

The eye and the gaze in Heart of Darkness: A symptomological reading.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Eye and the Gaze in Heart of Darkness: A Symptomological Reading

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In their initial theorization by Freud, symptoms engage the body's performative registers on several levels: they can traverse, for instance, behavioral patterns (as in compulsive gestures or tics), sensate functions (as in dyspnoea), communicative abilities (as in aphonias), and mental processes (as in supervalent thoughts). They are characterized alternately as excesses (as in phobias or obsessions) and absences (as in amnesic gaps), and they are marked by their formal variety, their ingenious refusal to confine themselves to any particular expressive mode of the embodied subject. Symptomology illustrates the ways in which the body's numerous performative registers are inseparable from the linguistic, are enmeshed in the discursive. The symptomatized body emerges as a site of hyper-signification.

Psychoanalysis can be said to narrativize the signifying embodied subject, that is, to construct from its specific symptoms a larger narrative. Several of Freud's case histories suggest that the overdetermined origins of this narrative remain entangled in history and fantasy. Novelistic narratives, often with analogously entangled sources, can also be somatized, conceived of as textual corpora, as discursively materialized bodies that likewise exhibit particular symptoms. Two recent commentaries on *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, have implied that its narrative **[End Page 711]** corpus displays what psychoanalysis might label symptomatic repressions, amnesic gaps. Chinua Achebe has argued that Conrad's text effectively forgets Africa, reducing it to "setting and backdrop . . . to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (257). Frances B. Singh has pointed out that Marlow's story contains a related albeit more explicitly embodied textual elision: in its insistence that the "actual rites, the customs of the same people whom the Belgians were exploiting, are exercises in evil and that knowledge of them should be suppressed," Marlow's narrative unwittingly doubles a material document it partially contains within itself—Kurtz's Report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (272).

Achebe and Singh both hold Conrad more or less responsible for these

repressions, the former characterizing him as “a thoroughgoing racist” (257), the latter maintaining that if Conrad shares most of Marlow’s prejudices, which does seem to be the case, “then *Heart of Darkness* was written, consciously or unconsciously, from a colonialistic point of view” (277–278). My own discussion of *Heart of Darkness* will ultimately supplement this line of commentary on the novel’s colonialistic biases, but it will also deliberately bracket Conrad: not because I do not think he is technically responsible for his own discursive body and whatever ideological weight it carries (and this weight is indeed considerable, given how widely *Heart of Darkness* in particular is taught); but because I do believe, like Singh, who concedes the possibility of unconscious textual agency, that writers have only limited control over intended textual meanings and even less over their reception.¹ Textual corpora are traversed by symptoms that are authored but not necessarily authorized. In illustration of this limited control, we can look at a particular figure within the textual corpus of *Heart of Darkness* itself—the colonialist Kurtz. As I will explain in greater detail later, the narrative inscribes the minimal mastery he has over his own symptomatic discursive self-projections. It also makes clear that good intentions guarantee nothing, that the intended meaning of his African mission never materializes, going errantly astray, as it were. In Marlow’s representation of Kurtz, symptoms speak more readily than conscious intents.

Kurtz is repeatedly and centrally figured as a textual being, as someone whose essence is inseparable from discourse, discourse that becomes a material carapace. In a series of other minor characterological images, the narrative breaks down the distinction between texts and **[End Page 712]** physical embodiments, by linking individual presences to various forms of representation: the Company’s chief accountant has the appearance of “a hairdresser’s dummy” (21); the Manager’s spy is a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” (29), a description that hybridizes a visual simulacrum with a literary and dramatic text; the Russian adventurer’s colorful patchworked attire contains visual residues of the multi-colored map in the Company’s...



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