

35 The Exotic

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years, especially British novels, have had exotic settings. By "exotic" I mean foreign, but not necessarily glamorous or alluring. Indeed Graham Greene specialized in unprepossessing or, to use his own favourite epithet, "seedy" foreign locations for his novels. It has been said that they are all set in a country of the mind called Greenland. They certainly have an atmospheric family resemblance (vultures, for instance, are more likely to inhabit his skies than doves or even sparrows) but the term does an injustice to the specificity of his settings.

The exotic in fiction is the mediation of an "abroad" to an audience assumed to be located at "home". Joseph Conrad, whose work is inextricably connected with the Age of Imperialism (he was a Polish émigré who joined the British Merchant Navy, and observed the workings of the British Empire, and its rivals, in many far-flung corners of the globe) understood this very well. At the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, his classic study of the appalling effects of the Belgian colonization of the African Congo, both on the indigenous inhabitants, and on the Europeans who carried it out, Conrad frames his story by having the narrator, Marlow, tell it to a group of companions on a yawl moored in the Thames estuary. "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." Marlow goes on to imagine how the banks of the Thames would have looked to a Roman trireme two millennia before — "Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages, — precious little to eat fit for a civilized man . . . Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay — cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile and death, — death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush." It's a neat reversal of the main story, in which an Englishman goes out from a busy, modern, "progressive" Europe to face the dangers and deprivations of darkest Africa, and it prepares us for the novella's radical questioning of the stereotypes of "savage" and "civilized" in the tale of Marlow's journey up the Congo.

Graham Greene often recorded his great admiration for Conrad, and confessed that he had to give up reading him for fear of being unduly influenced by the earlier writer's style. Whether the title of *The Heart of the Matter*, a novel that derived from Greene's war-

Wilson sat on the balcony of the Bedford Hotel with his bald pink knees thrust against the ironwork. It was Sunday and the Cathedral bell clanged for matins. On the other side of Bond Street, in the windows of the High School, sat the young negroes in dark blue gym smocks engaged on the interminable task of trying to wave their wirespring hair. Wilson stroked his very young moustache and dreamed, waiting for his gin-and-bitters.

Sitting there, facing Bond Street, he had his face turned to the sea. His pallor showed how recently he had emerged from it into the port: so did his lack of interest in the schoolgirls' opposite. He was like the lagging finger of the barometer, still pointing to Fair long after its companion had moved to Stormy. Below him the black clerks moved churchward, but their wives in brilliant afternoon dresses of blue and cerise aroused no interest in Wilson. He was alone on the balcony except for one bearded Indian in a turban who had already tried to tell his fortune: this was not the hour or the day for white men — they would be at the beach five miles away, but Wilson had no car. He felt almost intolerably lonely. On either side of the school the tin roofs sloped toward the sea, and the corrugated iron above his head clanged and clattered as a vulture alighted.

GRAHAM GREENE *The Heart of the Matter* (1948)

IMPERIALISM and its aftermath set off an extraordinary wave of travel, exploration and migration around the globe, in which writers, or potential writers, were inevitably caught up. One consequence was that many novels of the last hundred and fifty

time service for M16 in Sierra Leone, contains an allusion, or nod of homage, to Conrad's African tale, I do not know; but Greene's opening, like Conrad's, is particularly artful in the way it manipulates, juxtaposes and counterpoints signifiers of home and abroad. Wilson, newly arrived from England, is a minor character used specifically for the purpose of introducing the reader to the exotic setting. (Once this is achieved, the point of view of the narrative shifts to the hero, Scobie, a long-resident police officer.) Slyly, Greene abstains from telling us immediately where we are (Free-town) but makes us infer it, complicating the task by scattering some confusing clues. The Bedford Hotel, the Cathedral bell clanging for matins, Bond Street and the High School, all sound like features of an English city. In the first paragraph only the references to Wilson's exposed knees (implying that he is wearing shorts) and the young negroes suggest that the setting is probably tropical Africa. This double-take effect neatly encapsulates colonialism's tendency to impose its own culture on the indigenous one — partly as an instrument of ideological domination, and partly as a way of mitigating its own "home-sickness". There is irony and pathos too in the readiness with which the colonized collaborate in this process — the African girls in British-style gym-slips vainly trying to wave their hair, the black clerks and their wives dutifully attending the Anglican service. We tend to think of *The Heart of the Matter* as primarily a novel about the moral consequences of religious belief, but it is almost as importantly a novel about colonialism.

As I said earlier (in Section 14) description in fiction is necessarily selective, depending heavily on the rhetorical device of synecdoche, in which the part stands for the whole. Wilson is evoked for us by his knees, his pallor and his moustache, the young African girls by their gym smocks and wirespring hair, the Bedford Hotel by its ironwork balcony and corrugated-iron roof, and so on. These details of the scene constitute a minute proportion of all those that might have been noted. There is only one overtly metaphorical expression: the simile of the barometer, which actually seems a little strained, punning on "Fair" to maintain the antithesis between white and black that runs through the passage.

But some of the epithets applied to the literal details of the scene generate quasi-metaphorical connotations and cross-references. "Bald" (normally applied only to the head) emphasizes the hairlessness of Wilson's knees, and "young" (normally applied to the whole person) the febleness of his moustache, contrasting with the luxuriance of the African girls' hair. There is equivalence as well as difference here. The way Wilson thrusts his knees against the ironwork symbolizes the repressiveness of his British public-school-and-civil-service mentality, still pristine, as his lack of sexual interest (twice noted) in the African women indicates. The girls' efforts to subdue their tightly curled hair is a still more obvious symbol of the natural subordinated to the cultural. The use of hair as an ethnic marker continues in the next paragraph with the bearded and turbaned Indian.

Although the scene is described from Wilson's position in space and time, it is not narrated from his subjective point of view, until we reach the sentence, "He felt almost intolerably lonely." Before that, Wilson is himself one of the objects in the scene, which is described by an omniscient but impersonal narrator, who knows things Wilson does not know, and sees things Wilson does not notice, and draws ironic connections between them that Wilson, waiting for his gin-and-biters, dreaming (no doubt of home), is incapable of appreciating.