I read Chinua Achebe's article on Joseph Conrad with much interest and some sympathy. My sympathy rests on an appreciation of his uneasiness in the face of biases that continue to reinforce themselves in post-imperial western establishments. Perhaps the west does have the bad conscience Achebe attributes to it and is seeking, therefore, some assuagement of its guilt.

There are certainly writers, novelists, reporters, as he indicates, who seem predisposed to see nothing but bankruptcy in the Third World and one wonders in what unconscious degree perhaps the west may desire such bankruptcy—cultural and political—to become a fact of history, whereby it may justify its imperial past by implying that imperial order, across centuries of colonialism, was the only real support the modern world possessed, the only real governance the Third World respected.

Achebe's essay on "the dehumanisation of Africa and Africans" by "bloody racists" is, therefore, in the light of western malaise and postimperial hangover, a persuasive argument, but I am convinced his judgement or dismissal of Heart of Darkness—and of Conrad's strange genius—is a profoundly mistaken one. He sees the distortions of imagery and, therefore, of character in the novel as witnessing to horrendous prejudice on Conrad's part in his vision of Africa and Africans.

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.

The capacity of the intuitive self to breach the historical ego is the life-giving and terrifying objectivity of imaginative art that makes a painting or a poem or a piece of sculpture or a fiction endure long beyond the artist's short lifetime and gives it the strangest beauty or coherence in depth.

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.

I believe that this complex matter may arouse incomprehension in Africa where, by and large, tradition tends towards homogeneous imperatives. In South America where I was born this is not the case. The crucial hurdle in the path of community, if community is to create a living future, lies in a radical aesthetic in which distortions of sovereign ego may lead into confessions of partiality within sovereign institutions that, therefore, may begin to penetrate and unravel their biases, in some degree, in order to bring into play a complex wholeness inhabited by other confessing parts that may have once masqueraded themselves as monolithic absolutes or monolithic codes of behavior in the old worlds from which they emigrated by choice or by force.

It is in this respect that I find it possible to view Heart of Darkness as a frontier novel. By that I mean that it stands upon a threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself. Nevertheless, it was a stroke of genius on his part to visualize an original necessity for distortions in the stases of appearance that seem sacred and that cultures take for granted as models of timeless dignity.

There is a dignity in liberal pretensions until liberalism, whether black or white, un_masks itself to reveal inordinate ambitions for power where one least suspects it to exist.

The novel form Conrad inherited is the novel form in which most writers, black and white, write today. For comedy of manners is the basis of protest fiction, fiction of good guys and bad guys, racist guys and liberal guys. Comedy of manners is the basis of realism that mirrors society to identify refinements of behavior that are social or antisocial, heroic or antiheroic. All this is an oversimplification perhaps, but it may help to complement what is less obvious in this analysis.

The novel form Conrad inherited—if I may restate my theme in a more complex way—was conditioned by a homogeneous cultural logic to promote a governing principle that would sustain all parties, all characterizations, in endeavoring to identify natural justice, natural conscience behind the activity of a culture.

It was with such works of disturbing imagination as Edgar Allan Poe’s Arthur Gordon Pym and James Hogg’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner, both published in the 1830s, Melville’s Benito Cereno, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that the logic of human-made symmetry or absolute control of diversity, the
logic of benign or liberal order, disclosed hideous biases within a context of heterogeneous bodies and pigmentations. For the truth was that the liberal homogeneity of a culture becomes the ready-made cornerstone upon which to construct an order of conquest, and by degrees "the horror, the horror"\textsuperscript{4} was intuitively manifest. Conquest is the greatest evil of soul humanity inflicts upon itself and on nature.

Such an admission—such a discovery that sacred human stasis may come to shelter the greatest evil—is a catastrophe for the liberal ego-fixated mind. In it, nevertheless, lies a profound creation myth that may begin to nourish a capacity for meaningful distortion of images through which to offset or transform the hubris of apparently sacred order and to create, by painful and yet ecstatic degrees, a profound, complex, and searching dialogue between confessing and confessional heterogeneous cultures that are no longer the monolithic or absolute civilizations they once were in Africa, China, Europe, India, or the Americas in the fourteenth century and fifteenth century before the circumnavigation of the globe and the fall of ancient America. Creation myth is a paradox. It is a vision of catastrophe and of coherence in depth \textit{nevertheless} within or beneath the fragmented surfaces of given world orders. It is a vision of mysterious regeneration that apprises us of our limits and in so doing awakens a capacity to dream beyond those limits, a capacity for infinite conception of life and of humility, a capacity for complex risk, creativity, and dialogue with others through and beyond institutions inhibited by, or based on, the brute conquest of nature from which creation has recoiled again and again over long ages to leave us and our antecedents bereft and yet intensely aware of the priceless gift of being that begins all over again in the depths of animate perception.

The most significant distortion of imagery in \textit{Heart of Darkness} bears upon Kurtz's liberal manifesto of imperial good and moral light. In that manifesto or consolidation of virtues the "extermination of all the [alien] brutes"\textsuperscript{5} becomes inevitable. Thus Conrad parodies the notion of moral light that devours all in its path—a parody that cuts to the heart of paternalism with strings attached to each filial puppet. (The invasion of Afghanistan in the year of Machiavellian politics 1980 is a late twentieth century version of paternal Kurtz in which the virtues of the Soviet monolith make no bones about the symmetry of Communist power to encircle the globe.)

At no point in his essay does Achebe touch upon the crucial parody of the proprieties of established order that mask corrup-
tion in all societies, black and white, though this is essential, it
seems to me, to a perception of catastrophe behind the dignified
personae monoliths wear. (And, in this context, one is not speak-
ing only of conquistadorial monoliths but of mankind the hunter
whose folklore is death; mankind the ritualist who sacrifices fe-
male children to maintain the symmetry of males, or mankind the
priest who once plucked the heart from the breast of a living vic-
tim to feed the sun.)

These distortions of the human mask (hunter, priest, ritualist)
set their teeth upon African characters like an initiation ceremony
at the heart of the Bush to bite deep as well into the European
conquistador/butcher/businessman Kurtz.

Kurtz’s manifesto, liberal manifesto, affected Marlow as fol-
lows:

All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by and
by I learned that, most appropriately, the International So-
ciety for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted
him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. And
he had written it, too. I’ve seen it, I’ve read it. . . . Seventeen
pages of close writing he had found time for! . . . He began
with the argument that we whites, from the point of de-
velopment we had arrived at, “must necessarily appear to
them (savages) in the nature of supernatural beings—we ap-
proach them with the might of a deity,” and so on and on.
“By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for
good practically unbounded,” etc., etc. From that point he
soared and took me with him. . . . It gave me the notion of an
exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made
me tingle with enthusiasm. . . . It was very simple, and at the
end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it
blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of light-
ing in a serene sky: “Exterminate all the brutes!” The curi-
ous part was that he had apparently forgotten all about that
valuable postscriptum, because, later on, when he in a sense
came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take good
care of “my pamphlet”5

In this context of parody it is possible, I think, to register a
foreboding about the ultimate essence of Heart of Darkness and to
sense an exhaustion of spirit that froze Conrad’s genius and made
it impossible for him to cross the frontier upon which his intuitive
imagination had arrived. Achebe does not appear to have given any
thought to this matter in his essay. My view is that parody tends
to border upon nihilism, a fact all too clear in modern fiction and
drama. Parody is the flag of the death of god, the death of faith,
and without faith imaginative art tends to freeze and cultivate a
loss of soul. Perhaps god has been so conditioned by homogeneous
or tribal idols that freedom of spirit seems a chimera. When I
speak of the necessity for faith I am not referring therefore to
cults of idolatry but to a conviction written into the stars as into
one’s blood that creation is a priceless gift beyond human formula
or calculation of Faustian will.

Conrad’s despair is so marked that one is conscious of infinite
desolation within the very signals he intuitively erects that bear
upon a radical dialectic of form. His parody—like Beckett’s parody
—remains formidable because it cuts to the bone and heart of
liberal complacency. The transition beyond parody that humanity
needs neither Beckett nor Conrad fulfills.

I am convinced myself that there is a movement of transition in
some complex areas of twentieth century literature beyond paro-
dy but such an exploration would require another essay. I shall
give, however, two examples that may suggest a groping transition.
First of all, Wole Soyinka’s masterpiece The Road is influenced, I
am sure, by Conrad in that the unscrupulous professor is psychi-
cally related to Kurtz with the profound distinction that the pro-
fessor’s faith in “the chrysalis of the Word” prepares him for a
descent into the fertility of the African mask, so that he sustains
in himself the wound that kills those who exist in the depths of
place and time. He is, as it were, the involuntary metaphysic that
illuminates outcast humanity within the dissolution of the mask or
persona conferred by the savage god, Ogun, in contradistinction to
Kurtz’s totalitarian loss of soul within the rigidity of the mask
conferred by the hubris of material bias.

My second example of possible transition through and beyond
post-Conradian legacies is a remarkable asymmetric American fic-
tion by the black writer Jean Toomer in his book Cane, published
in 1923, which comprises a series of half-fictions, half-plays shot
through by stream of consciousness and lyrical moments as well as
by short interludes or poems.

The characters appear implicitly clothed in property and land-
capes they wear like bizarre roots and masks to suggest an unfree-
dom of personality locked in polarizations. This perception is
psychic rather than behavioristic and, therefore, it may begin to
undermine the polarizations since it is capable of seeing them not
for what they appear to be—forms of strength—but for what they
essentially are—fragmentations of a community dangerously divided within itself against itself. Paradoxically this psychic apprehension begins to grope for coherence in depth that needs to be grasped ceaselessly by imagery that points through itself, beyond itself, into a visionary comedy of wholeness that can never be structured absolutely. Indeed, where adamant property binds flesh and blood Cane is a revelation of bitterness and conflict since it evokes memories of the auction block on which persons were bought and sold, metaphorically nailed to the cross, as it were, as pieces of property.

I must confess, in bringing this article to a close, that I was rather surprised when Achebe quoted F. R. Leavis in support of his thesis. Leavis of all people! Leavis, as far as I am aware, possessed no sympathy whatever for imaginative literature that fell outside of the closed world of his “great tradition.”

I would question Leavis’s indictment of Conrad for an addiction to the adjective. The fact of the matter is that the intuitive archetypes of sensation and nonsensation by which Conrad was tormented are not nouns. They are qualitative and infinite variations of substance clothed in nouns. Nouns may reveal paradoxically, when qualified, that their emphasis on reality and their inner meaning can change as they are inhabited by variable psychic projections born of the mystery of creation. There is a woodenness to wood, there is also a gaiety to wood when it is stroked by shadow or light that turns wood into a mask worn by variable metaphysical bodies that alter the content within the mask. The livingness of wood is the magic of carven shapes that act in turn upon the perceiving eye and sculpt it into a window of spirit.

Marlow’s bewilderment at the heart of the original forest he uneasily penetrated reveals unfinished senses within him and without him, unfinished perceptions that hang upon veils within veils.

The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leaped, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. . . . A cry, a very loud cry,
as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamor, modulated in savage discord, filled our ears.

At this stage I would like to add to the considerations I have already expressed by touching on the issue of "music" in imaginative literature.

The loud cry and clamor as of an orchestra at the heart of the Bush that come as a climax in the quotation from Heart of Darkness are of interest in the context of the human voice breaking through instruments of stone and wood and other trance formations to which the human animal is subject. Indeed it is as if the stone and wood sing, so that in mirroring hard-hearted dread and rigid desolation they suffer at the same time a disruption or transformation of fixed bias within themselves.

I am not suggesting that Conrad extends this notion into a profound discovery of new form or radical aesthetic but it is marginally yet significantly visible in the passage I have quoted.

Caribbean writers and poets have been interested in the ground of music in fiction and poetry. Edward Brathwaite, Derek Walcott, and others have complex approaches to music. I have intuitively explored in novels organic metaphors of music. In a recent article I confessed to some of these intuitive archetypes and in particular to the pre-Columbian bone flute as a trigger of organic capacity to release a diversity of sombre or rock-hard images in alliance or attunement with phenomenal forests, walking trees, butterfly motifs within singing bodies of evolutionary hope in the midst of legacies of conquest and catastrophe.

I am reminded now, as I write this, of Beethoven's late quartets in which he wrestled with "the intolerable muteness" (as Anton Ehrenzweig puts it) "of a purely instrumental music; he tries to make the instruments sing in a human way. . . . In the end the human voice itself must break in as a symbol of extreme disruption in order to obey a more profound logic."10

NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Asymmetric context implies that the unknowable God mediates between all structures. Thus if one were to say "the sun is a rose" one would visualize—in asymmetric context—an inimitable
or unstructured mediation existing between sun and rose. Both sun and rose, therefore, are partial signatures of—partial witnesses to—a universal principle of mediation, a universal principle of light beyond capture or structure. That principle of mediation at the heart of all metaphor may only be perceived as an untameable force mediating between sun and rose.

Symmetric context on the other hand would imply a binding locality or materiality or physicality in which sun and rose are tameable extensions or symmetric inversions of each other.

5. Ibid., p. 84.
6. Ibid., pp. 84–85.