


Postcolonial romanticisms? The sublime and negative capability in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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1. Introduction

The sublime and negative capability are two aspects of romanticism that might be seen to have postcolonial potential, to be subversive or progressive in ways that speak to interrelated postcolonial concerns about representation, artistic and historical authority, and otherness. The sublime is a manifold and mobile concept, but my interest is in how it might be valued by romanticism and postcolonialism—depending, of course, upon how these categories are constructed—for the ways in which it might allow artists to engage in questions of unrepresentability, to find a means of representation that somehow does not fix or contain what it represents. And what Keats calls “negative capability,” “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (41-42), might suggest an attitude of similar refusal to master the subject. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* we can see, respectively, the sublime and negative capability at work. Much of the progressiveness of Conrad's text, much of its “postcolonialism,” consists in its deployment and modification of the romantic sublime, while for Coetzee a Keatsian “negative capability” seems to be a way of moving towards a postcolonial identity for the Magistrate of the novel and, perhaps, for the writer and reader.

Edmund Burke, in his *Enquiry* of 1757, identifies the “passion” caused by the sublime as “astonishment [...] that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (57). This passion is aroused by the contemplation of something of overwhelming greatness, something beyond human control or comprehension. This greatness consists in such things as obscurity, vastness and power, and gives rise to terror, the ruling principle of the sublime” (58). One of Burke's critical claims is that, bound up with this feeling of terror, the sublime gives rise to a sense of human smallness and incapacity, that it “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning” (57). Burke's insistence upon the incapacitation of reason puts him at odds with Immanuel Kant, for whom the sublime emotion consists in an oscillation between a feeling of displeasure, derived from a sense of the inadequacy of the imagination, and an equally important feeling of pleasure, derived from a sense of the contrasting mastery of reason (115). In relation to what he terms the “mathematical sublime,” the sublime derived from largeness, he describes the process:

our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination], our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power. (106) 

The sublime, thus, as Kant formulates it, “*is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*” (106, original emphasis). Where, for Burke, the sublime asserts the minuteness of the human, for Kant it demonstrates human mastery.

Both the Burkean and the Kantian sublime can be seen to have proponents in British romanticism, but it is the Burkean emphasis upon the loss of rational control that seems to suggest the sublime’s postcolonial potential. Blake’s “The Tyger” is a poem apparently informed by this version of the sublime:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (Pl. 42, ll. 1-4)

The tiger represents unrepresentability itself: the poet cannot fathom what could *frame* its fearful symmetry. The poet’s rational frameworks are certainly not up to the task:

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? (Pl. 42, ll. 13-20)

Like the Derridean “bricoleur” attempting to find an adequate “bricolage” (“Structure, Sign and Play” 360), the poet adopts and abandons the languages of industry and religion, as both prove incapable of capturing the tiger. The tiger’s sublimity ruptures the poet’s modes of understanding, and he can only end the poem by repeating the question with which it opens.

What might be postcolonial about this? In one sense, the poem announces its representational inadequacy. The poet’s authority is fissured: his cycle of rhetorical questions fails to comprehend the tiger and gestures instead towards something that lies beyond the confines of the poem. Postcolonial literature might often be interested in disclaiming its own authority in such a way, in signalling the inadequacy of its own representations. If it is a belief in the validity of certain ways of seeing and thinking that underpins colonial exploits, then for a text to be “postcolonial” it must challenge the authority of its cultural codes. In deploying the sublime, postcolonial writers can make such a challenge, foregrounding the failure of their art to represent the culture, history and consciousness of others. For Jean-François Lyotard

the sublime lies at the heart of postmodernism, being a way of putting forward “the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (“What is Postmodernism?” 46). In “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” he writes of what the idea of the sublime effects:

The artist ceases to be guided by a culture which made of him the sender and master of a message of glory: he becomes, insofar as he is a genius, the involuntary addressee of an inspiration come to him from an ‘I know not what’.
(202)

The artist becomes “addressee” rather than “sender and master.” The potential for such a reversal gives the sublime its postcolonial significance as well. If colonial thought is self-privileging, making of the artist a masterly “sender” of a “message of glory,” the sublime allows postcolonial writers to privilege another sender, just as the tiger is privileged in Blake’s poem. The other becomes the centre, and the speaking self can only bear inadequate witness.

2. *Heart of Darkness*

The failure to bear adequate witness is central to *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow, at one point, tells of “the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life” (113). Africa’s sublimity, in this characteristic description, is evoked by a language that seems incapable of fully articulating what it describes. F. R. Leavis writes disparagingly of Conrad’s “adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery” (177), claiming that he “[makes] a virtue out of not knowing what he means” (180). This “insistence” is in evidence here and throughout the text, but it is part of the sublime effect. Here, as throughout the novel, hyperbole is relentlessly employed as Marlow tries to express what is inexpressible, as a distinctly Burkean sublime is invoked, with its ideas of privation (of sound, here), vastness and obscurity. The speaking self is insignificant next to what is being spoken of: the attempt to contain Africa in language, thus, and in action is always futile. Consider this description of the manager’s uncle:

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. (59)

The incongruity of the “short flipper of an arm” with the “profound darkness” of the land’s heart, this juxtaposition of the ridiculous and the sublime, articulates the absurdity of the colonial attempt to control, as the land, with its “ominous patience,” waits for the “passing away of a fantastic invasion” (59). It analogously articulates how vain the artistic attempt at such containment is, too, the description of the uncle’s “short flipper” arm pointedly failing to describe his hand, so that his gesture is amputated of its symbol of divine, artistic and writerly control.

What is it that lies beyond artistic control? What is it that renders Marlow, to use Lyotard's words, an "involuntary addressee" rather than a "sender"? Jean-Paul Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, describes the other as "a kind of drain hole in the middle of [the world's] being," through which the world "perpetually flow[s] off" (232). The other is a haemorrhage at the heart of our perception through which mastered meaning escapes, effecting "a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting" (231). It is our intuition of the other's subjectivity, for Sartre, which threatens the primacy of our world-view. Marlow struggles with such intuition. *Heart of Darkness* has proved particularly controversial for its depictions, or lack thereof, of African humanity, with Chinua Achebe famously denouncing Conrad as a "thoroughgoing racist" (257). But the spectre of African subjectivity does seem to haunt Marlow's narrative. Perhaps it is displaced onto the African landscape:

Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path, with an empty water-gourd and his long staff lying by his side. A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild. (33)


The death of a native carrier, here, precipitates a description of the sublimity of the surrounding environment. And this sublimity seems to be a projection of Marlow's imagination, with the "Perhaps on some quiet night..." suggesting his sense of the aptness of such a sublime reaction rather than specific memory. Marlow, then, in describing the landscape in such terms, might be obliquely registering the enormity of an African's death. The "decentralization" Sartre considers is apparently effected, in *Heart of Darkness*, by the African continent, but this may be because Africa is intimately associated, in the text, with African human beings. It is the other, thus, that the sublime expresses.

If the colonialist enterprise must often construct the other-as-object rather than the other-as-subject—if it attempts to block the Sartrean drain-hole—Conrad figures that drain-hole right at the heart of his text. What distinguishes the Africa of the novel is its Burkean obscurity, its tenebrous immensity. African subjectivity seems to exist in this powerful sense of inscrutable "presence," a word used by Lyotard in *Heidegger and "the jews"* to denote the thing that the "concealment" of the sublime, or its failure to reveal, lets show just as it conceals (5). In other words, Africa's incomprehensibility suggests that there is something to (fail to) comprehend. To offer such an "unfathomability" might be all that Conrad can do, for to offer a coherent sense of African humanity might be to possess, to master that humanity. It would be as colonialist a gesture as any other, one that might demand an outrage akin to Hamlet's:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery. (III.ii.354-7)

To concede mystery is, in a sense, to disclaim authority.

On the other hand, even if the sublime does register African subjectivity, might there be something worrying about it too? It might suggest the “other,” but what kind of other? Subjectivity and humanity, after all, are two different things. While a sublime African “presence” might suggest the irreducible, it might also suggest the inhuman. Burke was interested in the sublime as it exists in nature, in things directly opposed to the human. The sublime, thus, when associated with human beings, might risk de-humanising them. Certainly, Marlow’s description of a carrier’s death fails to attest to any individuality, as it seems to confuse the human with the landscape the human inhabits. And what might be the progressive obscurity of the sublime, in Conrad’s text, is perhaps counterbalanced by its retrogressive terror. As far as African subjectivity is rendered by the landscape, it is made to have dark, even evil, connotations: “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. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect” (61). This description of the landscape’s “inscrutable intention” might be seen as a kind of recognition of African political culture, but the recognition is at best muffled, as Marlow constructs any such agency as something fearful, savage, and even supernatural. Kurtz, having “gone native,” and having, in Marlow’s eyes, obtained such agency within such a political structure, is a sublime figure: “His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you look down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines” (129). As far as Kurtz is sublime, his self is a force of nature, a source of terror, and somehow divorced from “natural” humanity, from civilisation: the sublime asserts his intractable and fearful difference. And the darkness of Kurtz’s consciousness is associated with Africa. His “evil” is his “Africanism,” his “alienised” subjectivity: this is clearly a problematic notion.

If the first major difficulty in attempting to express the other with the sublime is the dehumanisation it might effect, then the second is rooted in what might be its fundamental paradox: however the sublime is understood to be a rupture in the aesthetic, it ultimately cannot escape its status as an aesthetic.  In the above discussion of Marlow’s response to the death of a native carrier, I suggest that Marlow’s projection of the sublime onto the landscape is an implicit acknowledgement of the carrier’s humanity. But there is, problematically, a sense in which Marlow contains that death, and so masters that humanity, through his imaginative projection. The “Now and then” which begins the passage suggests a callousness, but that callousness, rather than being belied by the displaced representation of the death that the sublime offers, is arguably reinforced by a sense of the sublime’s adequacy as a mode for such representation. Marlow defines the death in his own terms; as opposed to demonstrating a negative capability, he aestheticizes what he sees. If the Burkean and the Kantian sublime are at radical odds, with the former dwarfing the human being and the latter asserting the mind’s “supersensible” power,

when it comes to the sublime in art the Burkean sense of the self's incapacity might become impossible. Marlow is telling a story, and the sublime helps him to do so. It is a tool of, rather than a fetter to, expression.

The close to "Kubla Khan" illuminates this facet of the sublime in art:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song, [...]
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (298, ll. 42-54)

"Kubla Khan" is a seemingly exemplary articulation of the Burkean sublime, a poem whose "subject" is only obscurely caught, whose meaning apparently lies beyond the confines of the artistic frame, the poet, and even language itself. The flashes of a subject not fully grasped create the terror of the poem: the sense created is that the poet is not the master of his own material, and this seems to be the key to the sublime effect. But at the end of the poem the poet becomes the potential source of such terror. There is a sense of the craftedness of the sublime effect: onlookers might think that "he on honey-dew hath fed," but it is actually the poet's own capacity to "build" that would make him seem possessed by something other. And with "Weave a circle round him thrice" there is a consciousness that the sublime in art does exist within bounds; it deftly suggests that the sublime makes only an illusory rupture in the aesthetic, that it is, in fact, an aesthetic of rupture. This re-centralization of the poet suggests that the sublime, in art, might make of the artist not a Lyotardian "involuntary addressee" but one who only generates that illusion, one who is the projector, the masterly "sender" of a thus paradoxical "I know not what."

Translated in these terms, then, the sublime might reduce African humanity, might transform it into an aesthetic. Even more problematically the sublime is, historically, an aesthetic of European provenance: the very fact that there is a precedent in European literary history for the sublime of *Heart of Darkness* might further undermine its validity in representing African human beings. The sublime, thus, might appear to express the "humility" of the writer, while actually enacting a kind of "cultured" colonialism.

How does *Heart of Darkness* move beyond such problems? To me, its fundamental linguistic instability resists the charge of "colonialism." Firstly, Marlow's authority is insecure. By having Marlow narrate the tale, and by having another first-person narrator tell of Marlow's narration, the novel declines to suggest its original authorial presence. Marlow's voice, therefore, has an unsure status. At

certain points his narrative is destabilised by the interruptions of his fellow passengers:

An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who’s that grunting? You wonder I didn’t go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn’t. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! (65)

There is, characteristically, a bizarre confusion of registers through which Marlow’s authority is contested and subverted. He attempts to assert the grand status of his voice, speaking in absolute terms, but that grandeur is repeatedly punctured, in this passage, by the reminder of where Marlow actually is. Marlow attempts to stage his voice as ahistorical—“for good or evil,” “the speech that cannot be silenced”—but the grunting and implied mutterings are an intrusion of the sense of his historical contingency. Any sense of his narrative as a “master-narrative” is dispelled by the insistence of its place in the mundanity of human interaction.

Heart of Darkness as a whole, then, does not suggest the sublime’s adequacy as an aesthetic tool. The sublime moments of Marlow’s narrative are always at least implicitly questioned by the larger narrative frame. Regardless of this, though, Marlow, in weaving his narrative, finds himself struggling to represent his experience. His struggle figures the struggle of the European, and specifically modern, artist to represent a colonial reality that threatens the meaning or validity of European culture, a struggle described by Homi Bhabha as born of “a fine tension between the melancholic homelessness of the modern novelist, and the wisdom of the sage-like storyteller whose craft takes him no further afield than his own people” (123). In *Conrad’s Romanticism*, David Thorburn imagines Conrad to have more in common with Wordsworth than with Kafka (x), but his thesis finds its limitations in its failure to appreciate Conrad’s very real and significant *post-romanticism*. The romantic sublime, as it exists in *Heart of Darkness*, is one of Marlow’s cultural codes, part of his European craft, by which he attempts to account for his experience of Africa and colonialism. But the sublime itself is incommensurate with that experience. Right from the start, the represented frustrates the representational mode:

I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake. Ough! A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. (15)

The “Ough!” subverts the sublime effect, as the banality of bureaucracy encroaches upon Marlow’s aesthetic. Throughout the text the reality of colonialism gives rise to such a crisis of representation, a crisis of thought and language. The ugly ridiculousness of imperial domination, here embodied by a French man-of-war, collapses the sublime idiom:

In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the eight-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. (22)

The sublime is seldom isolated in this novel; it often, as here, finds itself in disconcerting proximity to another kind of “incomprehensible”: the ridiculous. Marlow’s aesthetic projections fail at such moments. The anti-sublime of the man-of-war, its “Pop” and “feeble screech,” threatens to halt his narrative: “nothing happened.”

At the same time, Marlow refuses to allow his representation to be stopped short. His next words resuscitate his favoured aesthetic mode: “Nothing could happen.” In this sense, he lacks negative capability. He attempts to monumentalise, to re-aestheticize, the “nothing” that he stumbles upon: the “Nothing could happen” attempts to lend the moment a sublime veneer of inevitability, of destiny, suggesting that there is a reason beyond perception for the absurd lack of event. Marlow can be understood to be seeking a postcolonial mode of representation, as he attempts to bear witness to the barbarity and the absurdity of colonialism, but he cannot rid himself of the desire to understand, to represent: that “Nothing could happen” is a colonial moment, because he is attempting to bring the “nonsense” he perceives into the realm of aesthetic sense. His narration, in fact, is a struggle to linguistically contain that which has disturbed his language. The oscillation we can witness between Marlow’s perception of the “uncontainable” and his effort to contain, once more, what he has perceived recalls Kant’s conception of the sublime: “the mind feels *agitated* [...] as [the imagination] apprehends [...] an abyss in which [it] is afraid to lose itself. Yet, at the same time, for reason’s idea of the supersensible [this same thing] is not excessive but conforms to reason’s law” (115). If we modify Kant’s terms and consider reason to be language, Marlow’s struggle to articulate exhibits a similar agitation: the “abyss” that he apprehends on one level, that might undermine his often colonialist ways of seeing, he attempts to make conform to the “supersensible” law of his language. But where for Kant the sublime effect consists in the power of that “supersensible” law, in the success of making sense, the effect of *Heart of Darkness* is to do with the failure of language to perform such a redemption. On one occasion, as Marlow discusses Kurtz and the death of his African helmsman, he speaks of Kurtz’s power over “rudimentary,” that is, African, souls, over the “small” or “tainted” souls of the pilgrims, and over his own neither rudimentary nor tainted soul (93). But this “hierarchy of souls,” this “supersensible,” metaphysical construction of his experience, has its meaning undermined as his grief struggles to inhabit such language:

No; I can’t forget [Kurtz], though I am not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him. I missed my late helmsman awfully,—I missed him even while his body was still lying in the pilot-house. Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no



more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him. (93)

Marlow openly affirms that Kurtz, a European and so, presumably, in possession of a “full” soul is, nevertheless, not worth the loss of a mere “rudimentary” soul. His grief implies an equation of European and African humanity, but such words do not permit such an equation. The language of feeling and the language of colonialism are mutually exclusive: is the man he mourns his “late helmsman” or an insignificant “savage,” one of a “partnership” or a mere “instrument”? Marlow’s stuttering attempt to account for his grief is hampered by his colonialist vocabulary; and this vocabulary is hampered by his grief.

Marlow is stumbling as he sees, and in the ineloquence of such linguistic antagonism exists a new kind of sublime. For Kant, Marlow would never, properly, be feeling the sublime emotion because the “supersensible” power of his reason, or language, is never firmly asserted. But Lyotard, in his postmodern re-writing of the Kantian sublime, is concerned not with the idea that the sublime feeling asserts the superiority of the perceiver’s mind, but with the process of mental agitation Kant describes. The sublime, for Lyotard, is about “indeterminacy”: thus, “when it is sublime, discourse accommodates defects, lack of taste, and formal imperfections” (“The Sublime” 201). These are the qualities of Marlow’s discourse: in the formal “defects” that emerge from the unresolved conflict between perception and language, between the “sensible” and the “supersensible,” what might be termed a postcolonial sublime is in evidence, one that, like Lyotard’s, “bears witness to the incommensurability between thought and the real world” (201), one that, in fact, brings thought and “the real world” awkwardly together. The romantic, Burkean sublime is only one aspect of that thought, of Marlow’s Western language, that, in the postcolonial representation of *Heart of Darkness*, is shown, itself, to be lacking, to be incommensurable with colonial reality.

There is, then, a sense in which *Heart of Darkness* itself displays a negative capability that Marlow lacks. Keats writes that Coleridge lacks negative capability because he “would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge” (42). This incapacity is shared by Marlow. Marlow clings to Kurtz’s words because to him they contain knowledge; he craves the belief that they successfully represent the otherwise ineffable colonial experience: “He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man” (132). Marlow never lets go of his urge to represent, to aestheticize; he refuses to be content with doubt. But doubt and confusion are the markers of the larger narrative: the postcolonial sublime that emerges is an aesthetic of indeterminacy, of disruption, an anaesthetic, that is, defined by its refusal to “sum up,” to judge, to resolve its uncertainties. “The horror! The horror!” may seem, to Marlow, a “noble and lofty expression” (128) but to the reader it is a signifier that fails to signify. Rather than being a statement of the

romantic ineffable (Brooks 79), it seems an awkward and absurd articulation of, as Bhabha puts it, the “colonial nonsense” (123-28). The marriage of Marlow’s aesthetic impulse and the rupturing colonial “truth” which that impulse, effectively, yearns to conceal,¹ can only give birth, *Heart of Darkness* progressively suggests, to a kind of nonsense, and thus representation is disturbed at the very moments it attempts to do its work.

3. *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Just as Marlow’s experience of colonialism undermines his language, in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* the “irruption of history” (140) into the life of the Magistrate challenges his thought and identity. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, like *Heart of Darkness*, is a novel concerned with the difficulties of understanding in a colonial, or postcolonial, context. Keats, in anticipation of his later formulation of negative capability, makes a distinction between “Men of Genius” and “Men of Power,” the former, Keats implies, being distinguished by their “Humility and capability of submission” (35). To impose representation, to enforce, in other words, understanding—as Marlow desires to do—is to lack such qualities, and Coetzee, like Keats, suggests such a process of understanding to be an act of power, inevitably analogous to, even complicit with, the colonial endeavour. The Foucauldian identification of knowledge with power is one apparently shared by Coetzee’s novel, and at its opening an association of ways of seeing with colonialism is forcefully implied:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. (1)

Colonel Joll, described here, personifies Empire at its most brutal, with his dark glasses symbolizing his mode of perception, his colonialist gaze. They are literally a “product” of the Empire, a “new invention,” just as the imperial enterprise is enabled and legitimised by the “production” of a way of seeing. Men such as Joll, for example, are imagined as “created” by “the Bureau” (12), as Empire seeks to fix the colonised-as-object, as “barbarian,” and so maintain its own identity as belonging to “civilisation.” Joll’s glasses protect his eyes from the glare of the sun, then, as his gaze does from the glare of oppressed humanity. And he seems to wear them at all times—the novel starts indoors—displaying his dependency upon his dichotomised world-view. It is only at the end of the novel, after the decimation his troops suffer at the hands of the barbarians, that Joll is described without his glasses for the first time, as though the failure of his quest to subjugate the other shatters the “knowledge” which informs that quest.

Ways of seeing, constructions of knowledge, are ways of controlling, ways of maintaining the subaltern *status* of the oppressed as its *nature*, and so legitimising the actions of the oppressor in the

¹ Cf. Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”* (34).

oppressor's mind. Later in the novel, when Joll displays his prisoners, colonialist notions are attached to the barbarians in a brutally literal fashion. The prisoners are linked by a "loop of wire" (101) which runs through their hands and cheeks, forcing them, in order to minimise pain, to move together as a single body: their individual identities are obscured as they are made into an image of uniform otherness.² The phrase "loop of wire" recalls the "loops of wire" of Joll's glasses, directly connecting perception and violence, and when Joll inscribes their shared identity upon their naked backs, writing "ENEMY" with a stick of charcoal in the dust he scatters, that association is emphatically declared. The game is "to beat them till their backs are washed clean" (103). The projection of their status as "enemy," then, is what drives the violence.

Joll, thus, is a figure whose brutality is bound up with his wilful faith in his understanding, in the validity of his colonialist structure of thought. His thought, in its fixity and self-privileging attitude, is ethically dangerous, and it is to such qualities that Keats opposes negative capability:

at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (42)

A year or so later, Keats seems to elaborate upon his thought:

As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character [...] What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet [...] he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body. (148)

The chameleon poet, as opposed to the advocate of an egotistical sublime, has a shifting identity determined by what he encounters rather than by a dominating selfhood. The perceived is allowed to exist on its own terms, as the genius perceiver happily rests in half-knowledge, refusing a Kantian faith in his own reason, and declining to master his subject with understanding. There is an implied critique of knowledge, of truth and thought itself, in such formulations. Robert Eaglestone, following Levinas, suggests that the ethical basis of postmodernism lies in such a critique (187), and, to me, it similarly relates to the postcolonial sensibility that emerges in the Magistrate of Coetzee's novel. The ethical progress of the Magistrate is rooted in what might be seen to be his emergent negative capability.

When the Magistrate is imprisoned, he describes his meditations upon the barbarian girl: "I continue to swoop and circle around the

² Cf. Newman, "Intertextuality, Power and Danger: *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a Dirty Story" (135).

irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her” (79). The Magistrate struggles to empathise with the girl, and Sue Kossew writes, in relation to this image of hunting and capture, that the Magistrate suffers his struggle because he “lacks the language and understanding to translate the girl, who represents the impenetrability of the Other, into a reality” (92). But in what sense do language and understanding “translate” a human being into a reality? On the contrary, does the language and understanding of the self not risk translating the other into an unreality, into, for example, “ENEMY,” or, as in *Heart of Darkness*, an instance of a romantic sublime? The Magistrate’s image of hunting and capture is, in fact, precisely an image of understanding, of comprehension, of apprehension in both (or all three) senses. The Magistrate is worried that his efforts to empathise with the girl in fact make her subject to his understanding, and that he might achieve not a Keatsian identification by which the self disappears as it “[fills] some other Body,” but only a comprehension that makes him the hunter, she the hunted—a version of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. Thus, the Magistrate finds himself at a negligible distance from her torturers (27).

The Magistrate’s self-recriminating psychology, then, is based in his anxiety that his feelings for the girl are to do with a quest for meaning that amounts to a quest for mastery. He admits, “until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (31). He seems aware, however, that such interpretation might be problematic as it imposes an understanding upon the other that emanates from the self. To arrive at an understanding of the girl’s scars is an act that symbolically matches the blinding she suffers at the hands of her torturers, who literalise a metaphor as they rob the girl of her gaze, dispossess her of her capacity to assert her own vision of the world: she cannot see just as, to the coloniser, she cannot make meaning. Similarly, the Magistrate’s desire to read meanings into the girl’s body is a problematic reluctance to perceive her on her own, present terms. The first moment at which the Magistrate confidently asserts his defiance of Empire comes, interestingly, as a simultaneous resistance of the urge to understand, to interpret. It is the reality of the girl’s opaque subjectivity—“I behold the answer [...] offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze...” (43)—that seems to prompt the realisation that ethical behaviour cannot be based in understanding:

No! No! No! I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (43-44)

It is his interpretive urge, “like an old woman reading tea-leaves,” that links him to torturers, that uncovers and itself demonstrates his perhaps inevitable complicity with the work of Empire. His “reaching after fact

& reason,” then, debilitates and illegitimizes the prospect of political resistance.

In a sense, the Magistrate’s opposition is founded in a distrust of the language of meaning. Thus, it is a kind of negative opposition, one that declines to locate itself in any truth, in any ideology, as the Magistrate denies his heroism, asserting his “obscure goal” (77). Consider his outcry at the treatment of the barbarian prisoners:

“No!” I hear the first word from my throat, rusty, not loud enough. Then again: “No!” This time the word rings like a bell from my chest. The soldier who blocks my way stumbles aside. I am holding up my hands to the crowd: “No! No! No!” (104)

The repeated “No!”s suggest an outrage reluctant to be located in a space of language and metaphysics:

“Look!” I shout. I point to the four prisoners who lie docilely on the earth, their lips to the pole, their hands clasped to their faces like monkeys’ paws, oblivious of the hammer, ignorant of what is going on behind them, relieved that the offending mark has been beaten from their backs, hoping that the punishment is at an end. I raise my broken hand to the sky. “Look!” I shout. “We are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself! How—!” Words fail me. “Look at these men!” I recommence. “Men!” Those in the crowd who can crane to look at the prisoners, even at the flies that begin to settle on their bleeding welts. (105)

The Magistrate’s effort to translate his impulsive outrage into language fails. **Words are uncertain:** there is no coherent linguistic position from which he can claim “truth,” and so his attempt to explain himself in terms of ethical or conceptual **ideals—“the great miracle of creation”—is bound to confuse.** His hand, symbolic of the divinity of human reason, is broken, just as his language, his rational vehicle, finds itself fragile, maimed. Even the word “men” only elicits a kind of bafflement from the crowd, as they crane their heads to re-examine the scene. The Magistrate’s halting attempt to bring what he sees into the realm of language is reminiscent of Marlow’s, but far more self-conscious:

The words they stopped me from uttering may have been very paltry indeed, hardly words to rouse the rabble. What, after all, do I stand for besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes, and what do I stand against except the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes? Would I have dared to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? *Justice:* once that word is uttered, where will it all end? Easier to shout *No!* (106)

The Magistrate realises that he could not possibly have shouted “justice” without having undermined his own position. “Where would it end?” he wonders, for real justice would demand more than the humane treatment of prisoners. It would demand the very privileges of civilisation—property, wealth—to be given up; it would demand, in other words, the unthinkable. It would undermine his position in another sense, too: Derrida writes that “one cannot speak *directly* about justice, thematize or objectivize justice, say ‘this is just’ and even less ‘I am just,’ without immediately betraying justice, if not law” (“Force

of Law” 10). To claim “justice” is to enforce its truth, to compel that it be followed, to transform it into that which it is not: a violent concept, a law. It would be to grasp after fact and reason, to invoke a metaphysics of comprehension which, for Eaglestone, defines Western thought and, problematically, “underlies the desire for colonial and economic expansion, the oppression of peoples [...] and the resolution of conflicting claims by putting them into the same language—if possible” (190). Instead, the Magistrate rests with the provisional “no,” exhibiting a negative capability which is the refusal of precisely this “metaphysics,” as it dismisses the claims of knowledge, fact and reason, as he rests with a scepticism about his own moral credentials, discovering the ethically enabling quality of half-knowledge.

In Coetzee’s “The Lives of Animals,” Elizabeth Costello, in her lecture, expresses a Keatsian scepticism about the value of reason, suggesting that it is “neither the being of the universe nor the being of God” but merely the “being of a certain spectrum of human thinking” (23). Her feelings about human treatment of animals are just that: feelings, not conclusions born of a rational process. When asked about the “target” of her lecture, she refuses to enunciate “principles,” responding, “open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (37). The Magistrate and Costello share this wariness of principles: like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, they fear big words. In contrast to reason, Costello puts forward the idea of the “sympathetic imagination,” that which allows us, like Keats’s chameleon poet, “to share at times the being of another” (34). It is out of a critique of the discourse of understanding that comes this more sympathetic, postcolonial attitude to the world. Costello also talks of the writer’s literal cast of mind, seeming to imply the virtue of taking things at their face value (18, 32). It is, it seems, by perceiving things on a more literal level—finding a bed to be a bed, rather than the face of a deeper truth—that the Magistrate can move beyond his crisis of confidence.

At the same time, the suspension of interpretation that this attitude implies cannot be total. It is the “half” of the “half knowledge” of negative capability that is crucial. To completely refuse knowledge is as problematic as a simple faith in knowledge. Costello, in discussing the Nazi concentration camps, claims that “Germans of a particular generation are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity [...] because of a certain willed ignorance on their part” (20). For Costello, it is not only those citizens of the Third Reich who had committed evil actions that are regarded as marked by “a sickness of the soul,” but also those who were in ignorance of those actions: “It was and is inconceivable that people who *did not know (in that special sense) about the camps can be fully human*” (21). A failure to read, then, might equal a complicity with the oppression of colonialism. The Magistrate claims to hear nothing of the screaming from the granary (4), but he later reveals that he stopped his ears (9), and in facing the cruelty of Empire he overcomes this dubious initial refusal, in a sense, to “read.” Attridge’s claim that “the failure to interpret can be as important, and quite as emotionally powerful, as success would be” (48) is certainly true, but Coetzee does seem to insist that resistance to

a status quo involves a degree of reading, reading against the grain, it might even be said. To read the “ENEMY” inscribed upon the barbarians’ backs passively is to fail to recognise an important reality. And the Magistrate’s self-consciously spurious reading of the slips he finds in the desert, which makes them tell a narrative of imperial oppression (108-9), is one of his most subversive acts. Thus, perhaps it is not too much to say that Coetzee demands such an activity of his reader, challenging the reader to recognise the novel’s unnamed Empire as its contemporary South Africa—and indeed as the oppressive forces in the reader’s contemporary world. The interpretive urge must be regarded with a sceptical eye, then, but interpretation is still vital. After all, scepticism itself is a kind of interpretation.

The Magistrate’s negative capability, then, does not debar interpretation, for all thought, all language, deploys, in some measure, an interpretive discourse (Keats “understands” Coleridge in his very formulation of the idea). But Coetzee and Keats both imply the importance of a feeling of the provisional nature of knowledge. Dick Penner suggests that it is a “will to the truth” that saves the Magistrate from his cycle of self-questioning (81), but this not only begs the question (“what truth?”) but also affords the Magistrate a philosophical conviction which he never comes to possess. It is, in fact, the escape from his obsession with what is true that informs the Magistrate’s opposition to Empire, that enables the emergence of his postcolonial sensibility. The Magistrate’s negative capability permits his escape from the historically contingent metaphysics of colonialism, awakes him, in a sense, from the nightmare of history. But that escape is not achieved in an instant, but is an interminable process: language must be interrogated, but that interrogation can never end because language is its vehicle:

This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere. (152)

The Magistrate, here, refrains from projecting his own understanding, refusing to recognise the children at play as his dream (Head 92), as the novel ends not with a moment of epiphany but with an image of process, for that suspension of comprehension, that ethically valuable stupidity, is a road and not a destination.

4. Conclusion

Heart of Darkness and *Waiting for the Barbarians* can both be understood to be texts about the vexedness, or the impossibility, of understanding in a colonial world for a human being seeking to move beyond that world, seeking to think, to behave, or to bear witness in ways that do not repeat or reinforce the colonial activity. Conrad is writing his text from the centre of imperial Europe, and Coetzee writes his as a white man in a South Africa suffering from an apartheid regime at its most oppressive. Both writers, therefore, are perhaps unavoidably implicated in a very present colonial endeavour. As Coetzee says, “you cannot resign from the [master-] caste. You can

imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but, short of shaking the dust of your country off your feet, there is no way of actually *doing it*" (*Doubling the Point* 96). In a sense, then, their texts dramatise, through the struggles of Marlow and the Magistrate—both of whom are more than implicit in empire's work—the challenge of becoming postcolonial, and the sublime and negative capability can be seen to be manifestations of and potential solutions to that challenge. The sublime of *Heart of Darkness* stems from Marlow's failure to frame, and so subverts the fixed understandings of otherness and colonialism that colonialism propagates, and the Magistrate's negative capability is his self-conscious appreciation of the inevitability of such a failure, as he abandons his faith in such fixed ideological structures. But the word "solution" is suspect here. In both texts the versions of the sublime and negative capability that are respectively suggested are about a lack of solution, of resolution: the "postcolonial sublime" of *Heart of Darkness* is defined by its indeterminacy, its refusal to make up for the aesthetic ruptures Marlow suffers, and the Magistrate's negative capability is a doubtful embracing of doubt. Both texts, then, aptly leave us with images of process at their conclusions, with a road that may lead nowhere, and with a river flowing sombre "under an overcast sky—[seeming] to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (146). These words suggest a narrative circularity, seeming to lead us back into the *Heart of Darkness* we have already read.

Is there a point, however, at which stability is achieved? Lyotard writes, "When the sublime is 'there' (where?), the mind is not there" (*Heidegger and "the jews"* 32). But does literary criticism risk bringing the mind back to the unrepresentable? It was suggested, in my discussion of *Heart of Darkness*, that what might be problematic about Marlow's use of the romantic sublime in suggesting an inexpressible Africa is that sublime's status as a Western mode of expression. The text, therefore, ruptures that mode, as a new, more Lyotardian, kind of sublime emerges. But once that new sublime is articulated as such, once it is named the "postcolonial sublime," for example, does literary criticism not risk mastering the disturbance, containing, once more, the rupture in the aesthetic by approaching it as an aesthetic? Kant, writing of the "dynamically sublime," considers that infinity does not rupture our mastery of the world because we find, "in our power of reason, a different and nonsensible standard that has this infinity itself under it as a unit" (120). If, as suggested above, what Kant calls reason can be understood to be language, then what is this unit but the word "infinity"? "Infinity" defies the disturbance caused by infinity, and, similarly, as we utter the word "sublime" we risk stabilising the thing which we imagine it to signify (which perhaps, for this reason, it does not signify at all). Bhabha, in relation to such things as "The horror! The horror!" of *Heart of Darkness* and the "ou-boum" of the Marabar caves in Forster's *A Passage to India*, discusses the "threatened 'loss' of meaningfulness in cross-cultural interpretation," asserting that cultural difference, here, is "the extinction of the recognizable object of culture in the disturbed artifice of its signification" (126). The question is, at what point does that disturbance become part of the

artifice? Perhaps it is when we have a word to describe that disturbance: as we utter the word “sublime” we recognise, once more, an object of culture.

“Negative capability” is a wonderfully self-deconstructive phrase, but it, too, puts a name, in a sense, on not naming. Just as the sublime might be found out to be an aesthetic rather than its opposite, so Keats’s phrase, when used as an approach to another text, might become a philosophy, not an anti-philosophy. To turn the postcolonial sensibility of the Magistrate into this romantic tenet, might, itself, be a colonial gesture, a problematic manifestation of the metaphysics of comprehension that exhibits an urge to understand, specifically, in terms of literary history. If Marlow’s ineloquence serves to mock the social performance of language,³ to call that ineloquence a “sublime” is to reassert the descriptive adequacy of words, and if negative capability is about being in doubt, mystery, uncertainty, and so allowing the perceived to exist on its own terms, it is at least in some measure ironic to use it, extrinsically, to suggest a “truth” about a text.

Bhabha is slippery in his discussion of the “colonial nonsense,” refusing to consecrate its sign with a name: it is, at different times, the Ouboum, the kernel of nonsense, the Horror, the Horror, and the Owl’s deathcall, to name a few. This discourse of “un-fixity,” as it were, (of negative capability?) suggests a reluctance to counteract the disturbance caused by such moments, an effort, even, to mimic that disturbance in critical language. “It is obvious,” Lyotard writes, “that one tries [...] to close [the unrepresentable] again, to subject the thing to secondary repression in turning it into aesthetics” (*Heidegger and “the jews”* 34). Critical language needs to be wary, as Bhabha seems to be, of this tendency. While the sublime and negative capability are words that can have currency in a postcolonial context, then, they are words that also, in such a context, come under great stress.

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³ Cf. Bhabha (124).

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