linked with nature. Just as the physical boundaries of the Congo Free State define which groups of people in the African continent may be labeled Congolese, for Marlow, the African people are only conceivable in the environment that surrounds them—in the Congolese jungles. Accordingly, the only way in which the people of the land can be described is through the language of nature. In that sense, the people of the land are not independent of the land, but are merely a subset of it. The metaphor of the forest having engulfed the people is indeed congruous with this vision of the natives. The sentence "...the swift shadows darted out on [*sic*] the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace" provides continuity for two metaphors: That African aboriginals physically come out of the earth, and that they are in collusion with their maker, the African soil, to engulf the steamer whole (158). In another instance of this metaphor, Marlow recalls the relationship between the natives and the forest: "...as if the forest that had ejected these beings so suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration" (156). Shortly before that, a similar sentence understands the natives "as though they had come up from the ground" (154). In this continuous stream of metaphors, Marlow establishes an inheritance relationship between the land and the people. Since the natives are "ejected" from the land, they inherit the qualities of the earth that make Africa

such an incomprehensible and mysterious adversary to the colonizer. The African people, in this vision, are more like the earth and the trees and the river than they are like human beings.

The rhetorical thrust of the novella can be understood by combining Marlow's two perceptions of Africa: The anthropomorphic forest and the dendromorphic natives. Once the two elementary actors in the story (nature and man) are indistinguishably tangled, the rhetorical objective of negation emerges. Conrad reductively clumps the natives and the land into one object by creating a local metonymy between the two. In various passages in the text, bushes, leaves, and branches—the metaphoric limbs of the flora—get confused and intertwined with human limbs: "a face amongst the leaves on the level with my own, looking at me very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement..." (131). Notably so, the descriptions of human limbs in the text are always accompanied by glimpses of foliage: "...we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage" (116). These passages not only reinforce a textual proximity, a contiguity, between the forest and the natives, but also avoid referring to the natives as individuals by making use of synecdoche, where body parts become sufficiently descriptive of the whole. Long catalogs of human body parts are thrown together with "tangled gloom" and always "under the droop of motionless foliage". This metonymic linkage effectively negates the existence of African inhabitants of the land. The natives become mere "black shapes," like the shadows of trees, "clinging to the earth, half coming out," but half concealed behind the "veil" of the forest (85). Once again, African people are born out of the earth and are intricately linked with their green surroundings. In Conrad's vision of Africa, "dark things," shapes, and

shadows are surrogate descriptors for the aboriginals. While substituting a shadow for a man would be a common enough metonymy in Western writing, Conrad's use of darkness creates a second layer of contiguity, localized to the novella, between the natives and the land. By representing the limbs and the shadows of the natives as indistinguishable from the natural features of Africa, Conrad gradually forces the reader to understand the two actors of the Congo metonymically. In effect, Conrad tries to erase the abrupt discontinuity between vegetation and man by making man more like vegetation, and vegetation more like man. The result is the negation of both man and nature. Accordingly, nature is transformed into a treacherous plotter, a hungry force eager to swallow all of its surroundings, and man is transformed into a simple shadow of nature, the colluding offspring of the land. Neither of the two has an existence of its own. In fact, the reader becomes trained to see the two as the same.

The metonymic existence of man and nature is further complicated by a recurring metaphor of introspection. Marlow uses the adjective "pensive" three times in the novel, with each instance having a connection to the other two. In describing the cannibal on the steamer, Marlow recalls that the man "leaning his elbow on the rail, looked out into the fog in a dignified and profoundly pensive attitude" (124). In this case, a pensive disposition is attributed to a native. The second instance of the word occurs in the forest: "...streams of human beings—of naked human beings—...were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility" (154). Here, Conrad defines the natives as "streams" pouring out of a "pensive" forest. Pensiveness in this passage serves as a quality of the forest, while the aboriginals are likened to the endlessly flowing nature of the river. Further, Conrad reinforces the interchangeability of pensiveness between human and natural actors by describing Kurtz's mistress: "And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the

immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul."

Evidently, the wilderness, capable of self-reflection, gazes into its own soul by looking at Kurtz's mistress. Here, the African becomes an image of Africa. Thus, Africa and the African are not only contiguous, but rather they are the part and the whole. At this instance in the text, the local metonymy between nature and man breaks down and turns into synecdoche. Man ceases to be loosely related to nature in an indistinguishable sort of haze. Instead, the African man is pronounced a basic substituent of nature.

Synecdoche has a significantly narrower focus than does metonymy. Where the metonymic association of man with nature indicates a general proximity, the synecdochic discourse suggests a hierarchy. When man is a subset of nature, he must logically inherit a subset of his parent's characteristics. When Conrad appears to talk in impressionistic language about the Congo River, the forest, or the lingering mist, he is representationally talking about the natives of the land. Implicitly then, the Congolese are ascribed the unpredictable, overhanging, brooding, hungry, and mysterious qualities of the natural landscape by their metonymic and synecdochic relationships to the land. Likewise, when Conrad negates the history of the African continent by citing the primeval appearance of the forest, he is implicitly suggesting that the people of that land have no history either. This intra-textual form of synecdoche effectively amplifies the rhetoric of negation by reducing the African people to the level of natural scenery. Consequently, Africa in its primordial vegetation is not only devoid of Western features, such as cities, libraries, and policemen, but it is also empty of real inhabitants. Africa, in its beckoning emptiness, is asking to be colonized.

References

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