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THE RESCUE: CONRAD, ACHEBE, AND THE CRITICS

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I am interested in touching upon numerous concerns raised by *Heart of Darkness*, all of which radiate around the fraught issue of race and its construction in the novel. For many Conadians, this issue boils down to the charge of racism leveled against the novel, and Conrad, most prominently by Chinua Achebe. Achebe wrote his essay now over twenty years ago. Since it was published, there have been several responses that have apparently revealed the many problems with his argument to demonstrate solidly its ineffectuality.1 Many of these responses are developed in terms of an opposition between the African author who speaks out of his “race”—therefore only with hostility—and the critical expert—the “objective” European critic. These responses are therefore mounted in terms of Achebe’s “misrepresentation” of Conrad’s text; in terms of Conrad’s difference from other European authors at the time; and in terms of the invalidity of bringing a contemporary understanding of race and racism—assumed uncritically to be a progress over the past—to bear on a text of the 1890s. First, I want to unravel some aspects of these responses and examine the structures they rely on. Next, I want to ask why, given the apparently extremely ill-thought-out bases of Achebe’s argument, do Conadians continue to “answer” him?2

My point of entry into the discussion of race in *Heart of Darkness* is not an attempt to lay to rest the question whether or not Conrad was a racist, even if such a project were possible. So, I do not intend to work through Achebe’s specific charges and the responses to them with the aim of showing the rightness or wrongness of either. Instead I want to use the responses to Achebe’s essay in order to enter a different kind of discussion, one that will enable us, by our addressing the assumptions behind these critiques, to view his charge of racism from a fresh perspective. I should clarify immediately that the essays I am considering here are those that choose to respond to Achebe directly and not the many other works that address race, empire, and colony in increasingly more novel and challenging ways.3 I should also clarify that throughout
Let us now glance at some of the responses to Achebe. There are many, many essays that set out to undermine Achebe's reading. Here I will focus chiefly on Hunt Hawkins's "The Issue of Racism in Heart of Darkness" and also Cedric Watts's "A Bloody Racist: About Achebe's View of Conrad." Hawkins's essay is short, with a series of "defenses" of Conrad, and utilizes all those features that we see in other responses to Achebe as well. His essay is therefore a sort of ur-example of the kind of approach I am interested in examining and offers me a convenient anchor through what follows next. Watts's essay, too, is an important response to Achebe, a fact well-underscored by its inclusion in the Critical Assessments series edited by Keith Carabine.

The main perspective that critics use to frame their response to Achebe is the idea that he reduces the complexity of Conrad's novel by his mean-minded appraisal of its construction of race. Hawkins's essay begins with this point, although he arrives at it after granting Achebe some validity. Hawkins says that an argument such as Achebe's brings "a fresh perspective to Conrad studies," carries "a measure of truth," and that "the image which Conrad projects of African life could hardly be called flattering" (163). In the very next sentence, though, Hawkins goes on to say that "it is overly severe simply to write Conrad off as a racist" (163). Instead, Hawkins suggests that a better understanding of Conrad's "complexity" can be reached by "studying the series of defenses which are, and should be offered on his behalf" (164-165). Immediately, then, before we even begin the critique of Achebe, a certain structure has been put in place. This structure posits Achebe and his position as "simplistic" against which is pitted the complexity of not only Conrad but the Conradian critic responsive to this complexity and therefore one able to reproduce it in his reading. Conrad and the appropriate critic then join forces in order to undermine Achebe's reading.

How indeed does Hawkins arrive at the charge that Achebe "simply writes Conrad off as a racist"? If indeed Achebe were doing so, would he spend the better part of an essay on the enterprise? Would he not dismiss Conrad as he does other writers, for instance, and thereby write Conrad off? In fact, I would suggest that because Achebe cannot simply write Conrad off as a racist, he writes his critical essay in the first place. My summary of Achebe's essay earlier demonstrates, I think, that because Achebe takes Conrad and his work seriously, no such simple "writing off" is possible at all. Further, Hawkins's swift but certain move to reduce Achebe's essay to a simple "writing off" illustrates the point Achebe tries to make in his essay: that Conrad's place in the canon of high-literature is so secure that it blinds the reader and critic to the operations of racism in the text. It seems that in mainstream Conrad
criticism, a charge such as racism can only be approached as a sign of a simple reductive reading as opposed to a valid approach, one amongst many, surely, but nevertheless valid, that a critical reader might bring to the novel.

In a similar vein, Cedric Watts’s argument is peppered with statements that essentially reduce Achebe’s position to simple-mindedness. So, Watts says: “In Things Fall Apart, Achebe showed himself capable of fine discriminations; it is a pity that that capacity appears to have been eroded by bitterness” (406). Other comments such as “spleen has clouded his judgement” or that Achebe is “unable to perceive” (410) only perpetuate a structure in which the critic who sees racism as a valuable charge is reduced to being blinded by external pressures so that the complexity of the text, and indeed of its possible readings, is evaded. Why is it that the charge of racism has to be reduced to a simplification as indeed no other kind of critical approach does? How many papers have we all read on Heart of Darkness with titles such as “Marlow as Buddha: Wisdom or Perversion,” or “Marlow’s Journey to Hades,” or “Colour Imagery in Heart of Darkness,” or “The Heart of Horror” or even “The Art of Horror” etc.? Why is it that all these works and their limited interests can be seen as contributing to the body of knowledge on Heart of Darkness without it being necessary to dismiss the readings as simplistic? Why, then, is racism seen as the sole issue that reduces the text as opposed to being one valid perspective on certain aspects of the novel?

To develop further the “simplicity” of Achebe’s argument, critics resort to another gesture familiar in almost all critiques of Achebe’s essay. This gesture relies on the use of another “Third World” writer or critic, with a view opposed to Achebe’s, to suggest that his perspective is indeed mean-minded. Hawkins, therefore, relies on the Kenyan novelist Leonard Kibera, who says “I study Heart of Darkness as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa” (Hawkins 64). Further on in the essay, Hawkins quotes the positive comments made by the Sri Lankan critic D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke and the black South African Ezekiel Mphahlele as additional evidence that Achebe’s view is jaundiced. Similarly, Watts says, “I have taken heart from my acquaintance Lewis Nkosi, the black playwright and critic, who has worked on Conrad with me at Sussex” (405). What is the interest in quoting other “Third World” voices here? The argument is unstated but is in fact quite clear. Other “Third World” writers, all immediately assumed to have a critical understanding and interest in questions of race and racism, do not think Conrad racist. Therefore, Achebe is hostile and blinkered. What is troublesome in this sort of move is the essentializing of race the gesture relies on. Basically, this essentializing suggests that only blacks and browns can address meaningfully what is or is not racist. Therefore, since several “colored” folk have found Conrad praiseworthy, Achebe’s position is by no means valid. This strategy enables an evasion of Achebe’s argument while his position is undermined by pitting one Third-World voice against another, and where it is already clear which perspective we are supposed to find limited.

Let us consider some of the assumptions that go into such a move. I think it is clear that the evocation of Third-World voices is necessary for these critiques because all folks from the Third World are supposed to be interested in and critical of issues of race and racism. They are also supposed to, instinctually, have greater access to these nuances. The issue of racism, therefore, is made into an instinctual field, an issue that is felt or unfelt depending on the color of the critic. Questions surrounding racism are thus denied any scholarly validity: if color determines one’s knowledge then surely the realm of research and study in understanding racism has been effectively bypassed.

Watts says: “Achebe is black and I am white. . . . There seems to be an insinuation, as Achebe proceeds, that whites are disqualified on racial grounds from judging the text” (405). Where is this insinuation in Achebe’s argument? Yes, Achebe suggests that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its operations are completely missed in a text such as Heart of Darkness. But from this point, how do we get to the insinuation that whites are disqualified from judging the text? To my mind, we don’t. Instead, it seems to me that Achebe presents his argument precisely in order to jostle the white establishment into a consideration of race that would allow them to see its operations even in texts considered high literature. But a move such as Watts’s, I think, perpetuates a dangerous distinction between black and white and virtually implies that there are areas of critical study intrinsic to different color groups. Surely if Achebe is arguing that only blacks are qualified to comment on race in Heart of Darkness, there is no room at all for any kind of dialogue or debate and he might just as well not have bothered writing his essay at all. This essentializing of racial difference and the critical knowledge it apparently brings in its wake only makes it impossible to disagree with Achebe’s charge that the West produces and reproduces a racial “Other” against which it can profitably measure itself.

Further, when white critics say, as some do, that they are not equipped to talk of race because they are white, an absolute and final marginalization of the issue is being undertaken. A tremendous and dangerous abdication of responsibility is going on here. Not only is whiteness also a construct, but much recent critical work addresses this construction in ways which allow access to the cultural and sociological pressures that determine it. So, certainly the very notion of whiteness as somehow a given needs to be questioned. And the critic who absolves himself or
herself of the authority for a meaningful engagement with the question of race is the critic who refuses to hear an Achebe and who contributes, ironically, to exactly the kind of problem a text such as *Heart of Darkness* poses.

A further defense Hawkins and others offer is that although Africans are presented as negative, so too are Europeans, in fact even more so. What is the nature of this defense? Does the fact that Conrad casts a critical eye upon all he surveys exonerate him from Achebe’s charge, even if we agreed that this eye was impartial in its critique or even in the balance more critical of Europeans? I think not. For surely the point that Conrad has his problems with Europeans and their greed and excesses cannot neutralize the case Achebe and others make regarding his racist view towards Africans? This sort of argument refuses to take on the reasons why Achebe argues for the dehumanization of blacks, which Hawkins himself, as I have pointed out, could agree with in part. If we can agree that Conrad’s presentation of Africans is selectively and specifically derogatory, as his presentation of Europeans is not, then surely suggesting an equivalence between his representations of both groups is deliberately naive.

Another common argument along the same lines states that Conrad proffers many positive comments on Africans which Achebe chooses to ignore. Cedric Watts finds some of these moments in Conrad’s presentation of Africans as “vital” in sharp contrast to the “hollow” Europeans. Watts says that, far from dehumanizing blacks as Achebe suggests, Conrad presents them as “by far the happiest, healthiest, and most vital” (407). However, as much recent work on colonial discourse has shown us, vitality and naturalness are by no means unqualified positive statements. Quite the contrary. Let us remember that this “naturalness” of the “native,” was one of the chief arguments that justified the civilizing mission of the Europeans, for it was this natural vital energy that needed to be reined in. One of the most common tropes in colonial discourse pits the knowledge/power of the European against the natural, instinctual, purely physical energy of the native. How then can we celebrate the vitality of the Africans in the novel?

The most important argument made against Achebe is the one that states that Conrad was ahead of his time. Cedric Watts says: “If Achebe had but recalled that *Heart of Darkness* appeared in 1899, when Victoria was on the throne, when imperialistic fervour was extreme and the Boer War soon to begin, he might have been more prepared to recognize various unconventional qualities of Conrad’s tale” (406). Hawkins argues that Marlow learns to recognize the humanity of the Africans, and that “such a recognition on the part of Marlow, and Conrad, was remarkable for his era” (168). At the same time, this argument also resorts to placing Conrad in his time. Hawkins, therefore, quoting Sarvan, says Conrad “was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age” but he was “ahead of most in trying to break free” (169). Robert Hampson points out that the readers of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, where the story first appeared, would have been, like Marlow’s audience on the *Nellie*, made up of males of the colonial class whose attitudes would be fairly predictable. Hampson argues that Conrad therefore shapes his story with this audience in mind. Let us accept these positions and accept that, given Conrad’s moment, it is hardly surprising that the text reflects certain attitudes and that Conrad, by proffering a critique of at least some aspects of imperialism, undermines any simple celebration of it. However, there are two parts to this argument: the one stressing Conrad’s difference from other writers of the 1890s, and the other stressing the many codes he shared with them. For an understanding of Achebe and specifically his charge of racism, it seems to me obvious that we must consider the second of these positions. For if we accept Conrad’s historical and cultural location, must we not also accept that his views are shaped by that moment and indeed the very ontological possibilities available to him in the 1890s? To my mind, not acknowledging this locatedness, with its constraints that we may now find troubling, is to force Conrad and his text into a dangerous aspecificity.

What is at stake if we agreed with Achebe that Conrad was a racist? Usually, critics tend to find it *reductive* that we bring to Conrad a perspective tinged by our own times and our apparently more progressive attitudes towards race and difference. So, the argument goes, is it not unfair that we read Conrad after, for instance, having read Achebe? Watts says, “Marlow, however, cannot be blamed for lacking the benefit of *Things Fall Apart*, which appeared nearly sixty years after he told his tale” (408). How could one argue against Watts here? But at the same time, surely it behooves us, as readers of *Heart of Darkness* almost a hundred years after it first appeared, to read from our times? If these times are supposed to be an advance over the sort of reductive thinking of a century ago, then surely we should be able to call a work racist because we think it is so, without claiming that some abhorrent and irreparable damage has been done to the institutions of high culture.

But therein lies the rub, because the problem with accepting *Heart of Darkness* as relying on dangerous racist tropes threatens the august institutions of high culture. And this threat, in the twenty years since Achebe wrote his essay, has only increased. How else can we understand the constant need to write back to him? Achebe’s essay on *Heart of Darkness* is by no means the final or best word on the constructions of race in Conrad. Especially now, it is only one work amongst many that deals with the question of race in the novel. Yet he remains the critic to
be responded to, as is amply demonstrated by Phil Joffe’s essay at the 
1991 Poland conference, subsequently published in the proceedings in 
1993. Joffe’s essay, too, approaches the question of race in the terms 
that have been relied on by Conadians since Achebe first published his 
piece. So, we find the familiar polarity between the simplicity of 
Achebe’s position against which is pitted the “complexity of Conrad’s 
text,” a complexity that Joffe’s students also seem to divine, for he says 
students “register the ambivalences and contradictions in Marlow’s dis 
course without concluding that Conrad has a racist agenda” (84). Given 
that Joffe teaches in South Africa, to a diverse group of students, the 
effect this statement is supposed to have is clear.

If indeed the bases of Achebe’s argument are entirely too simplistic, 
why has it not been possible to dismiss his essay entirely? The fact that 
Achebe is a prominent writer is not enough of an answer, for surely there 
are many other instances where prominent writers have written pieces 
that have not been considered worth the kind of debate Achebe has gen 
erated? Not only has this not been the case but Achebe’s argument 
seems to have offered the most commonly used structure for approaching 
race in the novel. Anybody who works on Conrad and/or teaches 
*Heart of Darkness* in the Anglo-American academy (and beyond) is by 
now familiar with Achebe’s 1975 essay and his infamous charge that 
Conrad was “a bloody racist.” While Achebe’s 1978 piece revised the 
phrase to read, “Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist,” the former phrase 
have become an almost as entrenched quotation as Conrad’s own “the 
horror, the horror.” With the inclusion of Achebe’s essay in the Norton 
Critical edition of 1988, Achebe’s perspective has become virtually as 
canonized as Conrad’s novel, so that Conrad and Achebe are often 
taught in the Euro-American academy alongside each other. Now that 
*Heart of Darkness* is taught virtually inseparably from the Achebe es 
say, one could read the inclusion of Achebe in college curricula to sig 
nify an acknowledgment, albeit uneasy, of the significance of addressing 
race when exploring the novella. Yet I would like us to consider the 
inclusion of Achebe’s essay as an instance of the marginalization of race as 
a significant theoretical issue in the teaching of literature.

Achebe deploys a certain train of binary thinking in his essay, with 
the intent, I think, of shocking and deliberately provoking the critical es 
establishment. Ironically, though, his provocation has led the mainstream 
Euro-American academy to engage with the question of race, racism, 
and racial difference in Conrad only in terms that perpetuate and indeed 
strengthen these binary distinctions. Achebe’s essay was presented in 
1975, long before the canon wars and long before postcolonial readings 
gained a firm ground. It is not surprising that Achebe’s essay is deliber 
ately meant to provoke. But how do we explain the obsessive need no
order to bring him back to the canon of "high" art, where "racism" needs must have a more shadowy and contested existence.

Notes


2. I want to thank Jakob Lothe for inviting me to speak on Achebe in Oslo in 1996. I appreciate responses I received there from him, Cedric Watts, Jeremy Hawthorn, and Andrew Roberts.

3. I am thinking here of work such as Chris Bongie’s Exotic Memories (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) or Christopher Gogwilt’s Joseph Conrad and the Invention of the West (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), which approach imperialism, colonialism, and racism by taking into account a range of historical and sociological complexity. It is also only fair to point out that the positions taken by Hawkins and Watts in the essays I discuss here do not represent both critics' substantive work historicizing and politicizing readings of Conrad.


5. The Critical Assessments series makes a significant contribution to the production of a canon of Conrad criticism. The monumental four-volume set contains a separate segment devoted to Heart of Darkness with the following subtitle: "Race, Imperialism and the Third World." The confluence of terms here only underscores my argument later in this essay that matters of "race" are perceived by the critical establishment as separate from "critical," "literary" assessments. Only such an understanding helps me explain the place and position of the "third world" in the title. See Keith Carabine, ed., Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments, 4 vols. (Sussex: Helm Information, 1992).

6. My argument has been sharpened by Hunt Hawkins’ responses to both an oral and written version of this paper. I am grateful to him for the careful reading and commentary he offered on an earlier version of this essay. Our dialogue has led both of us to complicate our readings of Achebe and of the critics. Were we to write our respective essays today, neither of us would do so in their current form/s since we would both be posing different questions.

7. All these titles have, of course, been fabricated.

8. See, for instance, Toni Morrison’s Playing in the Dark (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), a provocative examination of the Africanist presence in American literature. See also Ruth Frankenberg’s work on the construction of whiteness and several recent issues of American Quarterly devoted to the topic.