Imperialist propaganda in politics, media, arts, and hence in the European collective unconscious was extremely effective in conveniently embedding racist and ethnocentric views in the public discourse mainly because it successfully induced fear of the other and, at the same time, evoked a sense of moral and intellectual superiority and entitlement in European society. Peter Forbath thus begins his prologue in *The River Congo*, published in 1977, long after Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and before he could be aware of the heated debate initiated, in part, by Chinua Achebe’s claim that Conrad was a “bloody racist”: “Congo: two sudden syllables beat on the imagination like the beat of a jungle drum, calling up nightmare visions of primeval darkness, unfathomable mystery, dreadful savagery. No other word has quite that power; no other symbol stands more vividly for the myth and magic of Africa than the fabulous river those two barbaric syllables name” (ix). Mr Forbath never mentions what kind of visions and phonetic associations the two syllables of his own last name might bring to life, but in a Conradesque fashion, his book describes the African river as repository of nightmarish reveries intensified by the feverish drumbeat and prehistoric darkness. The name itself, claims Forbath, is “barbaric” and is therefore an apt signifier.

Conrad’s Congo, with its heat, savagery, “unspeakable rites,” and overpowering incompetence, resembles his Costaguana, the imaginary country in Central America, a place tormented by waves of revolutions and weakened by a general ineptitude of its citizens.¹ Both lands suffer invasion by foreign powers: the Belgians (or Europeans in general) in *Heart of Darkness* and “An Outpost of Progress”; Spanish colonizers and Italian immigrants, followed by the English aided with American money in *Nostromo*. Their appearance is, in many cases, detrimental to the development of self-reliance and community building in the occupied territories.
The mechanisms of Belgian colonization resembled those of the British conquest, even though Joseph Conrad apparently was not willing to admit this. Some critics emphasize Conrad’s Anglophilia as a reason for his favoring the British political decisions and actions over Belgian barbarity. Peter Edgerly Firchow remarks that “with certain notable exceptions, Conrad is consistently less well disposed toward German, Russian, Dutch, Belgian, Arab, North American, or Irish characters than he is toward English, Scottish, Malay, or French ones” (Envisioning Africa 6). As Conrad’s biographers noted, the writer’s childhood experience in a country divided between three European powers (and specifically in the territory that was occupied by Russia) shaped to a certain extent his sympathies and dislikes on the world political scene. Conrad portrays both “quixotic fools” convinced of the civilizing (or cosmicizing) mission they are about to perform, as well as those individuals who have no illusion as to the character of the colonizing work in Africa or Central America. But, above all, his characters’ expectations and reactions to the dichotomy between the “civilized” and “savage” and finally their disillusionment and abandonment of their previous preconceptions about the civilizing mission indicate how close to the traditional vision of cosmos and chaos those preconceptions were and how accurately the official motives for the exploitation of Africa and her people correspond to the archaic myth of cosmogony.

Marlow’s Chaos and “Writing That Conquers”

Marlow’s encounter with the colonized land and peoples provokes the “fascination of the abomination” of the exotic, godforsaken land (Heart of Darkness 50); he feels both enchantment and abhorrence. Just as the archaic man stood before chaos, mesmerized and fearful, Conrad’s characters approach the unknown and unexplored land with destabilizing awe. The formlessness of chaos is translated into the shapeless, raw image of Africa, which is equally unknown and indeterminate.

Marlow’s inability to describe and comprehend images stretching before his eyes becomes apparent in his use of dreamlike language and his constant repetition of words indicating incomplete perception. Any territory outside the center, beyond the “cradle of civilization,” manifests “the mystery of an unknown earth” (17), “senseless delusion” (30), “oppressive wonder” (31), and “insoluble mystery” (33). It is a land of a “mysterious sound” (34), “unreal” (46), a place of “absurdity, surprise, and
bewilderment” (50), of “implacable force” and “inscrutable intention” (60), generating dreams, narcotic-like visions, and reveries, populated by “phantoms” (62). Although its narrator is unnamed, a similar voice in “An Outpost of Progress” describes the station as surrounded by “the river, the forests, the impenetrable bush that seemed to cut off the station from the rest of the world” (“Outpost” 4), by the “vast and dark country” (4). Kayerts and Carlier lose their contexts in this new, “chaotic” space, their identities slowly erased in the strange wilderness of Africa, in its fluid and larval state, where even “the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhere. It flowed through a void” (7). They dwell in the “impenetrable forest” (17) and fancy that the earth somehow became “bigger and very empty” (16). Notably, Marlow refers in Heart of Darkness to “the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water” (61–62), the monotonous landscape—“Paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land, through long grass, through burnt grass, through thickets . . . and a solitude, a solitude, nobody, not a hut” (70)—and, consequently, to his desire to “be out of chaos” (68). Here the emptiness of the landscape that is threatening but also full of generative potential clashes with confusing excess—of paths, flora, the sky.

The frequency of such expressions as “impalpable,” “inconceivable” (115), “improbable, inexplicable,” or “bewildering” (126) is the basis of F. R. Leavis’s criticism of Conrad’s “adjectival insistence” (Leavis 179), that is, the writer’s tendency to mystify and occlude his picture of Africa. However, this recurrent image of monotony, impenetrability, and formlessness, and this dreamlike atmosphere enveloping the account of the trip into the unknown establish a sharp contrast between the normal and the abnormal, the civilized and the primitive, cosmos and chaos. It is impossible to belong to both worlds at the same time—traditional societies inhabit the center, and only after conquering and ordering the periphery according to the rules of the center (that is, after cosmizing the periphery) can they discern all the shapes and comprehend the environment.

Conrad indicates that Marlow is incapable of discerning distinct shapes and contours not because they do not exist, but because he encounters obstacles blurring his vision. Marlow often admits that he has to deal with “the blinding sunshine” (65), or “a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night” (101). At times, he is able to discern
“vague forms . . . leaping, gliding, distinct, incomplete, evanescent” (111). He compares himself, in his attempts to maneuver the steamboat, to “a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road” (94)—an association he derives from the other, familiar world, in order to render his bewilderment and disorientation in the new, unknown environment.

Similarly, “a heavy . . . mist penetrating, enveloping, and silent” (22) descends upon Kayerts and Carlier of “Outpost.” They live “like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things” (7). Kayerts feels “as if he had taken a dose of opium” (21), and he suspects himself of “dreaming,” of having “a horrible illusion” (19). Bewitched by Africa, they lose clarity of vision and cannot comprehend the foreign milieu. The implied dichotomy here is that of the real European metropolis and the unreal periphery which should not be granted any ontological or ontogenetic status, let alone political autonomy. In both *Heart of Darkness* and “Outpost,” fog, mist, and hallucinatory visions induced by the weather and the environment are symbols of clouded perception and biased opinions; however, they also indicate a virtual inability to form a clear judgment, a handicap defined as intrinsic to Africa. Conrad, while acknowledging the narrow-mindedness of the characters’ perception, seems to indicate that one of the reasons for this limited vision is Africa itself—its climate, forbidding paths, frantic drumbeat, and overabundant flora. Africa’s blankness, darkness, and formlessness imply non-being, the uncreated space upon which something must be formed. When Michel de Certeau talks about “a colonization of the body by the discourse of power” and “writing that conquers” (*The Writing of History* xxv), he insists that it “will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production” (xxv–xxvi). Conrad’s Congo lends itself to this new construction because of its void suggested through the characters’ and the narrators’ inability to see.

Since Marlow belongs to the world of cosmos, he suspects the unexplored space, chaos, to be governed by devilish, irrational, and unpredictable forces. His cultural pride, a form of idolatry, blocks his intellect. He often blames his inability to act, or see, on some kind of charm or madness. Neither space nor time has its limits here, in the fluidity of chaos. Emptiness, silence, disorientation, and the eerie suspicion of some unnatural force exercising its evil power over the unknown land make
Marlow think that he is navigating in a space without rules, without all the landmarks that make orientation in cosmos possible. He notices white men who have “the appearance of being held [on the shore] captive by a spell” (61), the land of “the lurking death” and “the hidden evil” (58); even his sleep “seemed unnatural, like a state of trance” (67). When the adventure comes to an end, and Marlow finds himself back in “the sepulchral city” (114), in the world of “commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety” (114), he admits that the whole enterprise acquired some unreal shape. Marlow is not even certain whether Kurtz really existed: “Sometimes I ask myself whether I had ever really seen him—whether it was possible to meet such a phenomenon!” (103).

David Adams sees Conrad as an author who collapses boundaries between Europe and Africa: “Beginning his tale with an analogy between Roman Britain and Africa, and then describing Brussels as a ‘whited sepulchre’ (13), ‘city of the dead’ (14), and ‘cemetery’ (72), Marlow consistently incorporates Europe into the Inferno” (147). It seems to me, however, that consistently it is Africa that is infernal, a point which the numerous examples in this chapter illustrate. Europe is merely lifeless. Though anemic, it is not devoid of markers of identity and historical relevance, as Conrad’s Congo is.

The Diabolical Other and the Danger of Emasculation

Eliade includes in his description of chaos a crucial element; he maintains that to the inhabitants of cosmos, only the space they occupy is organized and populated. But the word unoccupied in relation to chaos may simply mean “unoccupied by our people” or “peopled by ghosts, demons, ‘foreigners’” (Sacred 31). Marlow’s natives resemble ghosts and demons, with “their eyeballs glistening,” “faces like grotesque masks” (30), and “death-like indifference of unhappy savages” (33). He sees “nothing earthly” in these “black shadows” and “moribund shapes” (35). Later, during his trip up the river, he recalls the men who “were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman” (62–63).4 Clearly, when the fabricated distinction between the devilish natives and the urbane Europeans becomes blurred, the negative mirror image through which Marlow and other Europeans identify themselves no longer allows for a clear-cut compartmentalizing and ordering