(Dis)Integrating Visions:
South and Imperial/Colonial Difference in Dickens and Conrad

by Luigi Cazzato

Whether constitutional or despotic, it is much the same: the doctors are not satisfied with the condition of the various governments. There are Turkey, and Greece, and Italy and Spain of which the short-coming are held to be lamentable [...] It is marvellous, indeed, this contempt with which Northern speak of Southern [...] you might imagine yourself in the presence of philosophers of a superior planet condescending to note the lost condition of a fallen race.
The Examiner, August 1856

Sud: il solstizio d'estate, la scomparsa delle ombre, lentezza, immobilità, sosta, pausa, arresto, attesa, prossimità, sensualità, torpore e sospensione, ma anche ebrezza e pienezza insostenibile della vita...
Franco Cassano, Paeninsula, 1998

One contention of the decolonial thinker Walter Mignolo is that

> post-colonialism presupposes 'Orientalism' while in the Americas the question is 'Occidentalism', the very condition of possibility of Orientalism. Without Occidentalism there is no Orientalism. Without coloniality there is no modernity. Modernity, Occidentalism and Coloniality are all members of the same club. (Mignolo 2000: 28)

By the term "Occidentalism", Mignolo probably means the invention of the Western Indies, i.e., the New World "discovered" by the Europeans and hierarchically measured according to the "coloniality of power". This concept was introduced in the 1990s by the sociologist Aníbal Quijano in order to differentiate between colonialism and coloniality. According to Quijano, if colonialism is the historical product of empires, coloniality (of power) is part of that history but also exceeds it.

> Coloniality of power was conceived together with America and Western Europe, and with the social category of 'race' as the key element of the social classification of colonized and colonizers. Unlike in any other previous experience of colonialism, the old ideas of superiority of the dominant, and the inferiority of dominated under European colonialism were mutated in a relationship of biologically and structurally superior and inferior. (Quijano 2007: 171)

If we agree with what Quijano says above, the global disintegrating division of the world, in colonial terms, between superior and inferior races, started soon after 1492, that is to say, long before the British Empire and its master narrative began. As a consequence, the "West/East" division was an invention of Western Christianity in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, when the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and the Treaty of Zaragoza (1529) were signed. It was at that time that the papacy and the Iberian monarchies invented the "Indias Occidentales" and the "Indias Orientales", with Rome (Europe) between them as the centre of the world. According to Mignolo, it was an invention that lasted until World War II:

> [t]he division was used to legitimize the centrality of Europe and its civilizing mission. From World War II onwards, there was a shift to a 'North/South' division, but this time the division was needed to legitimize a mission of development and modernization. The first part of this history was led by Europe, the second by the United States. (Mignolo 2014)

Be it "West/East" or "North/South", the split is not ontological but fictional. It is also political, since it tells us more about the interests of the enunciators than about what is enunciated, named and mapped.

The aim of this paper is to see whether the North/South division originated before World War II, to what extent the South/North division contributed to the emergence of European modern identity and, specifically, how the British contributed to this (dis)integrating *fictional ontology*. Since the inception of Euro-Modernity, or that geocultural identity which emerged as the central site for the control of the world – to which process the English contributed in a hegemonic way, albeit late with respect to the Iberians – the idea of North and South (though not always textually uttered) was central to British cultural imagination and helped the rise of Englishness and of its imperial master narrative. The South as a literary *topos*, in Charles Dickens' *Pictures from Italy* (the beginning of Victorian age apogee) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (the end of it), allows us to speculate on this hypothesis.

First of all some reflections on world mapping and world imaging in European cultural history may be appropriate.

1. MAPS AND ICONS

As we have seen before, according to Renaissance Christian cosmology Rome was the centre between the East and the West. Earlier, during the Middle Ages, the centre was occupied by Jerusalem as in the so-called T-O maps, where (see pictures below) the "T" represents the Mediterranean and the "O" the Ocean, while the continents are those allotted to Noah's three sons: Asia (Sem), Africa (Cham), Europe (Japhet).


It is during the Renaissance that the modern way of orienting maps occurs, when Ptolemy's *Geography*, lost to the West for centuries but known to the Arabs and the Byzantines, was translated into Latin in Florence at the start of the 16th century and made available in Europe again. Ptolemy, further to orienting the *mappamundi* towards the North, provided the *graticule* – a grid of intersecting meridians and parallels – in order to pinpoint places and project the image of the spherical world onto a flat surface, constructing accurate maps for the age of explorations. If medieval theology drew maps to represent an encyclopaedic cosmology, Renaissance learning started making them in order to measure space as a mere distance to be travelled and dominated (see Edson 2007).

Because the Mediterranean Renaissance powers (Italy but, above all, Spain and Portugal) were located in the North-West of the world – and even more so later on when France, Holland and England took over their hegemonic Atlantic position – both the invention of the compass (pointing to the magnetic north) and Ptolemaic geography were particularly suited to (colonial) history. North-oriented maps strengthened the perception that the "civilised" North was seated above the "primitive" South (be it African or Indian): a verticalist ideology (see Cazzato 2017) that has governed modern/colonial world history. Therefore, it is not difficult to point out

the historicity of geography[1]: a Japanese person may call Egypt the "Near East" and an Italian consider Morocco "Oriental". In short, history has made geography unreal and time, since the inception of the modern/colonial world, "has functioned as a principle of order that increasingly subordinates places, relegating them to *before* or *below* from the perspective of the 'holders (of the doors) of time'" (Mignolo 2002: 67; my emphasis). By the end of the 19th century, the masters of historical time completed the colonial work of translating space into time, according to the ideology of linear progress still dominant today. Furthermore, in the second half of 16th century, with Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator, mapmaking abandons its mimetic aspirations in favour of representation. The Mercator projection, conceived for the use of marine navigation, distorts geographic spaces: objects appear larger the further they are from the equator and, thus, Northern landmasses are grotesquely aggrandised. Therefore, not only does the North dominate the South by being seated above it, but it does so with its fictional vastness. Local Western *enunciation* has created a global fictional *enunciated* we all see on maps even today. The same can be said of iconography.
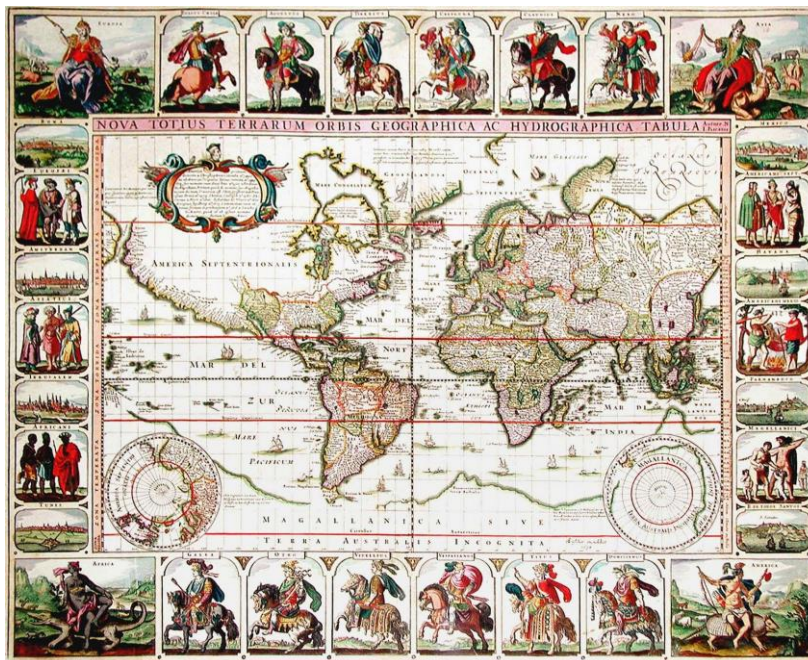
Nova Totius Terrarum Orbis Geographica Ac Hydrographica Tabula, 1652

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[1] Antonio Gramsci noted, *à propos* of the arbitrariness of the geographical constructions: "What would North–South or East–West mean without man? They are real relationships and yet they would not exist without man and without the development of civilisation. Obviously East and West are arbitrary and conventional, that is historical, constructions, since outside of real history every point on the earth is East and West at the same time. This can be seen more clearly from the fact that these terms have crystallised not from the point of view of a hypothetical melancholic man in general but from the point of view of the European cultured classes who, as a result of their world-wide hegemony, have caused them to be accepted everywhere" (Gramsci 1987: 447).

Dutch Visscher's world map (1652, see picture above) features a female allegorical representation of the continents in each corner: Europe, princely dressed in a pastoral setting; Asia, elegantly dressed but seated on a camel; Africa, half-naked resting on a crocodile; America, half-naked too but dressed as a warrior riding an armadillo. Here, the visual representations follow the visual logic of Western writing and reading, which proceeds from left to right and from top to bottom. At this time in history, although Asia was not orientalised yet, the "North/South" divide was somehow implied, specifically through the fact that every continental emblem rides a wild animal (signifying nature) except Europe (whose context is not wild because domesticated by culture). Cesare *Ripa's Iconologia* (1593-1603) had already implied as much. In this vast collection of allegories, widely known and extremely influential in 17th and 18th century *European* art, Europe is depicted as a "Lady in a very rich Habit" wearing a crown (power), holding a temple (Christianity) and next to a cornucopia (abundance). Whilst Africa is a "Blackmoor Woman, almost naked […] because it does not abound with Riches" (Ripa, 1709).

What about the North and the South? The South is, as can be seen below, an unassertive "Blackmoor Boy" with "a Sun upon his Head, surrounding him with its Rays", while the North is a man "of a proud aspect; ruddy complexion; […] His posture, the bravery of the Northern people" (Ripa, 1709).

Images from C. Ripa's *Iconologia or Moral Emblems*, 1709 English edition.

In conclusion, in 17th century learned imagery, the South was meek and black, the North white and brave. "Naked" continents were barbarian and, therefore, disconnected from culture, while "richly dressed" Europe was civilised and controlled nature. Barbarism, being a matter of location and not time yet, was in the "undressed" continents (the West Indies and Africa), civilisation in the "dressed" continent of Europe.

An innovation in the concept of the relationship between the continents was introduced by William Blake's well-known engraving "Europe supported by Africa and America" (1796).
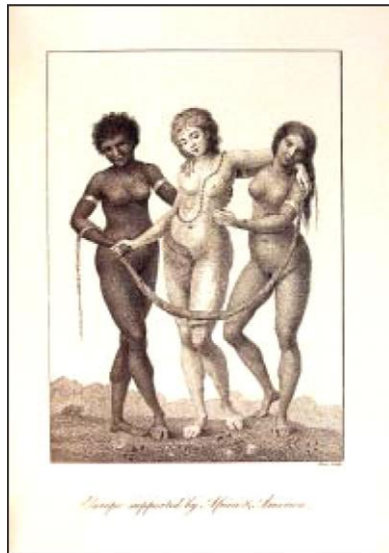
"Europe supported by Africa and America," from vol. 2 of John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Year Expedition*

Here, Blake famously – but not unambiguously (commentary on the image differs on the actual message he meant to convey because of the difference between the original sketch and the final output) – depicts three equally sensual women, whose skin is differently coloured. Europe is centre stage, holding with one hand the rope that links the three continents and with the other Africa in sisterly equality. Even if Blake applied equal stylistic principles to all three portraits, Europe is central and, as a result, the superior of the three. Nevertheless, his engraving promotes the image that without Africa and America Europe is unsupported and, therefore, the question of treatment of African and American natives is set. In Blake's time, England had already started to take over the leadership of Western expansion and London was displacing Rome as the centre of the world. The master narrative of the British Empire (with the Greenwich meridian at its very centre) had begun, destined as it was to control time and space and to govern both *colonial* and *imperial* "periphery".

It is now time to return to the concept of the coloniality of power as mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

2. (ENGLISH) COLONIALITY OF POWER

According to Quijano, "coloniality of power is not exhausted in the problem of 'racist' social relations. It pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the Eurocentered capitalist colonial/modern world power to become the cornerstone of this coloniality of power" (Quijano 2007: 171). That is why the workings of coloniality have also governed the relations within Western modernity. Indeed, Mignolo distinguishes between "colonial difference" and "imperial difference". The first difference occurs

between the colonisers and the colonised. The second difference refers to the relations between European countries which had fully succeeded in building an empire (England and France above all) and those which no longer had one or had not yet succeeded in building one (thereby positioning themselves in the lower ranks of the colonial hierarchical ladder and lagging behind in the race for progress). As a consequence, Mignolo expounds: "A degree of inferiority is attributed to the 'imperial other' that has not been colonized in that it is considered (because of language, religion, history, etc.) somewhat behind (time) in history or, if its present is being considered, marginal (space)" (Mignolo 2007: 474).

Finally, if colonial difference has played, since "the first modernity" (the *discovery* of America), a major role in the construction of European modern identity as a superior civilisation, imperial difference has played the same important role but at the expense of Southern European countries since "the second modernity" (the *discovery* of Reason). In other terms, imperial difference allowed the hierarchical process of distinguishing between "advanced" North-Western Europe and "backward" South-Eastern Europe. As Quijano clarifies, coloniality of power allowed the constitution of "a new geocultural identity: Europe – more specifically, Western Europe […] as the central site for the control of the world market. The hegemony of the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Iberian Peninsula was displaced toward the northwest Atlantic coast in the same historical moment" (Quijano 2000: 537). This moment would have occurred some time during the 17th century, after the beginning of the first modernity and before the beginning of the second one, definitely and meaningfully, to the detriment both of non-European and European peripheries. The discursive formation that has othered Southern Europe is called "Meridionism" (Pfister 1996, Cazzato 2017). Meridionism is mate to Orientalism (Said 2003) and, therefore, not coinciding with it. If Orientalism was born as a cultural tool for the implementation of European colonialism, Meridionism, out of imperial difference, was born as a cultural tool for the foundation of (North-Western) European modern identity.

For Edward Burnett Tylor, the founding father of British anthropology (whose backbone was the "physical laws" of Western progress), civilization existed among mankind in different grades. As he states in his *Primitive Culture* (1871): "The educated world of Europe and America practically settles a standard by simply placing its own nations at one end of the social series and savage tribes at the other, arranging the rest of mankind between these limits according to how they correspond more closely to savage or to cultural life" (Tylor 2010: 23). In this respect, Visscher's world map was quite clear. It is an evidence of what Quijano calls the "radical dualism" of European cognitive perspective: reason *versus* nature. "The 'subject' is bearer of 'reason', while the 'object', is not only external to it, but different nature. In fact, it is 'nature'" (Quijano 2007: 172-73).

However, since the 18th century, barbarians have been located thus not only in space but also in time. This act of translating barbarians from different or monstrous peoples into primitives meant translating with Hegel geography into chronology, and thus settling the colonial matrix of power arranging societies in an imaginary time-line going from nature to culture, from barbarism to civilization, towards the final point of

arrival that was Europe: "absolutely the end of history", as Hegel would put it (2010: 103). In this world, racial ranking, alternative epistemologies were merely remnants or errors of prescientific times. According to Tylor, the Italians, as Europeans, occupied a top position: "Few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in [ascending] order of culture: Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian" (Tylor 2010: 27). It is a pity though: implicit in Tylor's contention was that the real top position in the "rough scale of civilisation" was occupied by the English, as John Ruskin made clear in his 1870 lecture in Oxford when talking about England's "Imperial duty". Reminding his compatriots to be "a race mingled of the best northern blood", English duty is "Reign or Die", that is to say, England "must found colonies as fast and as far as she is able, formed of her most energetic and worthiest men; seizing every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on" (Ruskin 2008: 25).

It is now time to see how the coloniality of power and its discursive formations may have operated through 19th-century English literature, with particular reference to two novelists, the early Victorian Charles Dickens and the late Victorian Joseph Conrad, whose lives and works cover the time when the British imperial master narrative fully thrived. Notwithstanding the difference of their "literary discourse" and the difference of the geographical places they deal with, they may partake of the North/South dichotomy and be similarly haunted by the colonial matrix that has dominated (the second) modernity, in the space both of the colonial difference and of the imperial one.

3. MERIDIONISM, IMPERIAL DIFFERENCE, AND CHARLES DICKENS

Dickens went to the South twice (in 1844 and 1853). In *Little Dorrit* (1857) Italy and France are major settings. With his travelogue *Pictures from Italy* (1846), he places himself within the picturesque literary tradition. Nevertheless, his purpose is a critique of the traditional picturesque that sought beauty in a decadent reality. Indeed, according to Tore Rem, *Little Dorrit* is a radical reworking of the traditional depictions of Italy in English fiction and Italian territory "is primarily a background for Little Dorrit's inner landscapes, rather than a picturesque setting" (De Stasio 2010: 64). Actually, in the novel Dickens tries to deconstruct traditional picturesque and its hyperboles, for example, through Flora Finching's incoherent logorrheic speech, a parody of the stereotyped and exaggerated language of the picturesque addicts:

> 'In Italy is she really?' said Flora, 'with the grapes growing everywhere and lava necklaces and bracelets too that land of poetry with burning mountains picturesque beyond belief though if the organ-boys come away from the neighbourhood not to be scorched nobody can wonder being so young and bringing their white mice with them most humane, and is she really in that favoured land with nothing but blue about her and dying gladiators and Belvederes...?' (Dickens 1994: 535)

In Italy, the narrator remarks: "Nobody said what anything was, but everybody said what the Mrs Generals, Mr Eustace, or somebody else said it was" (566). So, Dickens' aim is to go beyond the celebrated classical Grand Tourists (Mr Eustace and the like), evading their constraints and the bounds of the stereotyped Italy of organ-boys and men with white mice (found along 19th-century English streets and, above all, in English cultural imagery). But how? In his travelogue, he invites the reader to look for a new kind of picturesque, one that does not gloss over the misery of reality: "a new picturesque with some faint recognition of man's destiny and capabilities; more hopeful, I believe, among the ice and snow of the North Pole, than in the sun and bloom of Naples" (Dickens 1974: 413). So, it is a kind of picturesque hardly found in the South. Here, the cold but hopeful North is in contrast to the sunny but desperate South, where there is little hope for an inquiry into human destiny, namely, to the Victorians, the destiny of progress and modernity. And progress to them meant above all: "factory system and free trade; representative government and liberal political institutions; a middle-class standard of material comfort and the middle-class ethic of self-discipline and sexual restraint; and the Christian religion in its Protestant form" (Stocking 1991: 35). All things that an Englishman could not find in mid-19th century Italy, subjugated as it was by political, religious and moral despotism.

This is how Dickens portrayed his beloved Genoa in a letter:

> What a sad place Italy is! A country gone to sleep, and without a prospect of waking again! I never shall forget, as long as I live, my first impressions of it, as I drove through the streets of Genoa [...] It seemed as if one had reached the end of all things – as if there were no more progress, motion, advancement, or improvement of any kind beyond; but here the whole scheme had stopped centuries ago, never to move on any more, but just lying down in the sun to bask there, 'till the Day of Judgment (Dickens 2000: 138).

In short, Italy is the antithesis of progress and enhancement. At this Southern latitude, as the Meridionist story (still) goes, time pauses. According to the imperial progressive order, Italy appears marginal in space (*below*) and in time (*before*). By the mid-1840s, the idea of the Anglo-Saxon race was an intellectual commonplace and it goes without saying that the duty Ruskin talks about in 1870 was somehow already in order when Dickens visited Italy, a country not only far from any imperial duty but also far from any national duty, because of its fragmentation and disunion: "miserable jealousies, fomented by petty Princes to whom union was destruction, and division strength, have been a canker at their root of nationality" (Dickens 1974: 433).

One of Dickens' fears on Italian soil was the contagion of its lethargic condition. If his pages, he urges in the introduction, "have ever a fanciful and idle air, perhaps the reader will suppose them written in the shade of a Sunny Day, in the midst of the objects of which they treat, and will like them none the worse for having such influences of the country upon them" (Dickens 1974: 260). Italy is a country where the cows are "perfect Italian cows enjoying the dolce far' niente all day long" (Dickens 1974: 286) and the fountains are "too lazy to work" (Dickens 1974: 287). In a letter to

Count D'Orsay from Genoa, he writes: "I am afraid this is the rustiest of *letters*, but *blame Italy for it*. Not me" (Dickens 2000: 139). It is as if the indolent Southern air has almost conquered the representative of the vigorous Anglo-Saxon race. By the time he moved to Piacenza, a dark and decayed town, he finally yielded to the Italian way, exclaiming: "What a strange, half-sorrowful and half-delicious doze it is, to ramble through these places gone to sleep and basking in the sun!" (Dickens 1974: 317). If so, then, Southern alterity, meaning to Dickens mainly indolence and torpidity, was a chance for the English identity to go on stage, as Annamarie Mcallister puts it, "upon which to play another part for a brief time, almost a holiday in which he too could be capricious and dance the tarantella" (Mcallister 2007: 158).

Amidst this general apathy, it goes without saying that commerce was slack. Instead of displaying their merchandises, Genoa shopkeepers almost hid them "as if the commodity were poison, and Genoa's law were death to any that uttered it" (Dickens 1974: 297). In Pisa, which looks like "a city at daybreak, or during a general siesta of the population", only "the beggars seem to embody all the trade and enterprise" (Dickens 1974: 359). "Not so Leghorn (made illustrious by Smollet's grave), which is a thriving, business-like, matter-of-fact place, where idleness is shouldered out of the way by commerce" (Dickens 1974: 301). In other terms, the only true dimension Dickens acknowledged was the liberal mercantile dimension, close as it was to the Victorian standards of free trade and middle-class material comfort and self-discipline.

But what is the main cause obstructing Italy's path to joining the Northern "imperial club" of civilisation? The answer is the Catholic religion or, better still, the papacy, which was the enemy of progress. While reflecting on the advent of the railroad on Italian soil, Dickens claims that the train is the most heretical astonisher for the Catholic establishment and he deems that "there must have been a slight sensation, as of earthquake, surely, in the Vatican, when the first Italian railroad was thrown open" (Dickens 1974: 359). As to religious matters, Dickens cannot do without the typical Meridionist critique of the Catholic religion as pagan. As he talks about the driver's way of swearing, he sarcastically remarks: "Sometimes, when it is a long, compound oath, he begins with Christianity and merges into Paganism" (Dickens 1974: 316). In Genoa, he tells how an old man is eager to convert him to the Catholic faith, "like Robinson Crusoe and Friday reversed" (Dickens 1974: 286). Here, the Italian plays the role of the savage, trying of pathetically converting the converter by its poor rhetorical means: "an abridgment of the History of Saint Peter — chiefly, I believe, from the unspeakable delight he has in his imitation of the cock" (Dickens 1974: 286).

Therefore, we are not sure, as Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano claim, that Dickens' observation process (or what they call his "attraction of repulsion", nurtured by pre-departure perceptions of Italy) produced an alchemical change in his view of Italy and that "he began to practice a routine discrimination between the natural warmth and kindness of so many of the Italians he met and the thoroughly unpromising material and moral circumstances in which they had to function" (Hollington and Orestano 2009: XV-XVI). In other words, the critics are just mimicking the writer and are thus prevented from releasing the othering process that the

Victorian writer performs towards the Italians[2]. What Dickens typically discriminates is between *gorgeous nature* and *degraded culture*. In the space of Italian imperial difference ("*un paradiso abitato da diavoli*"), one cannot help separating the earthly paradise from its earthly devils, or, in Dickens' own words, the "jewels" from the "dirt".

4. COLONIAL DIFFERENCE, AUSTRALISM, AND JOSEPH CONRAD

If imperial difference capitalised on what Johannes Fabian (1983) calls "the denial of coevalness" (that is to say, the denial of shared time, underlying time as a tool for the colonising strategy) of course, colonial difference did the same for obvious reasons. To Mignolo,

> In the 16th century, some knowledges were considered dangerous and, in the case of the Amerindians, Spanish missionaries devoted themselves to an extirpation of idolatries that was indeed an epistemic lobotomy. In the 18th century, knowledge was not extirpated but transformed into an object, and in that project Orientalism could be born. (Mignolo 2009: 73-74)

If discursive formations such as Orientalism and Meridionism transform the other's knowledge into an object aimed at othering it, both of them are the offshoot of the colonial matrix of modern power. The same can be said about other "geographic" discursive formations, Australism included. Tackling the North-South issue, Madina Tlostanova defines "Australism" as "an anxiety to divide the world according to the North-South divide replacing the previous West/East division, including the capitalist/socialist dichotomy" (Tlostanova 2011: 74). She soon adds that this anxiety was not only related to economics but also hid questions of ontology and ethics, such as the "epistemic principle and the division of humankind into modern (Northern) and traditional (Southern)" (Tlostanova 2011: 74). Once more, what is at stake is the hiding of imperial-colonial relations through the translation of the issue of civilisation into temporal terms. Perhaps the notion of Australism may be also helpful in reading Conrad's colonial fiction, even if at his time the "official" shift from West/East to North/South divide had not occurred yet and his interest in the South was secondary to his interest in the East (*Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim*, *The Rescue*).

Indeed, at the very beginning of the 20th century, when Conrad had published *Heart of Darkness* (1899), the long Columbian epoch of explorations was about to close. Around 1910, the last frontiers of the unexplored world were penetrated, the

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[2] Yet, this is hardly surprising since in another volume Hollington and the other editors, though speaking of "imaginative geography" (Hollington et ali 2010: 2), do not mention E. Said's *Orientalism* as a critical source at all. On the contrary, another collective work, *The Victorians and Italy*, tries to tackle the relationship between the two cultures from a Saidian perspective, deeming the othering attitude as "a hardly escapable by-product of the colonial and imperialist mind. The English were used to measuring other societies against their own standards of modernity and could not help finding fault" (Vescovi et ali 2009: 9).

first pioneers having arrived at the North Pole and the South Pole. However, when Conrad was a map-gazing addicted boy, vast territories of the African continent were unknown to the Europeans. Famously, Marlow tells how he, as a little chap, would put his finger on the map's blank spaces promising himself: "when I grow up I will go there" (Conrad 1988: 34). A couple of decades later, Conrad writes something similar in an essay called "Geography and Some Explorers" (1924) referring to his beloved 1852 atlas knowing nothing of the Great Lakes of Africa, so that "the heart of its Africa was white and big" (Conrad 2010: 12). Whether or not Conrad's will was Foucauldian power-knowledge or just "cartographical sublime" (Hampson 2003: 34), what is certain is that his metaphorical description of the exploration of those exciting Southern spaces of white paper is military-like:

> My imagination could depict to itself there worthy, adventurous, and devoted men nibbling at the edges, attacking from north and south and east and west, conquering a bit of truth here and a bit of truth there, and sometimes swallowed up by the mystery their hearts were so persistently set on unveiling. (Conrad 2010: 12)

When Conrad-Marlow went to those places, colonization had already turned the white heart of Africa into a place of darkness. They had ceased to be romantic blank spaces and had become places of "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration" (Conrad 2010: 14). It is true, then, that Conrad does not efface the subject of enunciation-knowledge, but brings into the picture his desire and intentions. However, taking for granted that the heart of Africa was blank signified the typical colonial manoeuvre of considering a space full of unknown otherness as empty. Second, Marlow's telling of his penetration into the heart of Africa, following the stream of the River Congo, immediately recalls the standard colonial translation of space into time made by the masters of European colonial epistemology: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad 1988: 102). Travelling up that river meant in reality travelling down in time, towards prodigious prehistoric barbarism. The same barbarism Marlow imagines a young Roman citizen would have found when he arrived at the Thames: "land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him" (30). But the Thames, unlike the River Congo, now rested peacefully and the group of men looked "at the venerable stream […] in the august light of abiding memories" (24). Not so for the African river, which was "an empty stream" in "a great silence" (102): no light and no memories, despite its primordial flowing. Indeed, the Europeans "were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet" (Conrad 1988: 108), where one could not be sure whether the prehistoric men were cursing, praying to or welcoming the wanderers.

Above all, notwithstanding the temporal distancing, the Europeans were afraid that the "whirl of black limbs" (108) surrounding them was human and, somehow, had a "remote kinship" with them (110). Also Marlow's African helmsman, described as "a

dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs" (112), while dying, gave him a look that was "like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (162). These are the passages that Chinua Achebe quotes in his well-known controversial essay accusing Conrad of being a "thoroughgoing racist" (Achebe 1977: 1789). What strikes the Nigerian writer is that Marlow was

> concerned not so much about 'distant kinship' as about someone laying a claim on it. The black man lays a claim on the white man which is well-nigh intolerable. It is the laying of this claim which frightens and at the same time fascinates Conrad, 'the thought of their humanity – like yours ... Ugly'. (Achebe 1977: 1789)

Hence, to Achebe, Conrad's plain racism. What is interesting for us is that Conrad's rhetorical/colonial manoeuvre of translating contemporaneity into inhuman prehistory, and thus distancing black people from white people, is not sufficient to shelter him from the suspicion that Africans are human and that the whites' aim is the "conquest of the earth" (32). And yet he does not provide any *other* perspective, as, for instance, Mungo Park (one of his "heroic explorers") had done a century earlier. Unlike Conrad, perhaps because Park was only an explorer, he tells how the world was viewed and mapped by the "puerile" Mandingoes:

> They imagine that the world is an extended plane, the termination of which no eye has discovered; it being, they say, overhung with clouds and darkness. They describe the sea as a large river of salt water, on the farther shore of which is situated a country called Tobaubo doo; 'the land of the white people'. At a distance from Tobaubo doo, they describe another country, which they allege is inhabited by cannibals of gigantic size, called Koomi. This country they call Jong sang doo 'the land where the slaves are sold'. (Park 2012: 252)

Only in this way could Conrad have discovered that "cannibalism" was not unique to Africa and that cannibals might be "fine fellows" also out of "their place" (106), where human flesh could be sold like meat and, so, differently *eaten*. Edward Said famously put it in this way:

> Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that 'natives' could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them. (Said 1994: 34)

According to Terry Collit's Barthesian myth-critical reading of Conrad's novella, "the mythic character of *Heart of Darkness* enables it to resist political readings principally because no appropriation of a myth can ever be final" (2005: 110). And yet, Conrad's ambivalence has produced many controversial claims: from Achebe's allegation of racism to James Clifford's praise of him as an exemplar anthropologist

(Clifford 1988). To Paul Armstrong, it is exactly his ambivalence that makes Conrad "neither a racist nor an exemplary anthropologist but a sceptical dramatist of epistemological processes. *Heart of Darkness* is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding" (Armstrong 1996: 23). The Kenyan writer Leonard Kibera, unlike Achebe, reads Conrad's work as "an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa [...] He used the third world so totally as a background against which he examined Western values and conduct that the people in Africa and Asia are no more than caricatures" (cit. in Sarvan 1980: 10).

Ultimately, it is true that *Heart of Darkness* undermines the 19th-century's faith in the ability of narrative to express realty. It is also true, as T. Collit argues, that this may become "the novel's meaning, in a move that subordinates the colonial content to those broader philosophical concerns that Conrad called 'secondary notions' [metahistorical concerns?]" (2005, 111). Nevertheless, notwithstanding all these provisos, it is unquestionably true that Conrad's novella is a scrutiny of the West *and* a comment on Africa (the South). The peculiarity of *Heart of Darkness* is that travelling in time through space leads to "Austral-traditional" barbarousness *and* to "Boreal-modern" one: the horror of Europe's "heavenly mission to civilise" (32). In Conrad's ambivalence, at the respective extremes of the colonial difference – the heart of either primitive Africa or civilised Europe – one equally finds the dark matter of human universal savagery.

Half a century separated Conrad from Dickens, who closed his Italian travelogue by claiming that, despite Italy's dissipation, "in every fragment of her fallen Temples, and every stone of her deserted palaces and prisons, she helps to inculcate the lesson that the wheel of Time is rolling for an end, and that the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing, and more hopeful, as it rolls! (Dickens 1974: 433).

In conclusion, if in the realm of imperial difference Dickens was overwhelmed by the anxiety of Italian (Southern) degeneracy, but still confident in the rolling of (progressive) time, Conrad, in the realm of colonial difference – where he met Kurtz, the horrifying "emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (Conrad 1988: 80) – was no longer so. And he could not help but be overwhelmed by the fear of an even more evil contagion. Evil enough to engulf both Africa and Europe, the South and the North, whose divide seems as old as the second modernity, when English world supremacy began. It is a supremacy no longer thriving today and, whether knowingly or not, the British frighteningly feel it, while Europe (and the entire West?) seems to disintegrate under the weight of the old division (colonial or imperial), which now comes back to bite it on its very land, both in its meridionist and australist gown.

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