It is a critical commonplace to refer to the literal and metaphorical resonances of Conrad’s focus on travel throughout his fiction. The sea journeys described in *Lord Jim* or “Typhoon,” the river expeditions of *Heart of Darkness* or “The End of the Tether,” the shifts of location from land to sea in *Chance* initiate the psychological and epistemological journeys of these stories’ protagonists. However, Conrad also draws attention to the localized movement phrases, gestures, and postures of individuals, complementing the geographical movements of the narrative with a sense of the physicality of characters’ intimate actions (and nonactions) within the larger framework. Thus Jim’s “leap” from the *Patna* offers a symbolic representation of the narrative’s restless geographical and narratological leaps as it moves disjunctively but inexorably toward Jim’s tragic demise in Patusan. Likewise, the sweeping geographical shift from Russia to Geneva in *Under Western Eyes* finds a more muted counterpart in the subtle modifications of Mrs. Haldin’s posture. Seated in her armchair, gazing on the Rue des Philosophes, she registers, through her physical deterioration in Geneva, her perception of the truth of her son’s death in Russia.

These examples illustrate Conrad’s sensitivity to “body language,” yet this feature of the fiction has often been overlooked. In this essay I shall explore...
this aspect of Conrad’s work, using *Heart of Darkness*, his most famous exposition of the journey metaphor, as a test case. Focusing on an analysis of the tale’s ubiquitous attention to movement in both literal and metaphorical senses, I suggest ways in which movement and stillness, the use of active gestures and silent poses operate not just as isolated descriptive moments, but form part of a complex relationship between physical and narrative movement that contributes in significant ways to the author’s predominantly skeptical mediation of the story.

In order to contextualize the narratological function of movement in *Heart of Darkness*, however, we need first to look closely at the language and structuring of the narrative to explore the ways in which physical movement occupies a constitutive role. To some extent Conrad’s presentation of bodily movement in this text responds to contemporary philosophical discussions, where, for example, the body plays an important part in the aesthetics of figures such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Stéphane Mallarmé. Reflecting in part this philosophical framework, Conrad harnessed the rhythmic and gestural properties of human action to his narrative strategy throughout the text of *Heart of Darkness*, astutely juxtaposing representations of movement and stasis in order to advance the skeptical tone of the narrative as a whole. The first section of the essay examines how he achieved this by creating a linguistic texture that privileged metaphors of movement and the human experience of embodiment, exploiting the metaphorical register to influence the narrative situation at the levels of the telling and the told throughout the tale.

The second section shows how Conrad further extended these qualities of the novella’s discourse by developing structural and temporal links between movement phrases in the text, enabling his audience to recognize the relation between Marlow’s literal and epistemological experience. This section calls for a reorientation of conventional readings of the novella’s structure that place Marlow’s meeting with Kurtz at the hollow “center” of the text. Instead, I draw attention to another famous moment occurring at the “heart” of the story. Following his first encounter with the dying Kurtz at the Inner Station, Marlow describes his vision of a female figure running along the bank, her physical vitality offering a striking contrast with the emaciated body of Kurtz,

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1. The Odyssean resonances of *Heart of Darkness* are well known. For a Dantean perspective, and a perspective on the “knitting women” as the Fates, see the article by Cleary and Thomas (1984).

2. Conrad’s elliptical method in this novella has already provided narrative theorists with one of their most complex paradigms of dramatized storytelling (see, for example, Todorov 1978, 161–73; Brooks 1984, 238–63; Lothe 1989, 21–56; Hawthorn 1990, 171–202; Greaney 2002, 57–76).
which at this point has been reduced to “a voice.” Rather than following existing exegeses, I want to shift our perspective away from the meeting with Kurtz. I argue that Conrad’s positioning of Marlow’s vision of the African woman’s “measured steps” (60) and atavistic gestures at the literal center of the tale constitutes the focus of a complex critique of the body and physical movement throughout the narrative.

I

The opening of Heart of Darkness immediately alerts us to the oppositions of movement and stasis that permeate the tale, as the frame narrator announces: “The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide” (7). Conrad establishes the context of the tale as one that is not just about movement in a physical, psychological, or metaphorical sense, but one that is also constituted by movement and cessation of movement in its very syntactical and grammatical structures. In each sentence the dominant verbal tense is simple past, the dominant voice is active. Yet in each case the verb lacks the agent that typically accompanies the active voice, suggesting an unfinished or inconclusive action, only to be interrupted by the stative ‘was,’ which brings the rhythm of the sentence to a moment of poise or rest at the end, rather than to a definitive conclusion. An abundance of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson term “image schema” metaphors occur here, denoting action strongly associated with physical experience: “swung to”; “at rest”; “the flood had made”; “being bound down the river.”

Lakoff and Johnson’s account of embodiment in language is useful in exploring Conrad’s presentation of image schemata in this text (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 6). They emphasize the prelinguistic experience that we metaphorize in language in order to describe certain phenomena. Image schemata show how meaning emerges through embodiment, through our experience of certain actions, systemic processes, states within our bodies, often accompanied by a directional preposition (“zoning out,” “being laid back”). In an earlier work, Johnson uses the paradigm of “balance” to explore the way in which our cognitive processes convert prelinguistic physical experience (like learning to stand up) into metaphorical usage when we interpret “balance” in a painting:

When we look at a painting we have a complex metaphorical experience
of visual weight and force. Weight is used metaphorically in the standard way—we structure and understand a domain of one kind (psychological/perceptual) in terms of structure projected from a domain of a different kind (gravitational/physical). What is unusual or unrecognized about this dimension of metaphorical activity is that it is an actual structuring operation in our experience. We may not consciously experience a metaphorical projection, but our experience of balance in the figure presupposes such a projection. (Johnson 1974, 80)

Such an example constitutes an individual’s understanding of a phenomenon and thereby influences their acts of inference. The metaphors, or analogies, are in this case not merely convenient economies for expressing our knowledge; rather they are our knowledge and understanding of the particular phenomenon in question.

Conrad frequently introduced image schemata into the fiction of this period, especially when alluding to the movement of sailors on board ship, or the movement of the craft itself, whether at sea or on the river. In chapter 1 of The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, the narrator tells us that the “carpenter had driven in the last wedge of the main-hatch battens” (3–4); in “The Lagoon,” “the white man’s canoe” was “advancing up stream” (27); in “The End of the Tether,” “the Sofala would plough her way up-stream” (152). The use of image schemata is also prolific in Heart of Darkness. Yet in this text Conrad’s method assumes an added significance insofar as these metaphors draw attention to prelinguistic physical experiences, something that Conrad seems intuitively to exploit in the larger narratological scheme of the tale, not only in its discussion of primitivism, but also in its structural relationship between the telling of the story and the told. As we read we may not initially be aware of the frequency of references to looking toward, stepping back, or giving in, as the language of both the frame narrator and Marlow implicitly metaphorizes the metaphysical or philosophical register of their narration in terms of physical action. This first paragraph establishes a narrative mood in which anticipation, reaching, forward motivation, the teleological thrust of the tale, is constantly frustrated, punctuated by moments of stillness, and of rest, or syncopated occasionally by sudden gestures and interpolations. Narrative interludes, where the representation of physical stillness “punctuates” the text, act as a guide to the reader in the manner of typographical punctuation, where the emphasis lies in the intake and exhalation of the breath during the reading process. But Conrad’s frequent use of unexpected gesture, flashes of color or sound also suggests a form of “syncopation” in musical terms, where the representation of physical presence depends on an internal sense of rhythmic disruption, experienced by
the reader as a visual dislocation. The juxtaposition of movement and stasis is symbolized temporally and spatially of course by the juxtaposition of the literal frame situation of the listeners on the boat and the situation of the story that Marlow recounts in narrative time, projecting his listeners back imaginatively in time and space.

Throughout the tale we are made implicitly aware of a relationship between the physical body's experience and its internalization. The familiar instance of Ian Watt's “delayed decoding” is only one example of Conrad's expression of perceptual reality, as he presents the phenomenological relationship of seeing and understanding (Watt 1979, 168–200). But Conrad’s exploration of a range of physical experiences drives the metaphorical register of the text at the deepest level, contributing to his most skeptical treatment of language, paradoxically through his expression of a narrative structured in part by visions of movement and gesture. The most economic summary of the tale appears (through the use of image schemata) in terms of a choreographed moment, when Marlow confesses that he “had peeped over the edge” but stepped back from the abyss (69).

Conrad also presents the physical dimension of the tale through the rhythmic alternation of scenes of movement and stasis (syncopation in some cases, or perhaps what Genette would call “effects of rhythm” [1980, 88]). Movement and passage are frequently denoted throughout the text in an iterative mode suggesting repetition of an occasion, providing the prose with its rhythm, and, visually, the function of a back projection in film. For example, as Marlow describes his approach to Africa along the coast he first establishes the inexorable rhythm and ongoing inevitability of the journey with image schema metaphors. He talks of “watching a coast as it slips by,” and how “we pounded along” in the boat (16). However, he signposts notable interruptions to this sense of physical continuity and flow. Using the adverbial phrase “now and then,” he establishes the first in a series of habitual occasions: “Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by African fellows... They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast” (17).

There is a striking ambiguity in the syntactical presentation of this scene. Marlow's account on one level appears to move from the iterative “now and then” to the singulative, “it was.” But is it one boat that is glimpsed now and then, or is there a succession of similar boats, glimpsed one after another? The move to “it was” seems to involve the use of Genette’s “pseudo-iterative,” where, as Genette observed, “the “richness and precision of detail” of the
description of each occasion in the series require a “willing suspension of disbelief” since “no reader can seriously believe they occur and reoccur in that manner, several times, without any variation” (Genette 1980, 121). By imbuing his use of the iterative, the series, with the quality of the singulative occasion, Marlow reinforces the physical description of the Africans. The temporal marker punctuates the scene of the “civilized” Marlow’s passive observation on the boat with a vision of intense energy in the primitivism of the natives’ movement. But by inserting the temporal ambiguity into the account, Conrad also extends the reader’s awareness of Marlow’s current position in the retelling of the tale. Conrad creates an interesting juxtaposition between Marlow’s self-consciousness of his own faltering subject position (his is the place of unreality, not the paddle boat’s), and the authenticity, “natural and true,” of the natives’ subjectivity. The force of Marlow’s evocation of the natives’ movement, within the told, implies that, yes, Marlow may have been partly aware of this distinction at the time, but that, now, sitting in the boat recounting the tale, the full impact of the physical “otherness” of the Africans, gathering force in the “singulative” expression of their action, has awakened in him, in the telling, his skepticism about the European subject.

The same effect occurs on another occasion, when the ongoing journey is characterized through the metaphorization of human experience: “the reaches opened up before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water” (37). The adverb “suddenly” interrupts the teleological movement of the narrative: “But suddenly as we struggled round a bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of African limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage” (37). Again we are made aware of the immediacy of Marlow’s experience, the force of the singulative “there would be” creating the effect of an unforgettable break in the movement of the journey. The use of the “pseudo-iterative” reinforces Marlow’s recollections with the physical charge of each occasion, while simultaneously strengthening the sense of the effect on him of accumulated experience, which he expresses skeptically in the telling, with the benefit of temporal distance from the event.

Conrad uses these interludes to establish Marlow’s particular ideological tone, mediating the seaman’s experiences as a continuum of movement punctuated by discordant moments, startling visual interruptions or hiatuses where he is brought into contact with activities whose teleology bears no apparent relation to his own, yet whose impact on his own psychological journey is profound. Thus Conrad cultivates Marlow’s sense of alienation and strangeness, at the same time questioning a Darwinian perspective of the Africans
as he moves from an apprehension of their alterity toward his perception of sharing with them a common humanity. Marlow’s empathy with the Africans arises not necessarily from dialogue with them, but through his observation of their movement: “The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy . . . this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar” (37–38).

Yet again the use of the “pseudo-iterative,” in conjunction with the experience of human embodiment suggested by the image schema metaphor, “The steamer toiled along,” brings into play Marlow’s sense of cultural shock contained in the seemingly singulative “They howled and leaped and spun.” We could also argue that in his linguistic emphasis on “primitive” action and on human embodiment, Conrad’s literary style here responds in part to contemporary anthropological and philosophical contexts, especially in Nietzsche’s identification of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), where Nietzsche associates the will of the unconscious, the life force, with the origins of tragedy in the Dionysian dithyramb—the hymn to the gods which constantly draws the individual back into the communal body of the chorus. Nietzsche gestures to the realm of the aesthetic when he associates the Dionysian force with “a symbolism of the body” ([1872] 2000, 26). Conrad’s novella presents several examples of the Dionysian frenzy as Marlow talks of the Africans as “streams of human beings” (59); “the crowd of savages”; “that wedged mass of bodies” (66). Reflecting the communal impulse of the Dionysian, Marlow also expresses a pervasive turn-of-the-century anxiety generated by the Nietzschean vision of an energetic and unruly crowd: “all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance” (66).3

On the other hand, Conrad’s allusions to Schopenhauerian philosophy in this text tell us more about Marlow’s skeptical position as narrator, which we apprehend both in the syntactical ambiguity of the retelling in the above examples and in the narrative frame, where Marlow sits on the boat recounting his story. Conrad is alert, throughout the text, to Schopenhauer’s dominant idea of the will and critics have frequently alluded to echoes of *The World as Will and Representation* in Conrad’s work.4 Schopenhauer claims that as willing

3. See Carey’s discussion of this phenomenon.
4. Schopenhauer’s ideas became widely known in Europe from the 1850s onward (he published volume 1 of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in 1818 and volume 2 in 1844). In his biography of Conrad, Frederick Karl frequently cites Schopenhauer as an important influence on the author, using Galsworthy’s claim that Conrad read Schopenhauer with sympathy (1979, 362).
beings our nature leads us to suffering through insatiable desire, an argument strikingly illustrated in *Heart of Darkness* by Kurtz’s corruption. Drawing on Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, Schopenhauer finds salvation from the cycle of ’willing’ or desire in the denial of the will. We may be reminded here that Marlow sits on the boat at the mouth of the Thames at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* like “a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower” (10). Conrad’s gesturing to Schopenhauerian philosophy in the narrative situation is tinged with his characteristic skepticism, suggesting that Marlow’s experiences have not gained him complete enlightenment. At the same time, Marlow has shown the restraint of the Schopenhauerian, someone who has suffered the knowledge of human desires but exhibited self-denial, stepping back from the abyss and confessing his tale.

But Schopenhauer also associates the action of the body with the will: “Every true act of his will is also at once and without exception a movement of his body” (2:130). Here Schopenhauer creates a problem, since the will constitutes desire and bodily needs leading to misery. He claims that you need to be in touch with the will but not to give in to it in order to reach a point of restraint, escaping the cycle of misery and desire. Schopenhauer’s key to the will is provided by action, but our inner awareness of our own will manifesting itself in the body supposedly points us toward what exists beyond the realm of representations altogether. Thus he privileges the aesthetic, placing the creative artist, in relation to the aesthetic experience, in a state of will-lessness.

In some respects Conrad makes Marlow, in the telling of his tale, respond to Schopenhauer’s account of the aesthetic. There is an increasing tension in Marlow’s embrace, and simultaneous mistrust, of the physical body, in his representation of an originating will that is both “savage and superb” (60). The frenzied movement of the natives also fits with the Schopenhauerian association of perception with intuition, distinct from the conceptual, in the continuation of a Western philosophical emphasis on the mind/body split.

Conrad may have been familiar with *The World as Will and Representation* through the work of Eduard Brunetière, editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and author of *Essais sur la littérature contemporaine* (1892). See also Pecora 1985.

5. See Schopenhauer 1969, 1:9, where he alludes to the Hindu veil of Maya. Marlow follows this theme when he observes, “as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes” (46). Schopenhauer’s exploration of the dichotomy of subject and object in Book 1 is relevant to this discussion. He claims that the subject of experience can never be an object of experience. It is not identical with the person (since persons are constituted in part bodily, and bodies are objects of experience), nor is it identical with any part of the spatiotemporal, empirical world. From an objective standpoint there is only matter in time and space (this is true of oneself considered from an objective standpoint). Rather, partly borrowing from eastern philosophies, he offers a form of transcendentalism where “each of us finds himself as this subject” (1:5).
Schopenhauer’s conflation of the will and the action of the body in a punctual moment is teased out throughout Marlow’s narrative as he repeatedly emphasizes the immediacy of expression through the action of the body, the naturalism of the physical movement of the natives given greater emphasis in the text through his use of the “pseudo-iterative.” However, Conrad’s text expresses ambivalence about the split between the intuitive body and the rational mind. Marlow speaks of the natives’ actions as “an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along the coast” (17), but he has nevertheless aestheticized their actions, both in the sense of positioning himself as voyeur in the told and in his aestheticizing practices in the telling. Moreover, Marlow admires Kurtz. His treatment of Kurtz’s corruption is ambiguous, protecting the reputation of the remarkable man who lived in the discursive realm of concepts. Not only does he lie to the Intended on the topic of Kurtz’s dying words (75), he excises from Kurtz’s report on the “Suppression of Savage Customs” (70) the dead man’s revealing postscript: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (51). In presenting Marlow’s disillusionment, Conrad exploits in the relationship between his situation in the narrative frame and in the inner story a tension between Schopenhauer’s theory of the will and his aesthetics, offering in Marlow’s position a more skeptical relationship between aesthetics and ethics.

Most importantly for this discussion, the narrative situation is constructed in such a way that the skeptical relationship between aesthetics and ethics arises out of the very relationship of the telling and the told. Moreover, this latter relationship is constituted by a juxtaposition of movement and stasis that draws attention to Conrad’s skeptical strategies throughout the tale. Marlow’s retelling of the movements of the journey and of the natives’ atavistic “frenzy” can be read against the image of his physical passivity, seated in the boat in the mouth of the Thames. But we also perceive Marlow’s growing disillusionment, his distancing of himself from European values in his use of a language of physical experience, and the ambiguous interweaving of iterative and singulative expression to tell the tale. In short, Marlow’s narrative style itself relies on syncopated rhythms of movement and stasis. Conrad’s skeptical framework arises in part from a doubling effect of the physical oppositions of momentum and stillness in the narrative situation. Marlow’s assertion of his physical presence, and his experience of physicality in the face of a breakdown of language (his narrative trails into a series of inconclusive dots), is repeated in the realms of both the telling and the told.

6. This resembles Isadora Duncan’s theory of movement. As Mark Franko has observed, from Duncan’s perspective there is no expressional product emanating from her body. Hers was a dance of feeling as embodied sensation, not of expressive reaction to sensation (1995, 1–17).
II

Against an ongoing rhythm of passage accompanying Marlow’s slow perceptual dawning, Conrad posits a series of sudden interruptions, freeze-frame images, gestures that catch the reader by surprise. I now turn to one of the most evocative of these interruptions to show how Conrad uses the temporal and structural links between movement phrases to aid the readers’ understanding of Marlow’s experience. Shortly after his meeting with Kurtz, Marlow describes his vision of an African woman:

... And from right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman.

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. ... She carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet. ... She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. ... She came abreast of the steamer, stood still and faced us. ... She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky. ... She turned away slowly, walked on. ... Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared. ... (60; the ellipses are mine)

Marlow’s voyeuristic and erotically charged account of the African woman foregrounds her lavish attire, her physical prowess and atavistic responses, her embodiment of emotion in wild physical gestures, and the challenging return of her unnerving gaze. As with his descriptions of the Africans elsewhere in the text, Marlow reflects a contemporary aesthetics of movement that privileged the intuitive and the physically expressive. We could argue that the sudden upward thrust of the African woman’s arms draws attention to the power and economy of gesture in Mallarmé’s sense of the female dancer moving “with miraculous lunges and abbreviations” (62) or that his admiration for her atavism offers a response to tensions arising in Schopenhauer’s negative association of the will with the body or to Nietzsche’s privileging of the Dionysian.

In fact, many diverse sources may be cited for the description of the African

7. See Mallarmé’s description of the female dancer: “with miraculous lunges and abbreviations, writing with her body, she suggests things which the written work could express only in several paragraphs of dialogue or descriptive prose” ([1886] 1956, 62).
woman, including anthropological texts like Richard Burton’s mid-nineteenth-century presentation of Amazonian dancers in West Africa.\(^8\) Conrad’s African woman reflects the atavistic energy of Burton’s description in her rhythmic progress and bold gestures, and her ‘helmet’ of hair suggests the military prowess of the Amazons. But the undifferentiated primitivism of Conrad’s description is hardly a distinctive anthropological account, attending, as Burton does, to the historicity and individuality of particular African dance traditions (Burton 1864, 47–48). Conrad’s account is closer to the generalized presentation of Rousseau’s “noble savage,” or fictional accounts of exoticism, such as Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1862), Wilde’s *Salomé* (1891), and various evocations of popular music-hall orientalism.\(^9\) Moreover, for many feminist and postcolonial critics, Conrad’s account intersects with an enduring rhetoric of exclusion depending for its success on the performative nature of the representation.\(^10\)

However, if we momentarily set aside the negative implications of Conrad’s representation of race and gender, I suggest that one important narratological function of the figure of the African woman has been overlooked in theoretical accounts of this tale’s structure. This extraordinary moment is often referred to as “the image of the African woman” (presumed to be Kurtz’s mistress). Yet by focusing on the notion of “image” and assuming a punctual, photographic framing of the body, we lose the significance of what Marlow in fact represents as a far more sustained movement phrase. The African woman strides along the bank; stops; changes direction and faces the men on the boat; thrusts her arms skyward; continues in her original trajectory; looks back. The even rhythm of her “measured steps” is syncopated by a wild upward gesture.

The operatic movement simultaneously fractures the reading process. Interrupting the narrative flow, it nevertheless synchronizes the actual time of story with reading time. Yet paradoxically the effect is to dehistoricize the textual moment. This atemporal effect accounts partly for the ease with which we may critique Conrad’s method, as he solidifies the image of the African woman into a recognizable stereotype (Gilman 1985, 15–35).\(^11\) Conventionalizing her

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8. In *A Mission to Gelele* (1864) Burton describes how the female dancers of Dahome (now Bénin) “stamped, wriggled, kicked the dust with one foot, sang, shuffled and wrung their hands,” the whole dance “ending in a prestissimo and very violent movement of the shoulders, hips, and loins” (10).

9. For Conrad’s perception of music-hall exoticism see Karl 1979 (between 412 and 413), where he reproduces Conrad’s pen-and-ink drawings “Woman with a Serpent” (1892–94) and “The Three Ballet Dancers” (1896).


11. The stereotype of the African woman occurs across a range of texts into the twentieth century, from Richard Burton’s (quoted above) to David Garnett’s novel, *The Sailor’s Return*.
subject position, Conrad nevertheless makes a political point in relation to an earlier episode. For the African woman’s movement is in fact anticipated by another famous “image,” in Marlow’s apprehension of the chain gang:

A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six African men advanced in a file toiling up the path. They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps. African rags were wound round their loins and the short ends behind waggled to and fro like tails. I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope, each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. (19)

In each case the use of silent gesture interrupts an even, rhythmic progress, freezing the image as if with a turn of the head or a “click of the shutter.” But something else is going on. Marlow sets up the visual and aural image of the African woman with her jingling garments and fierce vitality, analeptically and ironically against the earlier image of physical degradation of the “clinking” chain gang. But the moment also points forward proleptically to the Intended’s reaching out across the window during her interview with Marlow.

Jeremy Hawthorn has rightly emphasized Conrad’s ironic use of parallelism in positing the African woman’s role as a symbolic double for the Intended (Hawthorn, 185–92). When Marlow visits Kurtz’s fiancée he observes her repetition of the African woman’s gesture. As the boat leaves the Inner Station with the dying Kurtz aboard: “The barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river” (67). Likewise the Intended “put out her arms, as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black and with clasped hands across the fading and narrow sheen of the window.” On this occasion Conrad explicitly refers to the chimeric repetition of the silent gesture: “a tragic and familiar Shade resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness” (75).

These three moments, encapsulating the moving images of the chain gang, the African woman and the Intended, share a structural purpose in unifying the literal and epistemological aspects of Marlow’s experience. In this context, Paul Ricoeur’s well-known study of the relationship between time and

(1925), which drew on Burton’s work, and G. B. Shaw’s Adventures of the African Woman in Her Search for God (1932).
narrative offers a provocative framework for examining the phenomenological issues underpinning Conrad’s representation of the moving body as a figure of the narrative. Where Conrad’s language of embodiment throughout the text draws on prelinguistic physical experience, Ricoeur is useful in showing the ways in which our experience of the movement of time is nevertheless rooted in language itself. Leaving aside the extreme complexities of Ricoeur’s theories, it is sufficient to say that he explores an interplay between Aristotle’s account of “narrative” time in the *Poetics* and Augustine’s analysis of time in the *Confessions.* Ricoeur’s thesis focuses on a strong relationship between the “discordant concordance” of both accounts (Ricoeur 1984, 42). He compares two sets of relationships: in Aristotle, that of the relationship of *muthos/mimesis,* and in Augustine, the relationship of *distentio/intentio,* opening up the possibility for an account of literary narrative that reflects our actual experience of time. Ricoeur observes that in Aristotle’s insistence on the unity of the drama (*holos*) he nevertheless identifies both *muthos* and *mimesis* with activity. Ricoeur translates *muthos* as “emplotment,” and, in its relation to *mimesis,* claims that “imitating or representing is a mimetic activity inasmuch as it produces something, namely the organization of events by emplotment” (34). Ricoeur’s most important statement here offers an interpretation of Aristotle’s use of the term *mimesis,* not in the Platonic sense of a “redoubling of presence,” but rather “the break that opens the space for fiction” (45).

However, Ricoeur reads Aristotle’s idea of emplotment back through Augustine’s remarks on time. For Augustine, earthly time (as distinct from eternity) can only be experienced in the “threelfold present”—the past is experienced as an impression in the memory, the present as that of present things perceived, and the future as expectation. Crucial for Ricoeur is Augustine’s account of *distentio animi,* the fact that the “impression is in the soul only as much as the mind acts, that is, expects, attends, remembers” (19). The emphasis falls on mental activity, and as Ricoeur puts it, Augustine uses the example of reciting a poem from memory in order to mark “the point at which the theory of distention is joined to that of the threefold present”: Augustine’s *distentio animi* (extension of the mind) offers a “solution’ to the aporia of the measurement of time” (19).

12. See Ricoeur 1984, 32–37 for his harnessing of Aristotle’s dramatic theory to a notion of narrative in general.

13. Note the distinction from Platonic mimesis, where “the metaphysical sense of mimesis . . . by which things imitate ideas, and works of art imitate things. Platonic mimesis thereby distances the work of art twice over from the ideal model which is its ultimate basis. Aristotle’s mimesis has just a single space wherein it is unfolded—human making [faire], the arts of composition” (Ricoeur 1984, 34).

to view Augustine’s theory in the light of Aristotle’s silence about the relationship between temporal experience and poetic activity in the Poetics. Drawing attention to the emphasis on activity in both accounts, and on the creative, the making new by the effort of the mind, he shows the potential for reading Augustine’s distentio in relation to the discordance or aporia inherent in narrative itself.

In relation to Ricoeur’s account, Conrad’s symbolic configurations of physical movement within the narrative movement unify, in an Aristotelian sense, the beginning, middle, and end of Marlow’s tale. The movement phrases of the chain gang, the African woman, and the Intended, marked by a sudden gesture, a turn of the head, a move toward the window, offer descriptive pauses or discrete interludes that punctuate the journey narrative. But they also provide a chimeric overlaying, or Deleuzian repetition (Miller 1982, 5–6) symbolically synthesizing Marlow’s journey of disillusionment. This structuring of the tale effectively metaphorizes the mental activity suggested by Augustine’s distentio, which allows us to experience temporal reality by a movement forwards and backwards in the threefold present. Conrad’s presentation of moments of physical gesture illustrate metaphorically the “discordant concordance” that Ricoeur associates with the activity of the mind in relation to the experience of time and its recreation in poetic or narrative activity. Marlow’s aesthetic ordering of his recollection of these gestures emphasizes the temporal extension of the mind in the operations of memory, attentiveness of the present, and expectation of the future. The rhythm of the African woman’s movement along the bank, syncopated by the effect of a sublime, silent gesture punctuating her progress, extends back toward his recollection of the chain gang, where the rhythmic clinking signifies monotony and degradation. Likewise, the African woman’s tragic gesture of loss reaches forward to the future pathos of the Intended. Marlow marks the connection during his retelling of his interview with the Intended, when, in his reference to the gesture of the “tragic and familiar Shade” he uses the present participles, “resembling” and “stretching,” suggesting the continuity of a memory reaching beyond the temporal limitations of the tale itself, toward the moment of future retelling on the boat.15

In this respect Conrad’s introduction of these figures is supported by a language of movement that throughout the narrative turns our attention to the metaphorization of physical experience. These moments posit a rhythmic and gestural economy of phrasing, providing a narratological structure for Conrad’s responses to a contemporary aesthetics of movement. While he draws on a Mallarméan admiration for the gesture’s potential for economic expression,

15. In Conrad’s work, the gesture is again repeated by Linda at the end of Nostromo.
he also turns to Schopenhauer’s pessimistic account and Nietzsche’s account of the Dionysian, both of which have helped to determine the direction of tragedy in a modernist context. For even as Marlow admires the “lunges and abbreviations” and the atavistic energy of the African woman, the liberated movement of her body is elided by the intervention of European “civilisation.” Her rhythmic movement overlays the suffering of the chain gang, but she too suffers in losing Kurtz, her final gesture repeated by the Intended, confined as she is to the domestic spaces of the sepulchral city.

Returning to Ricoeur, we see that Conrad’s manipulation of these textual moments illustrates a symbolic “refiguration of our temporal experience by this constructed time” (Ricoeur 1984, 34). However, an important aspect of Ricoeur’s theory deals with the reception of the narrative, an issue that remains problematic in relation to the presence (actual in drama, imagined in fiction) of the physical body. In Ricoeur’s theory the reader or spectator completes the meaning of the tale insofar as she/he reproduces imaginatively an individual interpretation of the narrated events in relation to her/his experience of time. Yet his account of the tale’s embodiment in the reader largely elides the issue of imagining actual physical movement represented in the text.  

16. Ricoeur alludes briefly to the symbolism of the physical body, but only insofar as its representations appear in narrative. The body “introduces a twofold relation of meaning into the gesture or the behavior whose interpretation it governs” (1984, 243 n.6). He draws on Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick description” (Geertz 1973, 207) stating that “the same gesture of raising one’s arm, depending on the context may be understood as a way of greeting someone, of hailing a taxi, or of voting” (Ricoeur, 58). The African woman’s upward gesture, however, is closer to a European symbolism of Romanticism in reaching for the sublime than to Geertz’s anthropology (or Burton’s account of Dahomean dance, which offers a vocabulary of movement belonging to an autonomous structure of indigenous traditions).

17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945); Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958); discussions of Virginia Woolf’s modernism in both Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946); space and narrative in Michel de Certeau (1984) and Ricoeur in a later volume of *Time and Narrative*, owe much to a phenomenological account of the physical experience of time and movement of the body.

18. Conrad often characterizes the women of his novels in terms of bodily movement and stillness: Aïssa’s defiant gestures in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896); Falk’s lover, silent and statuesque throughout (1903); the women gliding between rooms of the Geneva apartment in *Under Western Eyes* (1911).
certain contemporary choreographic theories that have developed a semi-
otic understanding of dance. And yet Marlow’s appreciation of the power
of movement as a nonverbal means of communication resonates throughout
the text.

Conrad’s attitude to the body, however, remains skeptical of its autonomy
as a means of expression in itself, in the way that Mallarmé wished to treat
the movement of the dancer. The Intended’s unfinished gesture anticipates
Marlow’s skepticism about language, as his narrative, trailing into dots, mir-
rors her physical reaching beyond the parameters of the narrative, and points
to the inadequacy of any verbal expression of his disillusionment. Neverthe-
less, Conrad has placed Marlow in the role of observer, controlling the realm
of the aesthetic. I would argue that, as in both Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s
accounts, where the action of the body has been transferred to the objective
domain of the controlling artist, Marlow at the last minute doubts the alter-
native potential for expression offered by the body. Marlow’s evocation of
these three symbolic moments forms a kinetic “triptych.” Given his critique
of language (and Western iconography) elsewhere in the novella, the ‘natural’
language of the body seems at first to offer him an alternative form of expres-
sion. Yet the vibrant movement of the African woman is finally absorbed into
classical European drama as the gesture of a “tragic and familiar Shade.” In
presenting Marlow’s disaffiliation from Europe and his discomfort in lying to
the Intended at the close of Heart of Darkness, perhaps we sense Conrad’s cri-
tique of Western European literary and visual traditions and his anxiety about
that culture’s tendency to confine the body to the realm of the aesthetic.

19. Kim Brandstrup, a living Danish choreographer who predominantly produces narrative
dance pieces, often structures his work around a series of movement phrases in which the
repetition of each phrase registers a slightly different accent or a modification of the initial
sequence. The spectator’s reading of the meaning of the dance is thus generated from within these
moments of fracture of the repeated phrase.
Works Cited


