Introduction:
On Sensation, Knowledge, and Cultural Perception

Is not the truth the truth?
—Falstaff, King Henry IV, I

Thus men, extending their inquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into those depths where they can find no sure footing, it is no wonder that they raise questions and multiply disputes, which, never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to increase their doubts, and to confirm them at last in perfect scepticism.
—John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

Sensation and the Philosophy of Mind

The captain in Conrad’s The Shadow-Line begins his narration by musing on the course of our human lives. Early in life, he reflects, “One closes behind one the little gate of mere boyishness—and enters an enchanted garden.” But after the “seduction” of the paths of youth, one inevitably comes to a shadow-line, the boundary between youth and experience: “One goes on,” he continues. “And the time, too, goes on—till one perceives ahead a shadow-line warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind” (17:3). As we read this, our cultural associations with innocence and experience are immediately triggered. Whether or not we are practicing Christians, most of us think of the Garden of Eden when the narrator mentions an “enchanted garden”; we think of Adam and Eve and of transgression when he mentions seduction and warning; and we think of expulsion and exile when we imagine crossing the shadow-line, leaving behind the region of early youth. We have these thoughts in part because we are trained readers, poised for the imaginative leap, but also because Conrad is a
practiced artist who knows how we, as members of a predominantly Christian culture, will respond to his seemingly casual allusions.

This study explores the region beyond the shadow-line but not in the literal sense that Conrad suggests. Rather, Crossing the Shadow-Line looks at the link between perception and exile implied in the opening paragraphs of Conrad’s novella. In much of Conrad’s work, the shadow-line is a demarcation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the time and place at which one becomes estranged from one’s culture and the body of knowledge available or useful in that culture. The chapters that follow examine writers from the romantic through the modern periods who are fascinated with characters, narrators, or speakers who become estranged from their cultures. While recognizing the authority structures and mythos of the dominant Christian culture, these figures perceive and act in a manner that significantly departs from what is culturally acceptable, and thus they are heretical. Similarly, the authors themselves, whether or not they embrace or reject Christian values, are heretical in that they inadvertently or willfully subvert the cultural episteme, that body of knowledge associated with cultural attitudes toward sensation, language, imagination, symbolism and mythic archetypes.

I use the notion of cultural episteme in its broad and literal sense as an assumed, “certain knowledge” of the world that each individual, however variously, possesses—that is, the conventional codes of reality instilled in us by our society, our culture or, more broadly, our civilization. It is not my intent to explore the cultural episteme in the way Foucault has by defining a taxonomy or “archeology” of the classical episteme in The Order of Things,¹ but I shall briefly survey some of the philosophic assumptions of our culture, particularly with respect to concepts of sensation; for the philosophic discourse on sensation provides the adherents of this culture with an understanding of the way we see and provides the writers in the heretical tradition with the cultural values to subvert.

One basic assumption that determines what our civilization
Introduction

considers as knowable is the truism that our bodies are, in some basic way, inferior to our minds. This premise is metaphorically presented in what is probably the most widely known philosophic analogy in the Western tradition, Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” at the beginning of Book 7 of the Republic. Plato’s famous visual metaphor of sense perception suggests that bodily senses are faculties which enslave us and point us toward false representations of reality, mere shadows of higher reality. The mark of Plato’s idealist allegory and his overt derogation of the senses can be easily traced in the major philosophic thinkers who follow him. Like his predecessor, Aristotle prefaces his discourse on the human mind with the assertion that there are two orders of the apprehension of knowledge, one through the mind and another through the senses. He categorically states, in De Anima, that the apprehension of the soul is superior to that of the senses:

We regard knowledge as a good and a precious thing, but we esteem one sort of knowledge more highly than another either because of the acumen required for its discovery, or because it is concerned with better and more admirable objects: for both these reasons we should rightly assign the investigation of the soul to the first rank. (Aristotle 1–2)

In his discourse on human psychology, Aristotle finds that the soul “apparently neither acts nor is acted upon independently of the body” and yet, in its indivisibility from the body, possesses the exclusive properties of thought and imagination (6). The discourse asserts that while body and soul are inseparable, the soul, as an entity which “realizes an idea,” is distinct from the body which houses it. Intellection is thus deemed superior to sensation, and Aristotle metaphorically compares the various perceptions of body and soul:

If the eye were an animal, vision would be its soul, i.e. vision is the notional essence of the eye. As vision and pupil on the one hand constitute the eye, so soul and body in the other case constitute the living animal. (46)
Clearly, as St. Thomas Aquinas would later recognize (1:806), Aristotle's discourse assumes a closer connection between the senses and the intellect than does Plato's idealism. And yet Aristotle's rationalist philosophy nonetheless continues the model of mind which relegates the human senses to a rudimentary, preliminary mode of understanding that reveals only lesser truths about the nature of reality.

The Aristotelian model of mind that grows out of the discourses of De Anima and De Sensu posits three kinds of knowledge apprehended by the soul: sense-perception, reflective thought, and imaginative conception (106-7). Offering a kind of trinity of perceptual modes, the Aristotelian model quite naturally appealed to important Christian philosophers such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, whose models of mind served our culture until the late seventeenth century. Like Aristotle, Augustine envisions three kinds of metaphysical reality—body, human soul, and creator—and again suggests that "the conscious soul (animus) is better than the body [which is] always less than the soul itself" (45-46). Augustine also envisioned three levels of perception that correspond to these levels of reality: the corporeal senses, the spirit, and, finally, "imageless" intellectual vision. These three levels of knowing form a distinct hierarchy, "so that reason may ascend from the lower to the higher" (95-96). The lower form, which comes through the bodily senses, does not attain to true knowledge which comes through what Augustine calls the interior sense which is akin to reason. Intellectual vision is, of course, the highest form of knowledge and remote from lowly sensation. Following Augustine's lead, St. Thomas, in the Summa Theologica, distinguishes exterior from interior senses (Aquinas 1:738-44) and concludes "the judgment of the intellect is higher than the senses" (1:810). Using St. Augustine as an authority, St. Thomas argues that "we cannot expect to learn the truth from the senses. Intellectual knowledge apprehends the truth" (2:805). Augustinian and Thomistic theory, which gracefully adapt the secular model of Aristotle to religious purposes, retain the basic division between body and soul.
There is, of course, a school of materialist philosophy whose theories of sensation differ from those of the idealist tradition outlined above. But these thinkers did not achieve intellectual respectability until the time of Descartes, whose epistemology largely upheld the idealist division between mind and body but emphasized the importance of understanding the physical causes of sensation and perception. It was not until the eighteenth century, a period that spawned controversy regarding all questions of epistemology, that we see a major shift in the cultural attitude toward sensation. In a number of ways, the English empiricists offer the most interesting departure from the Aristotelian tradition, even though as a group they have some similarities with their rationalist and theological predecessors.

If Locke may be taken as the seminal thinker of this group, which includes Berkeley and Hume, we see that the first empiricist document, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, directly descends from the tradition outlined above. Locke's pronouncements—"All ideas come from sensation or reflection" and "perception might properly enough be called 'internal sense'" (Ayer 43)—are pronouncements that might have been made by his predecessors. What separates Locke from idealist or rationalist thinkers are those philosophic assumptions that we most commonly associate with empiricism, that humans are not born with any innate understanding in the soul—the mind is a tabula rasa—and that the vast store of ideas in the human mind comes from our own experience:

Our observation, employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understanding with all the materials of thinking. (Ayer 43)

During the late seventeenth century, Locke rearranged the cultural hierarchy of modes of understanding. In his view, sensation is no longer a crude, preliminary mode of understanding; it is the "great source of most of the ideas we have" (Ayer 43). This primary role of sensation in the empiricist model of mind
challenges the traditional valuations of body and soul and sug­gests that the soul or intellect is not necessarily the superior mode for understanding reality. Since much of the cultural, Christian concept of human understanding is based on the ear­lier idealist philosophy, this new emphasis on the primacy of sensation is essentially a heretical departure from the way our culture had traditionally described our relation to the physical world. A seemingly minor shift in the way Locke describes the relation of sensation and knowledge thus signified a major shift in the cultural episteme.

Locke's successors challenged and furthered his ideas. In A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley suggests that "ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination" (Ayer 189), and in A Treatise Concerning Human Nature, Hume concurs:

Those perceptions which enter with most force and vio­lence, we may name impressions; and, under this name, I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emo­tions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas, I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse. (Ayer 298)

This new emphasis on sensation and feeling in philosophy of mind significantly influenced the major literary figures of the next century. The degree to which the first generation of English romantics embraced or rejected the ideas of the empiricists is still a matter of scholarly discussion and debate. We can say with confidence, however, that the empiricist tendency to validate individual sensation and feeling as a way of knowing the world is a philosophic premise congenial to the romantic sens­sibility as it developed in the late eighteenth century.

In particular, Wordsworth and Coleridge shared aesthetic preoccupations that grew out of the central philosophic prob­lems of the eighteenth century. Reformulating the philosophic questions in artistic terms, the first generation of romantics implied that what is true about the acquisition of knowledge may also be true about the poetic imagination. While the poets
naturally give more credence than do the philosophers to the validity of the active imagination, both sets of thinkers recognized that vividness of sensation plays a primary role in the issue of representation, whether as part of an epistemological or artistic process. Accordingly, in his opening remarks to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth suggests that poetry must reflect “the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation” (16). Later, Coleridge extends this notion about artistic representation in the *Biographia Literaria* (Zall 160n):

> Images however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion. (7, 2:23)

Coleridge’s idea that the poet’s signature of genius is the way his or her imagination modifies representations of nature marks a significant departure from the Aristotelian philosophy of mind and the *Poetics*, which defines a mimetic poesis. This romantic literary epistemology, which theoreticians have labeled the “projective imagination” or “expressive theory of art,” is individual-centered and validates the primacy of sensation and emotion in representing a poetic reality to the reader.

The subjectivity of Berkeley and the romantics was extended in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sensationist thinkers such as Ernst Mach radically assert, like Berkeley, that “the world consists only of our sensation” (10). But unlike his predecessors, Mach, a mathematician and physicist, suggests antimetaphysical theories in which objective science describes the human experience of the phenomenal world:

> Bodies do not produce sensations, but complexes of sensations (complexes of elements) make up bodies. If, to the physicist, bodies appear the real, abiding existences, whilst sensations are regarded merely as their evanescent, transitory show, the physicist forgets, in the assumption of such a view, that all bodies are but thought-
symbols for complexes of sensations (complexes of elements). Here, too, the elements form the real, immediate, and ultimate foundation, which it is the task of physiological research to investigate. (22)

Mach's late-nineteenth-century study of physiological perception anticipated Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle of logical positivists. Also known as logical empiricists, this group of thinkers is typically regarded as an outgrowth of English empiricism, for they consider assertions about the objective, external world meaningless. Wittgenstein and his followers thus shift the study of perception from an epistemology of objects to a psychology of reality. In his *Blue Book* and *Brown Book*, a series of Cambridge University lecture notes, Wittgenstein discusses his ideas about sensation, language, and the relation between the two. He discusses the "locality of thinking" (16) and suggests a metaphorical model of mind in which our thoughts are compared to the shadow cast by a physical object, a model seemingly the obverse of Plato's (36). Later, in *Philosophical Investigations*, he systematically explores the privacy of sensations (246–48), the manner in which words represent sensation (243–44), and the relation between language and inner experience (256).

These philosophic developments are again reflected in the concerns of the leading literary figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Joseph Conrad, in many of his prefaces, stresses that the primary task of the artist is to put the reader in intense contact with what he called the "visible universe." Like Mach, Conrad views human sensation as indicative of experience and suggests that the task of the artist is to capture the sensation of the moment, "to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, its colour, reveal the substance of its truth" (*Prefaces* 52). For Conrad, sensation is substance or objective reality. Other modern writers, most notably Joyce, experiment with fictional forms which demonstrate the linguistic creation of reality, a notion consistent with Wittgenstein's philosophical tracts. Eugene Jolas, close friend and publisher of Joyce, suggests that Joyce led noth-
ing less than the "Revolution of the Word" (29–31) by destroying our cultural sense of the relation between the phenomenal world, language, and the human mind. The modern philosophical interest in sensation, linked to the role language plays in the human creation of reality, is thus a clear antecedent of the nineteenth-century literary interest in the representation of sensation by the projective imagination. Both models of mind offer an epistemological process that departs from the cultural episteme of the Christian era.

**Disjoining the Cultural Episteme**

I have emphasized the role of sensation in the above survey of cultural perception because the authors discussed in the following chapters are writers who demonstrate or portray the deliberate derangement of sensation in a way that violates our idealist cultural episteme. Though cultural perception obviously entails more than a shared attitude toward sensation—and may include such cultural givens as language, images, symbols, or archetypes—the literary artist inevitably confronts the aesthetic choice of how to represent sensation in his or her work. In the case of nineteenth-century writers such as Coleridge, De Quincey, Poe, and the French symbolists, the interest in matters of epistemology not only centers on sensation, but that sensation is colored by more than the human imagination. Each of these artists, at some point in his career, came under the influence of artificial stimulants, either opium or alcohol, which induce sensate experiences that are radically different from those offered by everyday cultural reality. Many later modern writers, such as Conrad, Joyce, Barnes, and Lowry, were also influenced by their experiences with drugs or alcohol, although by the twentieth century it is likely that the sense disorientation that we see in their works is a mixture of personal experience and conventionalized imagery. In either case, the disorientation of the senses provided all of these writers with imagery and vocabulary that set them apart from more mainstream writers who embraced the cultural codes of perception.
Roland Barthes, in a discussion of writing and reading processes in his *The Pleasure of the Text*, distinguishes between writers who embrace the cultural episteme and those who reject it in his discussion of writing and reading processes. The text of pleasure, he argues, "contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading." This, clearly, describes the writer who seeks to confirm our a priori values and sense of reality. The writer who abandons the cultural episteme, on the other hand, offers a "text of bliss"

that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

Such writers create discomfort or a sense of cultural estrangement in a number of ways. Typically, the writers in this study unsettle the reader’s cultural assumptions through sensory derangement which is accompanied by analogous forms of linguistic or symbolic disorientation. If there is a hierarchy of such forms of disorientation, it might be compared to the forms of knowledge in the cultural episteme as follows:

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<th>ADHERENCE TO CULTURE</th>
<th>ESTRANGEMENT FROM CULTURE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensate Knowledge (Body)</td>
<td>Disorientation of Senses (Percepts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual Knowledge (Soul)</td>
<td>Disorientation of Language (Thought)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disorientation of Images (Imagination)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Knowledge (God)</td>
<td>Disorientation of Symbols (Signs)</td>
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<td>Disorientation of Archetypes (Myths)</td>
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The form of disorientation most important to this study, *disorientation of the senses*, is often based on drug-related expe-
periences or conventions that grow out of that experience. Chief among these is simple hyperesthesia, or the supersensitivity of the senses. From a clinical standpoint, hyperesthesia is unusual tactile sensitivity; this medical sense may be extended to include other sensations that are exaggerated by the drug experience, including the "sense" of time and space. Synesthesia, or the stimulation of one type of sensation by a different type of sensation, is a second form of disorientation, long discounted in the rationalist tradition. Associated with the genuine synesthesia, literary synesthesia is a convention that suggests the transcendence of ordinary perception through imaginary vision. Finally, anesthesia, the cessation of sense stimuli and the opposite of hyperesthesia, also marks a departure from the realm of conventional perception.

Writers who are fascinated by such extraordinary sensations often create an analogous kind of linguistic disorientation, which can assume many forms. On the level of words, recent practitioners of the verbocentric text have experimented with neologisms and multilingual puns. On a stylistic level, they have used digression or prose that depends heavily on abstract associations. Structurally, writers in this tradition have sometimes used multiple texts which visually compete with each other for the reader’s attention and disrupt the normal activity of reading. Finally, these writers have treated linguistic disorientation thematically by making communication between characters difficult or confusing or by creating language that resists interpretation.

A third form of disjoining cultural value is through imagistic or symbolic disorientation. When an author consciously desecrates a symbolic object or image, he or she effectively denigrates the cultural value attached to it. Likewise, if a traditional object is appropriated for personal use, the individuation of its value is an attack on cultural value. This iconoclasm is closely related to the fourth form of disorientation, mythic or archetypal disorientation, which occurs when an important mythic or archetypal pattern is subverted through parody, farce, or irony. The subversion of archetypes, which occurs when an author modifies an important moral, mythical, or religious story, generally occurs on a structural level, when the plot or occurrences
of an archetypal pattern are violated in such a way as to challenge the cultural value implied by that pattern.

All of these forms of disorientation are means for disjoining the cultural episteme, for each instance of sensate, cognitive, or imaginative disorientation in a work of literature contributes to an estrangement from the value of that culture. The remaining chapters examine the literary tradition of disorientation, a tradition distinct from the Christian tradition of an archetypal circular journey. In this heretical tradition, estrangement from one's cultural landscape begins with a disorienting voyage and ends with the protagonist shedding cultural assumptions, accepting a new mode of perception, and refusing reintegration into the culture. To depict this subversion of cultural perception, major writers such as Coleridge, De Quincey, Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Conrad, Joyce, Barnes, and Lowry all adopt the imagistic and structural convention of sense disorientation, and in so doing they cross the shadow-line that marks the boundary of heretical space.