

David Dabydeen's *The Intended*: A Parodic Intertextuality

Charles Sarvan, Bahrain

As Umberto Eco found in writing *The Name of the Rose*, intertextuality is an inevitable condition of textuality. Books speak of other books, and stories tell what has already been told. To cite but a few examples, Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991) looks back to Shakespeare's *King Lear*; Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) presupposes and is enriched by a knowledge of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847); and the title of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) is explicit in its reference to *Hamlet*. David Dabydeen's novel (1991) harks back to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and its title, *The Intended* (in the now archaic meaning of "fiancée"), specifically to Kurtz's "intended" who lived in a whited sepulcher of a city. Both Stoppard's and Dabydeen's works are parodic, not in the sense of mockery but in that they imitate with a significant and ironic difference.

The Intended,¹ a work of autobiographical fiction, is the first novel by Dabydeen (born in 1956 in Guyana) whose collections of poems, *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), have been highly acclaimed, the former winning the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1994. (See also his second novel, *Disappearance* [1993].) *The Intended* is a retrospective work, a bildungsroman, and the narrator, like Pip in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, looks back at his life with remarkable candor, and some embarrassment. A novel of imbrication, the past overlaps with the more recent past, the present, and even with what was then the future but which, in the temporally unlocated fictional present, is also the past. The narrator is suddenly sent for by his father who had absconded to England, and the motif of the journey, central to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is replicated. The child voyages from Guyana to find on arrival that he has been summoned only because his parent hoped to claim extra money from the state's social security (welfare) system. The plan proving financially not worthwhile, the boy is abandoned and taken into a state-run "home." Seeing education both as the means of breaking free from his "coon condition," and of winning some measure of acceptance by white British society, the boy studies hard and goes on to win a scholarship to the University of Oxford. (Dabydeen himself studied at the equally prestigious University of Cambridge.) Of two Asian friends from his earlier school days in London, Patel ostensibly runs a video shop but sells pornographic movies and drugs under the counter: if one must be a "Paki,"² then it is better to be a rich Paki, argues Patel. To Muslims, "The Book" is synonymous with *The Holy Quran* but, Patel argues, the book which matters in today's materialistic world is the ledger of business, of profit and loss. The other Asian friend, Shaz, lives on the earnings of Monica, an English schoolgirl turned prostitute. The narrator's only African friend, Joseph,

¹ David Dabydeen, *The Intended* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991). Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

² Derived from "Pakistani," it is one of the terms of racial insult in Britain for those from the Indian subcontinent.

becomes increasingly depressed and disturbed, and eventually commits suicide, dousing himself with petrol and setting himself alight. Having come to understand "everything" (193), Joseph no longer wanted anything, not even life. These stories within the fictional autobiography constitute alternative responses, and form a contrast to that of the narrator.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz leaves his "intended" and journeys into Africa as "an emissary of light." The civilization he represents is a compound of idealism and achievement on the one hand, and of greed, cruelty and destruction on the other. In a parodic reversal, the boy in *The Intended* voyages out of the darkness of Guyana to the "whiteness" which Britain represents to him. Rather than the missionaries of "civilization" coming to him, he travels to their metropolis. It is a journey out of a poor, stagnant and ignorant society; out of the alcoholism and brutality, the irresponsibility and vulgarity of its adult males. There is nothing of pride to take from home to sustain him in a strange and unfriendly land, no positive images with which to combat the color-based prejudice he encounters in Britain. His aunt urges him to remember that "you is we" (40), and so he becomes an "intended," the pride and promise of a better future not only for himself and his family but for the group. The confidence of Kurtz was partly based on the fact that he represented a powerful civilization; in contrast, Dabydeen's narrator (never named) arrives in England with feelings of insecurity, a representative of underdevelopment, confused about his identity. Like Dabydeen, the fictional narrator is of Indian origin, the descendant of those who went to Guyana as indentured laborers, which is an added cause for shame (17). He is Indian but knows nothing about India and is far from its culture; he is from Guyana but, unlike the majority, is not black. Neither African nor a "real" Indian, he experiences unease and a sense of loss.

Hurting towards the light on London's underground railways becomes a metaphor of the immigrant's hopeful journey to mother England and a better life. But once in England, his color provokes rejection; it excites racial abuse and violence. His circumstances, though manifestly different from those which Kurtz experienced, are similar in that they are not conducive to the easy realization of positive intentions, or to the preserving of standards and values. In his new school, even games and sports seem aggressive as the natives howl (words found in *Heart of Darkness*) around a football or viciously lash out with cricket bats. Darkness is the experience of the non-white immigrant and Conradian echoes are pervasive: to surreptitiously enter a cinema showing an adult movie is to enter an area of darkness (8); prostitutes wait down filthy streets for darkness to fall (22); boats at a fair drift down tunnels where the air is not "brooding and mysterious" (77), as in Conrad's Thames, but dank with the smell of unclean water. Ironically, the narrator has sailed from darkness of one kind to another: "A white man was lying on the ground. Two white men stood over him as he struggled to get up. They kicked him in the stomach and he collapsed, vomit pouring" (129-30).

But the boy knows there is another England, far removed from the poverty, violence and aimlessness by which he is surrounded. If he is the "intended" to those back home, the England which he first meets in the person of Janet becomes *his* "intended." In her family photographs he sees calm, a sense of place and belonging. Her village was stable, with a centuries-old village hall, whereas the life of the

immigrant was a "mess"; one of hustling, thieving or working nightshifts; one of feeling "ashamed of our past, frightened of the present and not daring to think of the future" (168). Malicious envy would prompt a damaging of Janet; sexual possession of her would signify to him penetration into a culture from which he was then excluded. But there are stronger drives, and Janet leaves his room a virgin and, in his eyes, still "pure." She is the necessary Other, the inspiring ideal which would lift him up from degradation. She personifies everything he intended (243), and so must remain unsullied. Kurtz was not saved by the memory of his "intended" and the positives she represented, but Dabydeen's narrator succeeds. He enters Oxford, dressed in the white shirt presented by Janet, a brown knight wearing his lady's token, inspired and resolute.³ Oxford is a beacon (a word one finds in *Heart of Darkness*); it is one of the centers of British intellectual and cultural life, with structures that have survived centuries, and books almost as old as recorded time (198). Once admitted into its portals, the narrator feels he is no longer just another colored immigrant, for he can now "decipher the texts" (195) of Britain. To decipher is to understand, to gain a knowledge of the other and of oneself. It enables the narrator to begin "to make sense" (85) of all that which, hitherto, was puzzle, perplexity and pain.

Yet another "intended" is illiterate Joseph, who gives up a life of petty crime to "learn black history and spread love and feelings to everybody" (87). *Heart of Darkness* is a prescribed text at the local school, and Joseph listens as the others read and discuss it. To him, that novel is not primarily about suffering and redemption, as his friends claim, but a visionary work about colors. The white sun over the Congo cannot mix with the green of the foliage and the black of the people; colors curve against each other like in the rainbow, but white wants to dominate and obliterate all the other colors (98). Colonial Europeans had attempted to clear away the green forest and the black natives, leaving only white ivory, which can neither be eaten nor planted for future growth (99). In terms of parody and paradox, the heart of darkness is white and sterile. The Russian in *Heart of Darkness* is the only one in whom the colors meet; "a harlequin, a kaleidoscopic burst of color," as he is described in *The Intended* (98). This is someone whose very existence Marlow found difficult to credit, a man who wandered the earth lonely and in ultimate futility. Yet his innocence and courage compel admiration; his flame (in Marlow's words) may have been modest but it was clear. Discussing *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph observes that out of black coal, yellow and orange flames appear, the coal turns to white ash, and finally into atoms. What, therefore, is coal? What is blackness? What is reality? Disturbed, black Joseph turns himself into white ash in a terrible deconstruction of the white/black dichotomy. Kurtz had looked and perceived (not least within himself) horror; Joseph looked and saw an emptiness so vast that it overcame him. To him, the sign O signifies not completion (as it did for John Donne) but zero, nothingness. Like the slaves in *Heart of Darkness* who wretchedly crawl into a grove to die, Joseph retreats into an urban cave and there ends his existence.

³ It may be argued that the narrator, at this stage of his life, was too docile, readily accepting the defeatist inferiority which colonialism and its discourse sought to create in the colonized. On the other hand, he can be seen as one trying not to collaborate by damaging himself. Rather than protest from the periphery, he attempts to empower himself, and to locate the struggle at a center. The problem, as with V.S. Naipul's *A Bend in the River* (1979) is that we do not know the situation and stance of the first-person narrator in the fictional present. He is an "intended," being and becoming.

Kurtz moved from lofty goals to gross criminality and, in another reversal, Joseph travels in the opposite direction, that is, from crime to love and idealism. But like the Russian, because he is not infected by cupidity, Joseph is seen as an eccentric; because he talks of peace and loving kindness, he is thought to be either deranged or on drugs (87). The indictment is not of Joseph but of society. "When I was in borstal I was rumor. They look at me and see ape, trouble, fist. And all the time I is nothing" [*sic*] (101). Confronted by the destabilizing darkness (here, emptiness) at the very heart of existence, human beings turn to possessions for reassurance and the illusion of meaning. "So to make yourself real you collect things, and place them round you" (101), observes Joseph, and we recall that the more Kurtz possessed, the more empty he became; the more he degenerated, the more irrational and criminal his lust for ivory, wealth and power. Possessions are the contemporary equivalent of tribal superstition and protective ritual.

Joseph is driven to despair and death; Patel and Shaz succumb to the darkness of the London they live in, though they too are "intended," capable of friendship and generosity (see, for example, 221). The narrator, avoiding the extremes of cynicism (Patel, Shaz) and vague, impractical idealism (Joseph), chooses a workable and worthwhile middle path. He is neither Kurtz nor the Russian, but more like Marlow, "all work and no play" (118). Work, Marlow observes, is an opportunity to find yourself and your own reality, and as Marlow hunted for rivets to repair his ship, the narrator looks for practical ways to keep afloat in inimical surroundings. Rejecting the stereotyped immigrant image offered by a hostile and racist environment, he determines to be his own "sharply defined" photograph (245). The novel focuses on problems of identity, modes of response and survival strategies. Where illiterate Joseph chose the camera, the narrator opts for words, and the resulting text combats stereotyped images and creates alternative ones.

The phrase "the intended" indicates present unfulfillment and the promise of future realization. Kurtz's "intended" remained unrealized promise (eternal fiancée and never wife), faithful in her delusion to the memory of a man who had betrayed all decency, compassion and restraint. In contrast, Dabydeen's narrator realizes a good measure of his plans and potentialities. But beyond certain realized intentions lie others, and so (provided promise and positive purpose are not destroyed) we are always "intendeds." Dabydeen's novel is all the more original because of Conrad's work, which preceded it by almost a hundred years. The title signals that *The Intended* should be read in the context of its predecessor, and when that is done, the resulting intertextuality not only adds meaning to this text but inevitably affects our perception of the earlier work.