

Chapter One

IDEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITIES OF “WRITING BACK”

Anita Desai and George Lamming
in the Heart of Darkness

LITERATURE, MIND, AND THE STRUCTURE OF EXPERIENCE

It is a virtual commonplace of cognitive psychology that we do not perceive, recall, understand the world, other people, ourselves, by some direct and immediate experience of reality. The “manifold of intuition,” as Kant called it, must be shaped and oriented, structured by concepts, schemas, categories of understanding. A world of pure sense data would not be a world of perfect knowledge, but a chaos. This is true in our everyday lives and, even more obviously, in literature. We cannot live our lives, perform ordinary tasks, without organizing in our minds the properties and relations of things and ideas. Still less can we tell a story about lives without selecting, from the welter of inconsequential detail, the relevant elements, without ordering and relating those elements, without stressing one and subordinating another.

There are different ways of extracting meaning from the muddle of experience. The most obvious is through schemas, broad and abstract structures under which we subsume particulars. I glimpse a small, hairy, moving thing on a leash; some mix of features, inconclusive in themselves, but with collective value, triggers a schema: dog. Or, rather, in an imperceptibly rapid sequence, one sensation (small and motile thing) triggers a range of schemas (dog, cat,

rat, etc.). These guide my selection of further details, leading me to notice, say, the leash. This, in turn, selects the schema: dog.¹

This is one way experience is structured. More often, our thought and inference are more concrete, guided by instances or types of instance, not broad structures. We do not, in the usual course of things, see a particular as a dog because we subsume it under a category. Rather, we compare it with a prototype—a typical dog, not the bare idea of dogness. Consider birds. We recognize a flitting thing as “bird” because we see its similarity to such prototypical birds as robins, not because we fit it into the general category: “warm-blooded, egg-laying feathered vertebrate,” as the *American Heritage Dictionary* has it. At times our identifications are more specific still, linking the object at hand to a particular case or “exemplum”—“I knew right away that he must be a Carter; he looks just like our former President.”²

Thus schemas, prototypes, and exempla guide our perception and our thought, bring parts of the world into structure and emphasis, discarding or downplaying others. They also guide our literary construction of sensation and of cognition. Of course, the ordinary structures and instances that gather our daily lives into coherence figure in literature. But, perhaps more importantly, literary schemas provide broad principles for new literary compositions, and literary exempla guide the detailed choice of plot, character, and diction in new works. Indeed, such literary elements pervade ordinary life as well—for we understand our friends and foes in part through literary characters, our experiences and aspirations in part through literary plots. That is, among other things, what gives literature its moral and political force. As the great Arabic theorists, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sinā, and Ibn Rushd argued, literature fosters moral or immoral action through *takhyīl*, the simultaneously creative and mimetic imagination that guides the way we think about and react to the world, unconsciously tying our understanding of love to romantic fiction, as stressed famously by Flaubert, or our feeling about members of some ethnic group—Irish, Italians, African Americans—to particular characters from that group in movies or on television. As this suggests, *takhyīl* is perhaps best understood as the tacit use of literary or other exempla to body forth, to give substance and definition, to our otherwise ghostly and confused experience. This unwitting use of art in daily life is at least part of what makes literature consequential.

Writers, then, draw on schemas and prototypes—the broad structure of the novel or the drama, the repertoire of motifs and techniques (as Wolfgang Iser might put it) that are standard in a particular a genre, and so on. At the same time, they form their new works by comparison or contrast with works of precursors employed as exempla—seeking to avoid the failures of one work, seeking to emulate the successes of another. This use of exempla figures most obviously in self-conscious imitation, but it is crucial also in unconscious

influence, negative or positive. (For a fuller development of these ideas in relation to influence, see chapter 1 of my *Joyce, Milton, and the Theory of Influence*.) Most important for our purposes, it is a central part of "writing back."

There are many canonical works which, though written by members of dominant groups, set out to portray the lives, feelings, and society of "subalterns." Writing back is the process by which an author from a dominated group takes up and revises one of these canonical works. (The now-classic discussion of writing back is to be found in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.) This process is commonly conceived of as highly antagonistic. But it is not necessarily so. A subaltern author may set out to deny entirely the validity of the precursor work. But he/she may equally seek to create a sort of complement of the precursor text, filling in absent perspectives, histories, and contexts; he/she might undertake to extend or to modify the canonical work or to re-apply its structure to another object. Writing back to *Kim* in *Gora*, Tagore certainly set out to undermine Kipling's racialism. But, simultaneously, he developed another aspect of the novel, the contradictory emphasis on upbringing, on the Indianness of the Irish child raised as Indian. Thus Tagore's writing back is partially antagonistic, but partially sympathetic also. Despite Achebe's harsh criticisms of Conrad (see "An Image"), *Things Fall Apart* does not so much critique *Heart of Darkness* as provide a missing perspective: the social life and human subjectivity of Conrad's obscure, anonymous natives. Bapsi Sidhwa takes up the relation between Europeans and Africans in *Heart of Darkness* as one model for the relation between urban and tribal Pakistanis—a use which does not so much criticize as, so to speak, extend and "apply" Conrad, among others. In short, the aims and attitudes which underlie writing back are far more diverse than is typically imagined (for further discussion of the varieties of writing back, see my "Gora").

More important for our purposes, even highly critical revisions, even uncontroversial instances of writing back in the full, antagonistic sense, almost necessarily involve the use of the precursor work as a model for selecting, structuring, and stressing elements of character, theme, and plot. As such, writing back is always at risk of being complicit with the ideology—or, rather, the perceived ideology—of the precursor work. There are at least four significant variables affecting this possible complicity: (1) the extent of modeling; (2) the pairing of elements in the precursor work and the new work; (3) the ideological complexity of the precursor work; and (4) the subaltern author's interpretation of the precursor work.

As to the first, a new work may write back to a precursor work in a very general way, or in detail. A revision of *Robinson Crusoe* may involve nothing more than a man stranded on an island, or it may incorporate precise correlations of plot and character. Clearly, the greater the degree to which one adheres to the structure of the precursor text, the more one is likely to choose

details of one's own work on the basis of the ideological presuppositions of that precursor text. On the other hand, even in simpler cases, the precursor work typically defines the terms of debate, the issues discussed, the general parameters of the discussion. Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* clearly and effectively criticizes the standard portrayal of cannibalism as savagery. Yet the very fact that, in rewriting Conrad (see Brydon), he feels compelled to treat cannibalism indicates the degree to which the discussion of non-European peoples has been bound within a narrow problematic.

As to the second variable, a new author may map the elements of the precursor text onto different elements of the new text. It is, for instance, possible to map Marlow onto an African traveling in Europe and Conrad's African's onto Europeans. This would tend to render salient the "civilized" behavior of the African and the "barbarity" of the Europeans. In that sense, it would invert the stereotypes. Margaret Atwood's use of Conrad in *Surfacing* does something along these lines, in its straightforward identification of savagery with the United States. (For a discussion of Atwood's novel as a reworking of Conrad, see Brydon.) However, most cases are more ideologically complex. For example, to the degree that Sidhwa identifies Conrad's Europeans with urban Pakistanis, she removes urban Pakistanis from colonialist stereotypes; however, to the extent that she identifies Conrad's Africans with tribal Pakistanis, she tends to repeat colonialist stereotyping with respect to those tribal peoples.

Thirdly, a precursor work may involve a complex range of ideological elements, or it may be ideologically simple. This point is perhaps most easily seen in the case of patriarchy. Women are, of course, a dominated group in the relevant sense and engage in writing back, though it is not usually referred to in this way. For example, many Victorian women in effect wrote back to John Milton, as Gilbert and Gubar have shown. A short poem may, more or less explicitly, reduce a woman's legitimate aspirations to those of physical beauty and selfless devotion in the home, but introduce little ideological complication beyond this. In this case, the ideological elements may be easily isolated, and thus easily criticized, by the later author. In contrast, a lengthy and complex novel might involve a wide range of highly specified elements of patriarchal ideology, embedding these elements in details of setting, character, and plot. In this case, much of consequence is likely to escape a new author's self-conscious notice, and thus may guide that author's work in ways of which she is entirely unaware. In other words, due to their extent and complexity, these elements are more likely to affect the unconscious or implicit aspects of modeling that are often a part of writing back.

As to the final variable, a new author may interpret a precursor work in many different ways. Our understanding of a literary work is no more unmediated than is our understanding of anything else. When reading, we

select, structure, emphasize, and subordinate. Moreover, we fill in details, extend events and ideas, infer links and causes. In consequence, as we all know, readers interpret works differently, often very differently. Thus, for instance, some critics see Conrad as vilely racist, while others find him enlightenedly anticolonialist. Certainly one interpretation may be more plausible than another. But in writing back, what matters is not so much the text itself as the new writer's version of the text—his/her understanding or, in phenomenological terms, "constitution" of Conrad, Kipling, or Shakespeare, rather than Conrad, Kipling, or Shakespeare per se.

The point can be made more rigorously in cognitive terms, simply by introducing the important notion of the internal, idiolectal lexicon—a mental structure of words, meanings, morphological forms and principles, "encyclopedia" information, personal recollections, and so forth.³ This lexicon exists in individual human minds, with no separate, autonomous existence (as, for example, Chomsky has argued influentially; see chapter 2 of *Knowledge*). It is composed of lexical entries, which are related to one another through various links, which allow and guide access from one entry to another. For example, the entry for "Wednesday" in my lexicon includes such information as "middle of work week" and "day for departmental meetings"; it also includes links to such entries as "week," "Thursday," and so on. *Ulysses* in my lexicon includes such widely shared "encyclopedia" information as "written by James Joyce," as well as links with other epics, such as *Omeros*, which are less widely shared, and entirely personal associations—for example, memories of particular times when I read a part of the novel—which are not shared by anyone else.

Given this concept of the mental lexicon, we can return to the issue of writing back and say that what matters for a new author is not the precursor text per se—a notion that becomes almost meaningless in this context—but the new author's lexical internalization of the work, his/her incorporation of the precursor work into a complex of mental lexical entries, linked in specific ways with other, related entries. One important consequence of this formulation is that it highlights the significance, not only of the properties a new author attributes to a precursor text, but also of the lexical context in which that author locates that text. For example, does he/she link Conrad's Africans with entries for Victorian racist pseudo-science which he/she rejects unequivocally, or current racist pseudo-science such as *The Bell Curve*, which he/she might take more seriously? Clearly, this will affect his/her response to Conrad, whatever his/her strict interpretation may be.

In any case, however one accounts for this in detail in a particular case, it is clearly one's understanding of a precursor work that guides one's writing back to that precursor work. This has at least one noteworthy and perhaps surprising consequence. Other things being equal, the ideology of a new work is likely to be more colonialist to the degree that the author tacitly construes the

precursor work as colonialist. For example, if a new author is modeling some group of people on Conrad's Africans, he/she will be more likely to characterize that group as barbaric precisely to the degree that he/she understands Conrad's Africans as barbaric; he/she is likely to link that group with animals precisely to the degree that he/she links Conrad's Africans with animals, for this animalism will be part of the exemplum that tacitly serves to guide his/her construal of that group.

In sum, writing back is a highly cognitively complex activity and, quite often, an ideologically ambiguous activity as well. Though writing back is often seen as a fairly straightforward anticolonial gesture, there are many types of writing back, and there are many ways in which and many degrees to which writing back—even self-consciously critical or corrective writing back—may be complicit with colonial ideology, as a cognitive account of the process makes clear.

"EVERYTHING MENACING AND DEGRADED
IN INDIAN LIFE": DESAI AND CONRAD

Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* provides a particularly good example of writing back in this context. Part of Desai's novel clearly revises *Heart of Darkness*. Moreover, it revises Conrad's novella in such a way as to criticize English colonialism. But, at the same time, Desai tacitly models aspects of her novel on *Heart of Darkness*. In part because of this, Desai ends up linking Indian culture and Indian people with mad violence, historyless primitivism, gross animality, and even imputing to Hinduism the celebration of cannibalistic rites. In short, Desai has, I believe, in effect transformed the general population of India, especially Hindu India, into the semihuman savages of Conrad's Africa, in the most colonialist interpretation of that work.⁴

There are many minor but significant ways in which Desai draws on and revises Conrad. For example, prior to the anticolonial focus of recent critics, the standard interpretation of Conrad's novella was psychological: Africa presents to the European, in undisguised and thus horrific form, the savage darkness that lay always within his/her own heart, however much he/she might seek to conceal it with layers of civility. At least at times, Desai presents India in similar terms, for, from Baumgartner's first arrival in Bombay, he realizes that "India flashed the mirror in your face. . . . You could be blinded by it" (85). In both works, immersion in the alien culture produces the same shock and disequilibrating recognition of what is hidden within oneself.

Beyond this broad and, admittedly, common theme, there are parallel narrative moments and images, also limited and localized, but significant.⁵ When traveling upriver by steamboat, Marlow recurrently meditates on the

impenetrable darkness of the African bush and on its oneiric, hallucinatory quality: "the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time" (Conrad 42); "It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment" (27; see also 58). The incongruity of steamship, Kurtz, Marlow, the long-staved pilgrims, inscrutable nature, makes it all "unreal," "absurd" (Conrad 25, 23), ghostly—"we glided past like phantoms" (Conrad 36). Likewise, "Baumgartner on the steamship traveling to Dacca," looks out at the densely wooded shores: "The forest that was like a shroud on the bank, ghostly and impenetrable" (92). Baumgartner wonders if it is not "a mirage, a dream." It is all too incongruous. "If it had been a real scene, in a real land, then Baumgartner with his hat and shoes would have been too unlikely a visitor to be possible. . . . If he were real, then surely the scene, the setting was not. How could the two exist together in one land? The match was improbable beyond belief" (93). Compare Marlow on the Russian encountered in the bush, "His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain—why he did not instantly disappear" (Conrad 55).

Indeed, the incongruities of the situation redouble incomprehension, pile opacity on opacity in both texts. Marlow surveys the unfed cannibals on his steamer and wonders why they do not kill and eat him—"Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us," he wonders (42). He cannot fathom their restraint: "Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour?" (42). Baumgartner similarly baffles at the reserve of street people in their makeshift home on the curb outside his building: "They saw him bring bags of food, knew he had a wallet in his pocket, wore a watch on his wrist, good shoes on his feet . . . and he wondered what prevented them from grabbing him by his neck and stripping him in the dark" (145). Marlow worries that perhaps the cannibals find him "unappetising," and feels his vanity offended by their culinary disdain (42). This concern too recurs with Baumgartner. In an empty rural temple, Baumgartner, like Marlow, ruminates on his unfitnes for "cannibalistic rites" and, not without self-pity, names himself: "Indigestible, inedible Baumgartner. . . . Not fit for consumption" (190).

Desai's criticisms of the British also recall Conrad. Like Conrad's Belgian Congo, Desai's British India is a chaos of malign incompetence, portrayed to itself and to the home population as civilizing order. This is most obvious in the tragically irrational confinement of German Jews along with other Germans. There are other instances also: the befuddlement of the camp commandant at the end of the war and, before that, the general confusion of camp

life, the British surrender of control to fascist thugs. The few documents available do not indicate that this is an accurate portrait. It is, rather, a portrait formed by a Conradian view of colonialism.

Consider the internment of German Jews. At the outset, British policy was to arrest German nationals. The policy was a gross violation of civil rights, involving as it did a presumption of guilt rather than of innocence. However, once this presumption of guilt was in place, it appears to have been applied indifferently to all German nationals. Thus the refugee status of any given individual (e.g., a Jew) had to be demonstrated. Indeed, the British established the Darling Interrogation Committee to determine “friendly enemy aliens.” As a result of work done by this committee (and by the Jewish Relief Association), “within a couple of months, practically all [German Jews], some 317, were released” (Roland 220).

Admittedly, more Jews were detained later, and some probably did remain in confinement for the entire war. However, this too did not result from Conradian chaos. It too was the outcome of self-conscious policy. Consider, for example, the disturbing decision by the British Indian government that “even German Jews who had been deprived of their German nationality by the German Ordinance of 25 November 1941 were still liable to internment” (Roland 220–21). This was far from an imperial muddle in the heart of darkness. It was, rather, calculated colonialism in its standard form. The British were apprehensive about Jewish “antecedents and connections in Europe” (Roland 223) and were particularly fearful of Nehru-allied “Jewish communists” (183) who might support and further radicalize the Indian nationalist movement.

Finally, it does not appear that the British camp commandants were in fact the abstracted bumbler depicted in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, nor that the camp was a Conradian slop of randomness and organizational confusion, a vacuum of structure which Nazis could enter and form to their own will. Katherine Smith argues convincingly that Desai's primary source for the internment scenes was Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet*. Smith notes that Desai follows Harrer in numerous details, but “downplays the presence in Harrer of a hostile English military force” with “inviolable power” (151). In short, Desai's imagination of detention is defined at least as much by Conrad as by history.

But the structure of Conrad's novella operates most importantly and most obviously in the narrative sequence that concludes Desai's novel. A young man travels from Europe deep into the heart of colonial darkness, first mingles with the natives, then penetrates into their cults, excels them in their own perverse practices, degrading both his mind and body in the process. Half mad and deathly ill, he is nursed by another European voyager, but turns ungratefully on his benefactor. This precis partially summarizes both *Heart of Darkness* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. In the first case, the crazed adventurer

has no given name. His patronym is "Kurtz." In the second case, he has no patronym. His given name is—"Kurt." Both are tall and mad and in physical decline (Desai 13, 144; Conrad 60). A German Jew takes up the role of Conrad's Russian, nursing the dazed, half-nativized adventurer back to a provisional health (see Conrad 56). Baumgartner's murder is simply the playing out of Kurtz's threats against the loyal Russian, with a slight shift: Kurt murders Baumgartner for his silver, while Kurtz threatens the Russian for his ivory—"He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory . . . and there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased" (Conrad 57).

Kurt's desire for the silver is, of course, desire for the heroin it can buy. This fits too, echoing with Kipling as well as Conrad. Kurt draws his debilitating habit from Kim's father, colour-sergeant O'Hara, who "fell to drink and loafing up and down the line . . . till he came across the woman who took opium and learned the taste from her" (Kipling 19). Desai interwove this brief, sad figure from *Kim*, who "died as poor whites die in India," with the differently deteriorated Kurtz, switching O'Hara's taste for opium with Kurtz's equally addictive taste for ivory, "the appetite for more ivory" that in the end "had got the better" of him (Conrad 58), linking Kurt's injections of heroin with the ivory which, along with the "wilderness," the darkness, the primitivism, "got into [Kurtz's] veins, consumed his flesh" (Conrad 49).

But Baumgartner is not only founded upon Conrad's Russian. He also plays a sort of unwilling Marlow to Farrokh's company manager. Most obviously, Farrokh takes on the manager's role in aiming to rid himself and his business of Kurt/Kurtz; Farrokh fears patronage will decline, just as the manager conjectures "trade will suffer" (Conrad 63). More interestingly, Farrokh, recalling the company manager's disdain for Kurtz's "unsound method" (63)—his intimacy with the indigenes—denounces Kurt for nativism, and, indeed, Africanism. Despite his height, Farrokh terms Kurt a "pygmy," and adds that he is a "jungly heathen" (13). The reference to pygmies reethnicizes—indeed, racializes—an irony from Conrad: "Kurtz—that means 'short' in German. . . . He looked at least seven feet long" (60).

Most importantly, Farrokh's slurs are not the only instances of racialism in the novel. In keeping with many interpretations of *Heart of Darkness*, such racialism is widespread. This is not to say there is race hatred in the novel. There is not. There is, however, a consistent strain of "racial thinking," the conceptualization of individual people and of human relationships in terms of race and putative race properties, invariably stereotypical.

Consider, for example, the paranoid view that Jews can always recognize one another—a central part of the delusion of Jewish conspiracy. Desai presents a broadened and thus relatively innocuous, but nonetheless racialist version of this. Early in the novel, Desai has Baumgartner think that Germans

can always recognize one another, and especially that Jews and Aryans can recognize and distinguish one another. Indeed, like beasts, they sometimes do so by *smell* (21).

More significantly, Baumgartner, though greatly sympathetic, is characterized in fairly straightforwardly stereotypical terms—a “dirty Jew.” He “rarely washed his clothes; they emanated a thick, cloudy odour that he himself found comforting in its familiarity but some considered offensive” (6). In his room there is “mess spread and heaped everywhere” (148) and “filth” (226) giving rise to a noxious odor which drove away guests, but which “was to him a kind of fertiliser” (148). In terms of physical appearance, he is a stereotype too: he has a “nose like a thumb” (38); in Lotte’s words, he is a “turnip-nosed *Jude*” (96; *Jude* being the German word for “Jew”). Even his stance is a racist type: “his hands dangling, his knees buckling” (108; on the stereotype of this posture, see chapter 2 of Gilman, especially 46).

Moreover, Baumgartner is not alone in this. Reb Benjamin too is greasy and “odorous” (37). And Lotte—a Yiddish speaker (67) and thus, one must assume, Jewish—is formed in part from related, if somewhat different, racist images, Desai stressing in particular her vulgarly corpulent sexuality: “her fat legs . . . always contrived to show so much of themselves under her skirts” (65); her thighs formed “a generous meaty triangle” (68); the “loose flesh” of her legs was “bulging with maturity, with experience” (75); playing cards, she “pulled her skirts up over her thighs” (208) and, kneeling down, she had her “dress rucked up to the thighs” (228).

Admittedly, there is an element of critique in Desai’s treatment of Lotte. Her gross sexualization counters an opposition common to exploration narratives—that between licentious or bestial native women and angelic White women. The motif runs from James Bruce’s eighteenth-century writings through many intermediaries to *Heart of Darkness* and beyond. Thus, in Bruce, we find his European beloved referred to as “Virgin Mary” (Hibbert 44) and placed in contrast with group after group of native women anxious to bestow their sexual favors (30–31) in loud, orgiastic romps (36). We find the same structure in Conrad’s famous opposition between Kurtz’s demure Intended, with her “halo” of “unextinguishable light” (76), and his native mistress, “wild” (61), “savage” (62), “barbarous” (69).⁶ In portraying Lotte as the “whore” and the Indian woman—the wife of Lotte’s lover—as chaste, Desai is in part responding to this common stereotype. Indeed, a similar point might be made about the native worship of White men, another recurrent motif in exploration narratives, obviously repeated in Conrad. In rendering Baumgartner physically repugnant and in depicting Indians as disdainful of him, Desai is to a degree responding to the rather bizarre idea that indigenous people see Europeans as akin to gods (“the tribe . . . adored” Kurtz [Conrad 56–57]). But this is a merely partial critique. For the colonialist idea was never that Jewish

women were pure or that Jewish men were godlike. Rather, it was, of course, precisely the opposite. In that sense, even at the moment when Desai is offering a critique of Conrad, she is simply shifting from one discriminatory and stereotypical opposition to another.

Moreover, none of this prevents Desai from characterizing India and Indians in demeaning ways that have clear affinities with the vision of the natives in *Heart of Darkness*. Throughout Desai's novel, the Indian masses are unindividuated and inscrutable. In the very first sentence, they appear to us as a "collected crowd of identical individuals—one-legged, nose-picking, vigilant-eyed" (1). Elsewhere, they become "one restless, heaving mass" (83), formed into slithering fish, wild animals, swarming insects. Baumgartner thinks of the milling Indians on Colaba streets: "So much naked skin, oiled and slithering with perspiration, the piscine bulge and stare of so many eyes" (18). Elsewhere, the Indian people form and scatter "Like knots of ants" (229)—the image, taken in part from Conrad, is largely a matter of color: "A lot of people, mostly black and naked, moved about like ants" (Conrad 15). Worse still, at home, the urban masses form "families that lived in the cracks and crevices of the building like so many rats, or lice" (174).

Individual Indians, when they appear as such, do not necessarily escape this dehumanization—one, for instance, is merely a "small brown monkey of a man" (102). More importantly, even Indians who receive a fuller treatment remain inscrutable for other reasons. Baumgartner decides "that he would never fathom Chimanlal's motives, that under all that bland guilelessness there was an unfathomable guile" (191): stereotype of the endlessly duplicitous Asian. (Compare Mr. Bennett's claim in *Kim*: "My experience is that one can never fathom the Oriental mind" [99]—though, unlike Baumgartner, Bennett is far from sympathetic and his view is discredited directly by Father Victor and the lama.)

Desai not only refers to the Indian masses through metaphors of animals and vermin, she characterizes their lives as, in many ways, the lives of animals and vermin. In keeping more with broad colonialist views than with the details of Conrad's novella, she is particularly unremitting in her stress on virulently unhygienic conditions. A malnourished child sucks "something brown and slippery," then drops it on the filthy pavement; the mother retrieves the now foul "brown lump" and "pop[s] it back in the child's mouth" (144–45). Perhaps a realistic scene, but at the very least one rendered salient by schemas linking the Indian masses with bestial dirt, disease, and ignorance. Only a few pages into the novel, we are informed that the homeless family outside Baumgartner's flat washed their "cooking pots . . . in the gutter," "the same gutter" which held their "heaps of faeces" (6). Subsequently, Desai repeats the information, telling us again that they wash "pots and pans in the thickly moving water of the gutter" (144). Later, she reiterates the point another time: "pots

and pans being washed in the gutter” (207). This third time, she accompanies the information with an account of Kurtzian reactions: “the tenants stopped on their way in or out to express their *horror* . . . for the ragged creatures who *hardly seemed human*” (207, emphasis added). Recall Marlow standing “horror-struck” before a “picture of . . . pestilence” in which “woolly” headed “creatures . . . went off on all fours” and “lapped” water from a stream (Conrad 18); or, later, his complaint that “the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman . . . the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship,” though what they did was “horrid” and “ugly. Yes, it was ugly” (36–37). Then there is Kurtz’s repeated, culminating judgment on his experience of the heart of darkness: “he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: ‘The horror! The horror!’” (71); “his stare . . . could not see the flame of the candle, but was . . . piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’” (72). Elsewhere, Baumgartner too experiences the “horror” of *Darkness*, a horror linked closely with what Desai seems to present as a special Indian affinity for fecal matter: “horror at the sight of women carrying excreta on their heads, and digging their hands into it as they might into wet dough or laundry” (111).

Feces and other filth seem so pervasive in Desai’s India that it is sometimes difficult to discern any vigorous human life on the part of poor, ordinary Indians—except, of course, the ugly, remote, primeval version of life that assailed and discomfited Marlow. The smell and sludge are there from Baumgartner’s first arrival, when he hires a carriage that “stank of horsedung” (84). They recur in such passing, repeated images as the walls stained by urine (100, 213). They are central to the characterization of Baumgartner’s homeless neighbors—and also of many others who use the gutter as toilet, bath, and washing basin: “Open gutters ran outside . . . along which children squatted, women washed and dogs lapped” (187). Indeed, the water tap shared by a community is little better than the gutter; the mire seems coextensive with the people: “nowhere could one see any sign of cleanliness—the tap only created a morass of mud and slime; children squatted anywhere to urinate or defecate” (175).

Wallowing in verminous offal, and equally immersed in violence (“He knew the absolute degradation of their lives; he knew the violence it bred—the brawling in the night, the beating, the weeping” [7]) the Indian masses are also locked in an eternally primitive condition outside of history. Baumgartner, observing Indian peasants, wonders at “lives so primitive, so basic and unchanging” in “the absence of choice and history” (111). Compare Marlow: “I don’t think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time—had no

inherited experience to teach them" (Conrad 41; elsewhere in *Heart of Darkness* they are "simple people" [54], "rudimentary souls" [51] living in "the night of first ages" [37]).

Moreover, in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, this putative atavism is linked repeatedly with Hinduism—here appearing in its full colonial guise as grimly savage idolatry. In a wasteland of dust and stone, Baumgartner finds a crude temple "ancient and primitive" (189), but still in use. Inside there is "total blackness," a Conradian "darkness" which is "a presence" (189). It is here that Baumgartner calls up to his mind's eye the fantastical practice of "cannibalistic rites" (190). In addition, these rites are strangely associated with phallus worship—they include an "engorged penis" (189)—thus tacitly taking up the image of the native as an oversexualized and bestial savage. Indeed, this scene suggests further complexities of literary and ideological relations as well. Specifically, in the course of her novel, Desai spends relatively little time on the hierarchical and largely Aryan aspects of Hinduism, or the Christianlike devotional strains of Hinduism. However, the mystical strain of Hinduism, especially in its Śaivite and thus indigenous South Asian form (see Wolpert 18–19, 35–36) is taken up directly into Desai's Conradian structure. It defines, in fact, the very heart of Indian darkness in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The most striking, and the most fully Conradian, instance of this is Kurt's recollection, or fantasy, of cannibalism.

Alone with Baumgartner, Kurt narrates his trip into the obscure depths of Indian culture. He had lived for a time in the burning ghat, the cremation place at the river's edge. Baumgartner asks, "And—the bodies? Did you—also eat?" Kurt replies, "I was a tantric then—I was with the tantrics. With them, yes, I ate. I ate. Why? Why do you look like that? Is only flesh, only meat. For eating. For becoming strong. Strong" (157). One recalls Kurtz "presid[ing] at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (51) and living in a compound marked out by severed heads, "black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids" (Conrad 58). Certainly, much that Kurt says in this monologue is untrustworthy, but this boast of uninhibited Indo-primitivism is in effect corroborated by Baumgartner's question—after all, he introduces the topic of cannibalism, and Kurt replies without hesitation—and by Baumgartner's earlier meditation on Hindu "cannibalistic rites" (190).

It is worth considering this temple scene again. It is, perhaps, a scene from Rushdie read through Conrad, for Rushdie's presence pervades *Baumgartner's Bombay* as much as Conrad's. Saleem, "in a murky corner of the abandoned shrine . . . saw the remnants of what might have been four small fires—ancient ashes, scorch-marks on stone—or perhaps four funeral pyres; and in the center of each of the four, a small, blackened, fire-eaten heap of uncrushed bones" (Rushdie 440). In Rushdie, this is the end of a consuming dream in "the forest of illusions" (440). It says nothing of Hindu practices, and still less

of cannibalism. It is only when the passage is read through Conrad, when Saleem's trip into the forest is a trip into the heart of darkness, when the Hindu shrine is the place of those savage rites first witnessed, then celebrated by Kurtz—it is only when the passage is structured and filled in by this exemplum, that Rushdie's scene might seem to speak of cannibalistic rites, and be transferred as such into another novel.

After recounting his eating of burned corpses with the tantrics, Kurt goes on to explain that he “learnt yoga” and “meditated till one night the devil came to him, dressed only in white ashes. . . . They had danced together on the rock” (157). Here Kurt portrays Hindu spiritual discipline as Satanic, and identifies Satan with the ash-covered God of yoga and of dance—which is to say, Śiva. He goes on, “Yoga, yes. I learnt. . . . To be like the devil” (157): a standard colonialist view, that the religious practices of the colonized peoples are demonic, that their gods are Satan and his cohorts. Moreover, it is crucial that the deity in question is Śiva. Of the two major Hindu deities, Viṣṇu is clearly more in line with Christian conceptions of divinity and devotional practices. Moreover, as we have already noted, Śiva was indigenous to South Asia. In other words, Śiva and Śaivism are the remnant of the pre-Aryan darkness—what those first Aryan invaders found in their ancient civilizing mission. Put differently, they are the part of Indian society that any Indian might wish to repudiate, insofar as he/she identifies him/herself as the descendant of those Aryans and not of the “barbarians” they brutalized. Here, modern colonialism repeats the structures and motifs of an earlier colonialism, both aligned with and structured by Conrad's novel.

Here, too, Kurt repeats Kurtz, who engaged in “the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation” (49) and “had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally” (Conrad 50). But, despite the final adverb—“literally”—it seems that Desai's portrayal of Śiva as Satan goes beyond even a staunchly colonialist interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*. It degrades the subtle and powerful system of Hindu yoga, and—literally—demonizes Hinduism's great ascetic, metaphysical, and indigenous deity. This is, of course, all in the voice of Kurt. But there is nothing to contradict Kurt's view, nothing to rebut the characterization of Hindu yogic discipline and Śiva as demonic.

Indeed, Farrokh extends the vilification of mystical Hinduism, characterizing Hindu hermitages as drug dens; people like Kurt, he insists, “get drugs in . . . ashrams” (14); Kurt later corroborates this linking of Hinduism with narcotics: “At Holi, he and the pilgrims had . . . drunk opium in milk, eaten opium in sweets, smoked opium in pipes” (159). Holi is a Hindu festival, given different interpretations. In one common view, it commemorates Śiva (see Knappert 119). It is a popular festival involving “a reversal of relationships in which the lowly can abuse the high-born” (Knappert 120). It is a good exam-

ple of a Bakhtinian carnival in which social hierarchies are disrupted and a "contradictory . . . fullness of life" (Bakhtin 61) is affirmed. In Farrokh's speech, however, it is presented as a day of addiction, vice, debauchery.

The West's worst nightmare of barbaric Hindu paganism seems confirmed in this novel by an Indian author, writing in, about, and from India—and thus, one might assume, rich with authenticity. Rosemary Dinnage, reviewing *Baumgartner's Bombay* for the *New York Review of Books*, provides an excellent and disheartening illustration. She explains Kurt thus: "Everything menacing and degraded in Indian life has moved into the empty drugged spaces of his brain" (36).

My point here is not to single out Desai, to impugn her motives, or even to criticize her political views, of which I am largely unaware. Desai has written a novel which develops great human sympathy for a person with whom she has no ethnic or other connection—and that is always difficult and admirable. Nonetheless, she has, at the same time, created a work which, while responding to and revising *Heart of Darkness*, seems not only to repeat but to further what is, under one interpretation, its dehumanizing characterization of non-White people and its denigration of their culture. In doing this, she has shown with disturbing clarity that, contrary to common presumptions, writing back is not necessarily a full and politically progressive repudiation of the precursor work.

BUT IS IT WRITING BACK? IDEOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY
IN GEORGE LAMMING'S *WATER WITH BERRIES*

There are, however, two obvious objections to this argument. One is that there are successful cases of writing back. For example, Tagore's *Gora* does not appear to succumb to the sorts of blatant stereotyping that mar Desai's novel. This is true. I do not mean to say that any postcolonization writer who sets out to revise a metropolitan precursor is thereby condemned to repeat the colonialist ideology of that precursor work. However, success or lack of success in avoiding the ideological pitfalls of writing back is a function of those variables discussed above—the degree to which the writer follows the precursor work in detail, the degree to which he/she interprets the precursor work as expressing colonialist ideology, and so on. Tagore's *Gora* does not repeat colonialist ideology, at least not in any obvious or extended way, primarily because Tagore writes back to Kipling's *Kim* only in the most general terms: an Irish boy orphaned and raised as an Indian—and, in keeping with this, there is in fact a certain amount of Irish stereotyping in Tagore's novel. Moreover, the preceding analysis does not set out laws of nature, intended to cover every individual case with ironclad necessity. It isolates broad tendencies that individual authors

may overcome, due to circumstances, effort, or features of their particular intellects or compositional processes.

The second obvious objection to the preceding analysis is more specific and concerns *Baumgartner's Bombay* in particular. Perhaps Desai never set out to “write back” to Conrad. Rather, she simply set out to use *Heart of Darkness* as a model for her own novel. Thus, her evident ideological complicity with Conrad is not an “ambiguity” of writing back—it is not a matter of writing back at all. This too is a reasonable point. Desai does not appear to have begun with a critical or corrective attitude toward Conrad, and an attitude of this sort might be considered a necessary condition for writing back. Still, if Desai is not “writing back” to her metropolitan precursor in this narrow sense of the phrase, then a common working assumption of much postcolonization literary analysis appears to be mistaken. If asked, critics and theorists would, no doubt, acknowledge that postcolonization writers sometimes adopt a positive attitude toward metropolitan texts, even texts which those writers find to be pervaded by colonialist ideology. (It seems clear that Desai understands *Heart of Darkness* in this way, whether she would put it like that or not.) However, the most common working assumption of critics and theorists is that writers from colonized groups do write back to colonialist metropolitan texts in a corrective manner, that they do not “write through” such precursors. In other words, the most common working assumption is that the postcolonization writer begins with a critical or corrective attitude. At the very least, Desai’s case indicates that this working assumption is overly simple.

More importantly, the ideological ambiguity we have been discussing is not confined to works such as *Baumgartner's Bombay*. It arises in paradigm cases of critical/corrective writing back as well. It does not seem to be a matter of the postcolonization author’s self-conscious aims, but rather of the other variables set out above: the interpretation of the precursor (e.g., how colonialist Conrad is taken to be), the degree of detail in the parallelism, and so on. It is worth considering an unequivocal case of this sort before concluding.

George Lamming has been one of the most articulate and forceful critics of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. His essay “A Monster, a Child, a Slave” is a standard instance of the anticolonial reading of metropolitan texts. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out, “Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* has been subject to many such readings. . . . Perhaps the most influential rereading of the play has been George Lamming’s” (189). For example, Lamming directly links Prospero’s treatment of Caliban with the torture of slaves in Haiti after emancipation. There, and in “Caliban Orders History,” he takes up Caliban as an image of anticolonial resistance. Fortunately for our purposes, Lamming’s concern with Shakespeare is not confined to critical essays. In his novel, *Water with Berries*, Lamming has set himself the task of writing back to this play (from

which he takes his title) along with Shakespeare's *Othello* and, perhaps, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published five years before Lamming's novel.

Water with Berries is, in many ways, a finely crafted exploration of the psychological harm done by colonialism. Moreover, Lamming's self-conscious motives in writing this novel were straightforwardly anticolonial—opposed to colonial political economy, deeply critical of colonial ideology, and so on. Indeed, the entire plot leads toward Teeton's return from England to the Caribbean on 12 October. It is no coincidence that 12 October is the anniversary of the day Columbus landed in the new world. The novel is, in effect, an exploration of the deleterious consequences of that landing.

Yet the overall effect of the novel can hardly be said to undermine the racist beliefs that are so central to colonialist ideology. There are three main non-White characters in this work—Teeton, Roger, and Derek. By the end of the novel, all three have engaged in reprehensible actions. Teeton has killed an old White woman—the "Old Dowager"—who had been kind to him for many years. Roger has driven his White wife to suicide and has committed multiple arson. Derek has tried to rape a girl. Admittedly, none of these men is entirely in his right mind when committing his particular crime. Moreover, there are indications throughout the novel that this mental disequilibrium is the result of the colonial conditions in which they live. There is also an allegorical element to this, as several critics have noted (see, for example, Nair 66–67). Nonetheless, every one of these men engages in violent criminal behavior—and violent behavior that is entirely in keeping with racist ideology. As Supriya Nair points out, "the black man as rapist is hardly a radical breakthrough against . . . stereotyping" (67). More generally, Helen Tiffin notes that all three major non-White characters "might be expected in their individuality and creativity to escape their respective pasts," but, instead, all fall into "false stereotype" (qtd. in Joseph 71).

In contrast, the White characters seem relatively decent. Though far from perfect, their crimes are less than those of the non-White characters. The one apparent exception to this is the Old Dowager's estranged husband, who is reported to have treated his servants very badly on his estate in the Caribbean. However, while we more or less directly witness the crimes of the non-White characters, we are only told indirectly about this man's actions, which are, for that reason, less salient, less consequential for our reaction. Moreover, the evil of this character's behavior is more than counterbalanced by that of the servants themselves, who gang rape his apparently innocent young daughter. In short, the novel involves White men who are often bad, but evidently not as bad as the non-White characters with whom they are linked; White women who are more or less unequivocally good; and non-White men who brutalize the good White women in horrible ways. One would hardly expect this summary to apply to a work written by such a politically self-conscious novelist as Lamming. But it does.

At least part of the explanation for this lies in Lamming's project of writing back. He tacitly interprets his precursors as highly colonialist and follows their texts in detail—with the predictable results. The perfidious acts of his three non-White protagonists are exactly the crimes of the Blacks in those precursor works. *Water with Berries* became an ideologically ambiguous work at least in part because Lamming's composition of the novel was necessarily to some degree guided by the very texts he was setting out to criticize and correct.

More exactly, we may isolate three interrelated stories in the novel, surrounding three related characters—Derek, Roger, and Teeton. Derek is an actor who once played Othello at Stratford, but is now unable to get any role other than that of a corpse. The thematic point is both literal and metaphorical. Literally, there are too few good roles for non-White actors—more generally, too few good jobs for non-White people. Metaphorically, life as a colonized person has made Derek a sort of living corpse. For our purposes, Derek introduces the link with Othello, calling the reader's attention to Shakespeare's tragedy, making the reader sensitive to links between the novel and the play. But Derek does not enact the Othello story. Rather, he enacts the story of Caliban; he tries to rape an innocent girl, a young actress—"It's the girl's debut. She's just fresh from drama school" (237). This occurs shortly after he has been given shelter by the theater, his apartment building having been burned to the ground (241–42):

There was a wildness of butterflies in the girl's eyes, and her voice went ripping through the footlights like a wail of angels in agony. The silence grew like the horror of the body which was now pricking its way violently through the girl's thighs. Some hurricane had torn her pants away, as the body struggled to split open her sex.

Lamming makes it clear that Derek's life is emotionally debilitating, that he has, as just noted, become a living corpse. But to have him rise up from his role as a corpse to attempt rape—a "uniquely brutal . . . assault" (242)—makes no sense. Or, rather, it makes sense only on the model of a certain interpretation of Caliban—for Caliban's crime, according to Prospero, was an attempted rape of innocent Miranda, after he, like Derek, had been taken in and housed (*The Tempest* I.ii.421–27):

Prospero: Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee
(Filth as thou art) with humane care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate
The honor of my child.

This speech immediately follows the one that provided Lamming with the title for his novel. There, Caliban speaks of Prospero's change from early kindness to cruelty and exploitation and notes that, when he first came, Prospero "made much of me" and would "give me / Water with berries in't" (I.ii. 408, 409). Moreover, the rape passage in Lamming's novel calls attention to this link by comparing the rape to a hurricane (242), thereby alluding to the storm from which *The Tempest* takes its name.

Roger is a musician, also formerly successful, also down on his luck. He is married to an angelic White woman named Nicole. She gets pregnant and he accuses her of infidelity. She evidently commits suicide. In any event, she ends up dead in Teeton's room—precipitating Teeton's flight, with the Old Dowager. Though Derek introduces the theme of Othello, it is clearly Roger who lives out the story of Othello—the non-White man with a pure White wife, against whom he makes wild, jealous accusations. Indeed, the connection is explicit in the novel: Derek is thinking of "the man whom Roger had imagined to be Nicole's lover" when "suddenly Derek was back to the days of *Othello*" (133). It is even possible that Roger killed Nicole.

Of course, by the end of the novel, it is clear that Roger is somewhat deranged. His mental imbalance is suggested by his final criminal acts of arson. But, ultimately, this only makes matters worse, for his arson is not really explained at all. It too seems to make sense only by reference to a precursor text. Roger's fire starting evidently results from Lamming tacitly assigning him the role of the (dehumanized) Blacks who burn down Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Unlike *Othello* and *The Tempest*, there are no clear, direct references to Rhys's novel. However, the position of that novel as a precursor text may be suggested in the repeated references to "Saragasso." It was the place on San Cristobal where the dead were supposed to return in order to face their accusers (107)—an image of central importance in Lamming's story. Moreover, Derek was raised "by the pastors of the Saragasso chapel" (238). Finally, when the revolutionaries of San Cristobal plan to return to their island and reconvene, their meeting place is "Saragasso cemetery" (244).

Teeton is the main character in the novel. He is a successful painter, but also a member of an underground organization determined to liberate San Cristobal—largely the island of Hispaniola, comprising Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He is living in the home of the Old Dowager, a kindly lady who obviously cares for him. His story in effect combines those of all three precursor texts, though with a particular emphasis on *The Tempest*. One night, in the dark, Teeton meets a woman who introduces the theme of *The Tempest*—or, rather, reintroduces the theme, for the title itself has already linked the novel to that play. Her name is Myra, a version of "Miranda." One night, she tells Teeton about a horrible storm that killed her father. She then explains that she had lived alone with her father and their servants "on that

island. . . . Five thousand miles from home” (145). Her father had suffered some sort of robbery—later, we learn that her mother is the Old Dowager and that the “robbery” was the sexual liaison between the Old Dowager and Fernando, her father’s brother. We also learn eventually that the father had treated his servants very badly and that Fernando killed him—all variations on Shakespeare’s story. But, whereas in Shakespeare, there is only an uncertain accusation of attempted rape, here Myra tells a brutal story of vicious gang rape by all of her father’s servants (150). Evidently, this derives from a tacit interpretation of Shakespeare’s play in which Caliban is truly guilty of the accusations against him, and an interpretation in which this guilt is more salient than any actions of Prospero.

Interestingly, Teeton immediately identifies with the servants and is “tortured by regret and guilt,” feeling “as though he had been the agent of these barbarities” (151). Evidently, he was not a part of these actions, but assumes their guilt because he sees himself as racially identified with the perpetrators—in clear contrast with the White characters, who show no tendency to assume that the crimes of one or another White person are somehow shared by the entire race. Of course, White people do share Teeton’s sense that all Blacks are linked in this way. Thus Fernando too identifies Teeton with the rapists and characterizes him as a “monster” due to the actions of other Blacks; for example, speaking to Teeton, he refers to “your monstrous kind” (224). In one way this operates only to expose Fernando’s racism. But the actions of Derek, Roger, and Teeton appear to bear out his assertion. In any event, as we have already noted, Teeton eventually kills the Old Dowager. In this respect, he ends up acting like the “tribe of monstrous butchers” with which Fernando linked him (226) and with which he linked himself. He does this by taking on the role of Othello, murdering the good White woman who had loved him selflessly. Moreover, the full act draws on *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well, for “He had made arson on the Old Dowager’s body” (247).

Lamming clearly conceives of himself as writing a critique of or corrective to these precursor works—two metropolitan plays, one settler novel. And he does clearly indicate the debilitating effects of colonialism on the hearts and souls of the non-White men he portrays. But, at the same time, he closely models his own novel on these precursor texts, following them in the most politically consequential details, which he interprets as highly colonialist and highly racist. The result, in this paradigmatic case of writing back, is a novel that, perhaps, does more to reenforce negative stereotypes of non-White men than any of the works it sets out to critique.

In sum, whether or not we conceive of *Baumgartner’s Bombay* as writing back, it seems clear that writing back is far from an ideologically unambiguous undertaking—which is just what one would expect from an understanding of

its cognitive structure. Fortunately, there are many variables which affect the ideological development of a new work. Moreover, the revision of a single metropolitan precursor—whether a case of writing back or not—is by no means the only way, nor even the most important way, postcolonization writers respond to literary tradition.