
Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

The Way of Silence

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In *Heart of Darkness*, unquestionably one of Conrad's most complex and resonant works, language is enlisted into the exploration not only of experience but of its own capacity to represent experience. As I shall be arguing in the discussion of the novel that follows, Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness—a journey that proceeds on two distinct but interpenetrating temporal planes—might be construed as investigative of the assumptions upon which the literary effort is founded in the first place, a depiction of language probing its own periphery and defining its own limitations.¹ Examined attentively, the work discloses an intricate pattern of references to "voices", to speech, to the word in all its diverse forms, and almost every important event in the book pivots on a linguistic act of some kind, whether this be Kurtz's final verdict, Marlow's lie, or the narrative itself. At the same time the failures recorded in the novel involve the frustration of language, an inability to express, exemplified for instance in Marlow's rueful discovery that he can formulate no culminating judgement comparable to that pronounced by Kurtz, and in the bafflement he later experiences in his role as raconteur. Lurking in the background of Marlow's narrative is a disturbing and potentially disabling consciousness of the inadequacy of words and of the ideas that words denominate, the suspicion that language is not a transparent, neutral medium but freighted with an assumptive world which is present in every utterance. Nevertheless certain culminating incidents represent triumphs of the Word, of the demiurgic voice; when language, having submitted itself to an ordeal by silence in order to realize its own creative potentialities, becomes the shaper of the world and not merely its distorting mirror.

Although at first sight there may appear to be a clear formal distinction between the one Marlow on board the *Nellie* engaged in the intensely intellectual task of trying to find adequate expression for the meaning of a past experience, and that other Marlow piloting a steamer into the interior of a continent, a closer examination reveals that the two undertakings are in fact closely related. Marlow's expedition up the river of darkness is in search of a man who to him is little more than a voice, whose very name "was just a word for me" (82), and is motivated primarily by the desire both to hear that voice and to discover the object which the dislocated name refers to. The other Marlow, drifting on the

Thames, is committed to a narration which becomes the paradigm of the expressive act, representing every effort to compose experience by means of words which must inevitably falsify it. The younger Marlow pursues Kurtz's voice, and that is the experience; while Marlow the raconteur, become now no more than a voice himself (83), seeks to define the meaning of that experience. In a broad sense, then, *Heart of Darkness* might be said to be about voices, about voices opposing themselves to other voices, to the ineffable or literally "unspeakable", or to silence itself—as Marlow himself suggests in one of his many reflections concerning Kurtz's significance:

A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices . . . (115)

Heart of Darkness thus depicts a kind of exploratory voyage among words, among clashing voices striving to articulate experience but failing because they are fundamentally incommensurate with that experience, and the two Marlows and their respective pursuits are therefore each closely implicated in the meaning of the other. Marlow's task in the here and now being to arrive at some formulation that will do justice to his traumatic ordeal, he is obliged to immerse himself fully in the adventure of his younger self, the trajectory of his moral, linguistic and (ultimately) epistemological investigation paralleling his earlier spatial movement up a river. The story, in other words, does not simply record an event: its delivery *constitutes* an event, one whose significance interpenetrates with that of the experience which is its subject, the telling and the told converging towards a common focus of concern. In relating his recollections Marlow traverses a series of thresholds of understanding which are equivalent to the succession of physical thresholds his younger self has had to negotiate in passing through various "stations" on his way to Kurtz, and he does not speak in quite the same accents at the end of the novel as at the beginning. His various comments and explanations cannot, therefore, be interpreted as the definitive summation submitted by a man who has appraised once and for all his completed experience, but must be read rather as provisional formulations only, indicative more than anything else of the particular way station at which the explorer has arrived in his quest for insight.

The first conceptual threshold which the novel (and the voice) must cross is that dividing the simplistic glorification of the imperial adventure with which the work opens from the more critical attitude evinced by Marlow. "The conquest of the earth [...] is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much", Marlow admits, suggesting nonetheless in what appears to be partial mitigation that "what redeems it is the idea only" (50-1). Very little is to be gained by not looking into things, however, and Marlow is stirred by his meditations into embarking on a review of one of his "inconclusive" experiences, an undertaking which is far more profound than a simple investigation into imperialism as such. As he

descends within himself imperialism comes to be viewed not only as the symptom of, but also as an appropriate metaphor for, the relentless imposition of a mode of consciousness whose effects make themselves felt far beyond the political sphere as such, a mode of consciousness characterized by the destructive rationalization of life, an avid but arid materialism and a cynical instrumentalization of human beings dictated by purely pragmatic criteria of value and significance. And as numerous critics with various classical precedents in mind have pointed out, the process of discovery which enables Marlow to detach himself from this mentality and recognize the atrocities for which it is responsible is figured as an archetypal quest or night-sea journey into, the self.²

One of the first tasks that Marlow discharges after assuming the command of a river steamer is to recover the body of his predecessor Fresleven, who has been killed in a quarrel with natives about two black hens, and he mentions later that when the corpse was found “the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones” (54). Marlow’s journey begins however not here but in a city likened to a “whited sepulchre” (55), and by a subtle process of association the skeleton of Fresleven seems actually to become the street in which the offices of Marlow’s prospective employers are situated:

A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. Two women, one fat and the other slim, sat on straw-bottomed chairs, knitting black wool. (55)

The suggestion is that Marlow is in some sense “entering” the dead body of Fresleven, whose two black hens are here knitting black wool: “nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven’s remains, till I got out and stepped into his shoes” (54). The images marshalled in the description of the episode in the Company offices do far more than simply establish this tenuous connection, however. The phrase “whited sepulchre” carries all the connotations here that it does in the Gospel, evoking the image of something pure and fair on the outside, but hollow within—and filled with corruption. The grass growing through Fresleven’s bones, and through the stones of the street, symbolizes the wilderness, fecund everywhere, indefatigably groping for cracks in the facade of civilization. In a novel redolent of mortuary suggestion—communicating the futility and sterility of the imperialistic enterprise—these images help to establish the tone.

The scene inside the Company offices is deservedly famous. The two women knitting black wool have frequently been identified as Fate-figures, and while this seems to me entirely valid, it must also be emphasized that they belong to a wider symbolic pattern constructed around women, spurious intentions or ideals, and “blackness”. Marlow describes the episode as follows:

I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy [...] something not quite right [...] In the outer room the two women

knitted black wool feverishly. [...] The old one [...] glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. Two youths with foolish and cheery countenances were being piloted over, and she threw at them the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom. She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. (56-7)

These women are at once the guardians of the threshold in the initiatory drama, and Fate-figures knitting out the destinies of those passing under their scrutiny. It is interesting to note that in a letter written by Conrad to Cunningham Graham the image of a diabolical “knitting machine” is elaborated with sardonic intensity as the symbol of an absurd and coldly mechanical universe: “It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters”.³ Marlow’s knitters too seem to be engaged in the ceaseless fabrication of an incomprehensible universe, and their influence extends far beyond the walls of the Company offices. It has already been remarked that Fresleven’s aimless death is linked to these women through the two black hens which are the occasion of his fatal altercation with the natives. His fate is in some respects similar to that which befalls the “second-rate helmsman” steering Marlow’s steamer: both lose their composure at inopportune moments, and both perish by the spear. Marlow “steps into” Fresleven’s shoes when he assumes the command of the Company steamer, but figuratively discards them after the death of the helmsman, thus stepping in and out of the universe created by the knitters.

But this is not all. The knitting women belong also to the world of Kurtz’s “Intended”, his black mistress, and the allegorical portrait he has painted at the Central Station of a “woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch” (79). Marlow declares at one point that women “are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse” (115)—and they do in fact remain rather remote presences in this novel. Although they are not assigned a convincingly human, personal role, however; they do discharge an important symbolic function, their “beautiful world” impinging fatally though only obliquely upon the arena of violent actualities in which men must struggle. They are only “out of it” as human individuals, being very much present in their role as the “knitters”, in various guises, of an absurd world. Marlow’s impressions when confronted with Kurtz’s Intended at the end of the novel recall his sensations in the Company offices: it is “as though I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold” (157). For the Fate who is absent from the group guarding the door of darkness would seem to be none other than this woman who appears portentously at the conclusion of Marlow’s ordeal, framing and completing it—as if that too were knitted out. The Intended is representative of Kurtz’s fruitless “intentions”, but she is also paradoxically assimilated at one point to the savage mistress who has been one cause of his betraying those intentions (160). The two

women—black-skinned or attired in black—therefore represent opposed but analogous realities, or rather (deferring to Stein’s metaphysics), opposed but analogous illusions; and the various determinants of man’s activity, whether they be ideals or passions, are thus reduced to an identical status. Even Marlow is in some sense the victim of “women”, for it is his aunt who serves as the intermediary whereby he is plunged into the absurd world of idealism and depredation in which he finds himself.

It might be useful to refer to a revealing passage in *The Rescue* in order to gloss this symbolic use of women in *Heart of Darkness*, though in the later work the specifically sexual aspect of the situation is assigned somewhat greater prominence:

They [women] lead a sort of ritual dance, that most of us have agreed to take seriously. It is a very binding agreement with which sincerity and good faith and honour have nothing to do[...] Woe to him or her who breaks it. Directly they leave the pageant they get lost [...] They get lost in a maze [...] They end by hating their very selves, and they die in disillusion and despair.⁴

Interestingly enough, in that novel Mrs Travers, the object of Lingard’s fatal infatuation, is seen at one point bearing up a burning torch like the allegorical figure in Kurtz’s portrait,⁵ and the telling ubiquity of this image in Conrad’s fiction will become even more apparent if we consider Jewel’s leading Jim to confront his enemies by the light of a blazing torch (an episode assimilated imagistically, through Stein, to the “dream” of life), and the emblem of the bleak ceremony of Alvin Hervey’s domestic existence in “The Return”: a “marble woman, decently covered from neck to instep with stone draperies [...] thrust[ing] out blindly a rigid white arm holding a cluster of lights”.⁶

Thus women impose themselves on the structure of *Heart of Darkness* not as flesh and blood human beings but as symbolic incarnations, representing all that impels man: his intentions, his ideals, his appetites. Through their association with women these various motivating forces are assimilated, conceived as being merely different ways in which the dream can be instilled into life. Marlow’s quest is through these possibilities—“a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares” (62) in search of some value or principle to which he can commit himself with the minimum of reservation. Examined in this perspective, his voyage of discovery might therefore be interpreted as a response to the inferences that Stein draws from his oneiric metaphor. If life is indeed a dream then the only course open to the modern pilgrim is to discover some foundation on which can be erected a sound differentia, a means of distinguishing one dream from another—or even one nightmare from another. Marlow’s journey into the interior of the dark continent accordingly figures the intellectual and spiritual progress of a man entertaining and rejecting the various fictions in terms of which life can be conducted. When he leaves the Company offices situated in a building that is “as still as a house in a city of the dead” (57), he feels as though he “were about to set off for the centre of the earth” (60). And the movement of the novel from the world of mundane concerns down through all the circles of hell—from the boat

on the Thames to the Company offices, and from there to the Company, Central and finally Inner Stations—mirrors this dark pilgrim's progress.

What Marlow discovers at an early stage in his expedition is a grandiose parody of cosmos in the organized activity of the traders, juxtaposed against the resistant, ineffable reality of aboriginal existence. The wilderness that Marlow sets out to explore is the mystery of primordial life, and in journeying through this region he is penetrating into his inchoate self as well as inchoate nature, his movement towards the source of the river being also an approach to the primitive springs of humanity. Imposing itself upon this undifferentiated wilderness is the absurdly comic universe of the men whose collective sobriquet of "pilgrims" emphasizes one aspect of the complex religious parody which they enact in their daily pursuits, and which is at times exaggerated to the point that colonial "development" becomes almost a travesty of the fiat lux—the light emblemizing their universe being the yellow gleam of ivory and the counterfeit radiance of the "whited sepulchre". Their attempt to divide chaos after the pattern of their own categories is anticipated in the Company offices where a doctor records the measurements of Marlow's head, undeterred by the fact that he never sees his subjects again, and that "moreover, the changes take place inside" (58). The ultimate futility of the entire imperialist—or civilizing—effort is effectively conveyed by means of a succession of particulars of this sort, concretized in such telling, crisply focused images as the following

Once [...] we came upon a man-of-war [...] shelling the bush. In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding. (61-2)

The ostensible reason for this bombardment is that there are "enemies" concealed nearby, but this word, wrenched out of its European context, has by now degenerated into a mere label, as void of meaning as the military operation itself. By means of such vivid close-ups of civilization at work, the reader is estranged from the conventional canons of intelligibility, and what was previously familiar and comprehensible becomes, in this alien setting, inexplicable and subtly disturbing.

Repelled by the spectacle of civilization gnawing ineffectually at the fringes of the wilderness, Marlow finds himself growing increasingly alienated from the cultural assumptions he has previously shared in common with other Europeans. Sometimes "I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long" (61), he recalls, and later he declares to his audience that "it seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream" (82). This insistence on the dreamlike quality of the sequence of events contributes not only to the critique of imperialism, by underscoring its irrational aspect, but also to the ritual overtones of the novel; for while the gunboat shelling the bush is strikingly paradigmatic of civilization attempting incomprehensibly to subdue that to which

it is irremediably alien, it is also a signal that the normal structures of reality are in abeyance, and thus that a liminal state is being entered. Other descriptive elements discharge the same multiple function:

I came upon a boiler wallowing in the grass [then] an undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with *its* wheels in the air. [...] The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails. [He hears an explosion coming from a cliff.] They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on. (63-4)

These detonations remind Marlow of the French gunboat—“It was the same kind of ominous voice” (64)—but the natives who were earlier styled “enemies” are now no less arbitrarily designated “criminals”, having unwittingly offended against the white man’s inscrutable law. Marlow later hears other, equally inane, categories being applied to the natives, and impatiently wonders at one point “what would be the next definition [he] was to hear. There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels” (132).

There are more of these images of civilization gone mad, converging to an impression not only of the massive absurdity of the Europeans’ enterprise, but also of the actual disintegration of the familiar world. Symbolic once again of the futility of applying a routine conceptual apparatus to the ineffable component of experience is the fire that the pilgrims at the Central Station cannot put out; and which one man is trying to extinguish with the aid of a leaking bucket (76). The inflated formulas with which another of the pilgrims responds to the fire and to the punishment of the alleged culprit are scarcely more watertight. Noisily ferocious, but hopelessly inapplicable in this alien context, these displaced labels and platitudes are pumped into the mystery of the situation as bullets and shells are discharged into the bush—to no avail:

“Transgression—punishment—bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That’s the only way his will prevent all conflagrations for the future. [...] Ha! Danger- agitation.” He vanished. (80)

An allied image may be discovered in the anecdote concerning a hippopotamus that seems to bear a charmed life:

There was an old hippo that had the bad habit of getting out on the bank and roaming at night over the station grounds. The pilgrims used to turn out in a body and empty every rifle they could lay hands on at him. [...] All this energy was wasted, though. (84)

The animal is as impervious as the continent itself to the limited arsenal of European norms and assumptions. The wilderness and its emissaries stubbornly resist the nets flung over them by civilization, whether these be nets of words only, or more general cognitive categories, modes of perception and consciousness. Though the men bent on taming this wilderness vaunt themselves as the crusaders of order and efficiency, it is evident that Marlow has arrived at that terminal point where the resources of civilization falter, beyond which each

man must descend into his interior self if he is to discover a viable principle for life.

Although his reaction upon entering the “grove of death” where the moribund victims of the pilgrims’ exploitation are cast off to die is to feel as if he had “stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (66), Marlow has apparently still not liberated himself entirely from the theory that even depredation of this sort might somehow be redeemed by a steadfast “devotion to efficiency” (50), by an “idea” which can be served with one’s entire being. This saving principle seems for a while to be operating in the meticulous efficiency of an accountant who keeps his collars starched and his books in exemplary order:

To be out of the chaos I would sometimes get into the accountant’s office. It was built of horizontal planks, and so badly put together that [...] he was barred from neck to heels with narrow strips of sunlight. (68)

The building whose interior is thus partitioned by parallel strips of light appears at first to be a tiny oasis of constructive order in the midst of the chaos of the station, and Marlow admits of the accountant that he “respected the fellow” (68). But the game is given away when a dying man is lodged in the accountant’s office, and is looked upon by the proprietor of that microcosm as no more than an annoying distraction. As Ian Watt expresses it, “the heartless priorities of the Western administrative order have helped the accountant to maintain his professional efficiency, but they insulate him from the darkness only at the cost of insulating him from everything else”.⁷ It is evident that the accountant too has relinquished his humanity, and Marlow’s admiration for him turns out to be misplaced, his notions of the “redeeming idea” patently inadequate.

It is while Marlow is delayed at the Central Station because his steamer is undergoing repairs that he finds himself being associated with Kurtz. “The same people who sent him specially also recommended you” (79), claims the papier-maché Mephistopheles, who is evidently a cohort of the “flabby devil” which Marlow divines is “running that show” (72). Marlow’s partial identification with Kurtz, once kindled, begins to exercise a determining influence on his life, and the famous lie with which he confirms the Intended in her illusions at the end of the story is presaged even at this point. Although he protests that “I hate, detest, and can’t bear a lie” (82), he omits to undeceive the papier-maché Mephistopheles as to the real extent of his own influence in Europe, becoming “in an instant as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims [...] because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz” (82). This nascent allegiance originates in his revulsion against the methods of the pilgrims, a recoil which finds expression in his admitted preference for the outright outlaw over the petty schemer:

They [the pilgrims] intrigued and slandered and hated each other [...] but as to effectually lifting a little finger—oh, no. By heavens! there is something after all in the world allowing one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter, Steal a horse straight out. Very well. He has done it. Perhaps he can ride. But there is a way of looking at a halter that would provoke the most charitable of saints into a kick. (78)

In consequence of this growing disgust with the world of the pilgrims, the steamer's passage upstream to visit the various stations, once it gets under way, comes to represent for Marlow a personal voyage of discovery: "For me it crawled towards Kurtz—exclusively" (95).

As the account of this expedition continues, certain inconsistencies emerge in the use of the concepts of "truth" and "reality", apparent contradictions which are closely bound up with the vexed problem of Marlow's attitude to work. At one point in the narrative work seems to signify a positive, self-actualizing engagement with the world, by means of which a relevant personal reality can be established:

I don't like work [...] but I like what is in the work, —the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others what no other man can ever know. (85)

But at other moments "reality" is firmly identified with something outside and independent of human activity, something incomprehensible and hostile, so that work becomes significant chiefly as a bulwark, a means of keeping that terrible actuality at bay. In describing his labours in keeping the steamer on the move, Marlow recommends the virtues of such practical occupations in terms that are essentially negative in implication:

When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. (93)

This epistemological confusion is itself symptomatic of Marlow's increasing estrangement from the simplistic formulas by which he has hitherto interpreted his experience and regulated his life, and the various constructions he places on the value of work, when compared, add up to a progressive sequence. From the unexamined assumption evinced in the Company offices that "real work" was being done by imperialism at least in some areas (55), he has proceeded to a more qualified view which, while sceptical, can still admire the accountant at the Company Station because "in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance" (68) and attended dutifully to his figures. From this position he has moved on to discover an existential, self-actualizing virtue in work, associating such activity with the creation of a personal reality, and from this he lapses more and more into an even more absolute scepticism which looks to work simply as a defense against a circumambient chaos. Eventually even this will not constitute the last word on the subject, for by gazing into Kurtz's liberated soul he will witness human nature in its rawest form, confessing allegiance to nothing outside itself and seeking no protection against the anarchy to which it has succumbed.

As his familiar interpretative apparatus disintegrates in the course of this journey, Marlow becomes increasingly aware that the wilderness which surrounds his vessel exists within himself as well. And although at one point he can assure his audience that he and his companions could make no sense of the sounds and gesticulations produced by the "prehistoric man" because "we were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings[...] We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of

first ages" (96), only a few lines later he contradicts himself, acknowledging that after all there was a response. Once again the reader is forcibly reminded that this is the narration of a Marlow who is struggling on board the *Nellie* to discover adequate terms for his experience, and who is continually finding himself obliged to surrender one largely conventional formulation in favour of another that more accurately approximates to the reality of the situation:

It was unearthly, and the men were— No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—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. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. [...] Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. (96-7)

The drama of sympathetic identification has enlarged here to the point that the "dark other", the "secret sharer", can comprise an entire population. The problem that emerges from this identification is analogous to that raised in *Lord Jim*: granted this kinship, must one succumb to it, must one accept all the implications of a shared humanity? Marlow says no and takes deliberate refuge in his work. A man, he insists, must withstand what only a man can discover:

He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. (97)

At this juncture then it is the voice that becomes the hero, opposing itself to silence and to other voices, and creating a world of significance to ward off chaos. On a more material level Marlow, who is supposedly the only European on board the steamer "man enough" to acknowledge the appeal of the savagery on shore, is saved by the business of keeping his boat on the move: "There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man" (97). In order to illustrate the protection that a set of beliefs—any set of beliefs—can afford Marlow cites the case of the black fireman of the steamer, who has been duped into thinking that a powerful spirit in the boiler will exact a terrible revenge if the correct level is not maintained in the water gauge (98). This deception exploits the same superstitious credulity that the white men in the short story "Karain" play on to put the mind of a native prince at rest; but ironically enough, in view of the fate that befalls the helmsman after he abandons his post, there would appear to be a partial truth embedded even in this fiction of a vengeful spirit, for to succumb to panic to the extent of forsaking one's duty is in a sense to let a demon

gain the upper hand. In terms of absolutes, of course, there is little difference between Marlow's "deliberate belief" and the contrived belief he has instilled into the fireman, but the belief in both cases has a prophylactic value which is entirely independent of considerations of "objective" truth, and neither Marlow nor the fireman yield to the allure of the primitive because neither "had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts" (98).

At this point the idea of work as a redemptive factor in human life coincides with another theme touched on in *Heart of Darkness*, that of "restraint". Marlow is astonished at the remarkable forbearance exhibited by his crew of cannibals, who despite their growing hunger unaccountably refrain from dining off their white masters: "something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play" (104). On the other hand Kurtz, who is supposed to epitomize the best elements of European civilization, according to Marlow's wry understatement "lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (131), having apparently exchanged places with the cannibals and partaken of human flesh himself. Fresleven has been killed after losing his customary composure and abandoning himself to a fit of anger, while the helmsman dies because he succumbs to panic. The conclusion that salvation is to be achieved only through the exercise of restraint in the face of inner and outer chaos would thus appear to be unavoidable, were it not for a passing observation with which Marlow effectively punctures the entire argument. The manager, he remarks, despite his cynicism and petty machinations, "was just the kind of man who would wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint " (106) In view of the obviously defective nature of this individual's moral character, it is clearly to be concluded that "restraint" and even "work" are not exempt from the criticism which discredits Stein's theory that each must be faithful to his particular dream. In purely private terms any belief, any task, any form of restraint, might serve to preserve the personality from disintegration if it is lived with sufficient conviction, but the individual's actions and even his beliefs impinge on the public world too, and must be evaluated according to their consequences in that world. As far as his personal mental state is concerned, the manager's version of restraint might be no less efficacious than those of the cannibals or even of Marlow himself, but in the public arena the various manifestations of the principle must be distinguished. In this respect too choice must be reinstated as a significant factor in human affairs, even if at this dark level the only choice possible is between nightmares.

As Marlow approaches Kurtz's station, and at the same time grows increasingly conscious of the true profundity of the affair in which he has become embroiled, even his voice suffers a check, and "it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility" (100). This temporary frustration of language might be regarded as the linguistic equivalent of the phase of immobilization which, as we have observed, is a characteristic feature of the revelatory experience as Conrad renders it in his fiction, an arrest imaged elsewhere in the becalming of ships and the prostration of men. In this novel too the psychic situation is not without its physical correlative, and although Marlow is "annoyed beyond expression" at the delay (101), he is obliged to halt

the steamer for the night only a few miles downstream from the Inner Station. The description of nightfall is suggestive at once of the annulment of the sensible world and of a universal state of paralysis:

The living trees [...] might have been changed into stone [...] It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. (101)

The liminal quality of the scene is if anything only intensified by daybreak, for a fog descends which is “more blinding than the night” (101). Even at this point the human voice is not yet entirely stilled, but it has reverted to an undifferentiated, prelingual current of sound without definable significance:

A very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air [...] A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. [...] It culminated in a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. “Good God! What is the meaning—” stammered at my elbow one of the pilgrims (101-2)

Characteristically, the pilgrim seeks a semantic sense in this uproar, but there is none to be found, for the abruptly terminated commotion suggests that language itself has returned to its origins in inchoate sound before passing over the final threshold into silence. After that culminating outburst there is nothing to see and nothing to bear: “the rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind” (102).

As Marlow has negotiated the succession of physical and conceptual thresholds that conduct him by stages to the central truth of human life, he has entertained different formulations of his experience, examined a variety of possible “voices”, and discarded each in turn as it has proved inadequate to the task of capturing the essence of the situation. Like “work”, language establishes a reality which can be opposed to the primeval reality of the uncreated wilderness, building a world of order which is the human counterpoise to the anarchic truth of raw nature. In *Lord Jim* Marlow makes explicit his own awareness of the intimate involvement of language with human order, suggesting that beyond the frontier of words lie only chaos and darkness:

For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder [...] But still—it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must—don’t you know? though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge.⁸

Not all such “sheltering conceptions” are necessarily to be approved, however, any more than all kinds of work or restraint are to be approved: light itself can become a demonic symbol in the fallen world, and order might be no more than

that of a destructive system. It does not really suffice to assign the arbitrary labels “enemy” or “criminal” to the native and attempt to deal with him in those terms, and Marlow in his search for moral and linguistic authenticity has therefore rejected those “languages” which prove to be no more than fragile membranes of words enclosing an essential vacancy. The Company manager with his pragmatic talk of methods and profits is himself little more than an object lesson in the practical validity of his own maxim that “men who come out here should have no entrails” (74), while Marlow’s impression of the papier-maché Mephistopheles, who dresses up his petty scheming in the inflated phraseology of enlightened self-interest, is that “if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt” (81). Despite his genius for oratory, Kurtz is himself described as being “hollow at the core”, although in his case it is only through a plumbing of this inner vacancy that he is able to achieve his final victory. Marlow recalls the utterances of all these hollow men mostly as disconnected fragments—the gaudy remnants of dead rhetoric which, like the “pretty rags” of abstract principles, will “fly off at the first good shake” (97)—as devoid of meaning in this context as the unfathomable marginalia written in a manual on seamanship by a Russian whose own clothing consists of a patchwork of rags (99). But by systematically divesting himself of these merely verbal realities Marlow has placed himself at the mercy of the alternative truth embodied in the wilderness, and after the final extinction of the voice which follows upon the last frantic outburst of the natives he does deliberate battle with that truth.

I have suggested that the helmsman who abandons his post is also essentially “hollow”, and that his hollowness is searched out by a spear as Fresleven’s hollowness was discovered when a native made “a tentative jab” at him (54). The helmsman’s death defines a critical juncture in the movement of the story, for it is in response to this incident that Marlow symbolically relinquishes the functional identity he has assumed by “stepping into” Fresleven’s shoes. The blood in which Marlow’s shoes are drenched suggests that as a European participating, however pacifically, in the white man’s invasion of an alien continent, he has incurred a portion of the responsibility for the blood which has been shed in that undertaking. His disposal of the shoes therefore symbolizes his disengagement from the entire enterprise, and this brings in its train an awakening to his own real motives in voyaging up the river—an awakening from which he has previously been shielded by his exclusive concern with the task in hand:

I couldn’t have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz. Talking with . . . I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz. (113)

The shoes, then, are symbolic of a civilized role, a social identity, which Marlow now deliberately abdicates, and an emblem also of all that civilization represents in the way of alienation from the primal sources of being. Marlow’s deliberate abandonment of his function, the surrender of the social identity upon which he

has depended for his very sanity up until this moment, assumes the aspect of a ritual act of propitiation or oblation reminiscent of the boatswain's symbolic dispersal of the carpenter's nails over the raging sea in *The Nigger*:

The other shoe went flying unto the devil-god of that river. I thought, By Jove! it's all over. We are too late; he has vanished—the gift has vanished [...] I will never hear that chap speak after all. (114)

It is perhaps revealing that Marlow's discovery that his quest has been orientated towards Kurtz and nothing else should be arrived at through a "sacrificial" gesture analogous to the violent rites which have been enacted for the renegade's benefit by his black followers. Now Marlow too, like Kurtz before him, walks with "untrammelled feet" (116), having surrendered his social identity in order to achieve an unmediated confrontation with the individual who by now has come to be identified almost exclusively with his voice:

The man presented himself as a voice. [...] Of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (113-14)

Speech is the most characteristic instrument of man's demiurgy, creating a universe of human significance, and it would seem that Marlow's craving to hear Kurtz's voice reflects a passionate desire for some ultimate statement concerning life, a statement that is not conditioned by practical exigencies, self-interest, or a merely rhetorical impulse. The Word is the shaping power behind the human world, and even Kurtz's rupture with that world is described in linguistic terms, his language having proved inadequate in the face of the silence which is one of the many voices of the wilderness. It is the compelling power of this silence that Marlow insists on in challenging the complacency of his listeners, asking them whether they can really imagine "what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude [...] by the way of silence" (116).

Yet ironically, Kurtz's vulnerability seems to have been rooted not in the common infirmities of the *homme moyen sensuel* upon whom Marlow heaps such scorn, but rather in the extraordinary range of his capacities—especially his verbal capacities. This "universal genius" (83) has been endowed with all the linguistic and cultural resources of his civilization—"All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (117)—and Marlow cannot decide whether to classify him as a politician, journalist, painter or musician, so remarkably successful is he in everything he undertakes (153-4). It would seem however that the price exacted for being everything is the impossibility of being *any* one thing, to be hollow at the core, for as Marlow points out in the novel *Chance*, unlimited potentiality and complete vacancy are not very different in practical terms:

The trouble was that I could not imagine anything about Flora de Barral and the brother of Mrs. Fyne. Or if you like, I could imagine *anything* which comes practically to the same thing. Darkness and chaos are first cousins.⁹

Unlike the pilgrims, who can comprehend things only in so far as they conform to their limited value system, Kurtz is vulnerable, and free, simply by virtue of his not being any determinate thing, and as such is particularly representative of the “mind of man”, which is “capable of anything—because everything is in it” (96). Far from attaching himself without reservation to a specific idea or faith, to the “deliberate belief” that Marlow advocates as the only reliable amulet against the powers of darkness, he “could get himself to believe anything” (154). The pilgrims converse in only one “language”, that of trade, of profit, of cynical pragmatism, but the polyglot Kurtz has all languages at his disposal, and so is unfettered—and undefined—by any.

This linguistic, cultural and (in the broadest sense) ontological heterogeneity is externalized in the person of Kurtz’s faithful attendant, the Russian harlequin who insists that his mind has been “enlarged” through contact with Kurtz (140), and whose clothes are a motley of rags collected in his mentor’s storeroom (137). In this connection one of Marlow’s earlier observations acquires for the alert reader an additional increment of symbolic resonance. A man, he declares, must meet the “truth” of the wilderness “with his own true stuff”:

Principles won’t do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake No; you want a deliberate belief. (97)

Kurtz’s moral being consists in just such an assortment of rags, gathered at random in the depository of European culture, and stripped from him as soon as he penetrates the wilderness. His rhetoric and his most cherished ideals, being mutually sustaining, founder together, and the terse postscript appended to his eloquent and enlightened treatise on the redemptive role of white civilization—“Exterminate all the brutes!” (118)—represents the final paroxysm of language before it collapses utterly. Destitute of a personal voice adequate to confront the challenge of his solitude, he has proved fatally susceptible to that of the wilderness:

It had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. (131)

Despite the degradation exacted by the wilderness as the price of this “devilish initiation”, however, Kurtz has absorbed within himself all the potentialities of mankind, thereby attaining a stature which dwarfs the world of the pilgrims and exposes it as the contemptible puppet show it is. Marlow’s (and Conrad’s) attitude concerning this Faustian accession to a total humanity is complex and ambivalent. Kurtz is condemned, and even at times held up to derision; yet Marlow insists that “whatever he was, he was not common” (119), and eventually goes so far as to extend his allegiance to the dying outlaw. It is the

callous triviality of the train of reasoning lying behind the pilgrims' disparagement of Kurtz's activities which provokes Marlow into taking this drastic step, for he finds it appalling that the manager should, after having witnessed some of the atrocities committed at the Inner Station, inveigh against Kurtz solely on the grounds that his method is unsound (137). Revolted by this complacent reduction of a complex moral situation to the insipid criteria of commerce, Marlow elects to support the renegade who is at least aware of what he is doing:

It seemed to me I had never breathed an atmosphere so vile, and I turned mentally to Kurtz for relief [...] "Nevertheless I think Mr. Kurtz is a remarkable man," I said with emphasis. [...] My hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe: I was unsound! Ah! but it was something to have at least a choice of nightmares. (138)

The point of Marlow's commitment to Kurtz would seem to be that he deliberately chooses active as opposed to passive evil, prefers the brutal frankness of nature's cruelty to the moral inertia which characterizes the world of the pilgrims. He recognizes that the most terrifying aspect of the crimes committed by the Company agents is that they are virtually unconscious, not even necessitating an active engagement of the will, and that the hell they create is an inhuman one of pedestrian automatism and stale abstraction. Kurtz has at least made some kind of active choice, exists still as a self-conscious being tormented by the moral aspect of his acts, and his passionate surrender of himself to intensely recognized evil paradoxically suggests that some kind of salvation is possible. When Conrad alludes to the "privilege infernal et divin de la Pensée" in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska,¹⁰ he is defining the moral axis upon which the outlaw's deeds and very being assume their place, and it is perhaps revealing that Marlow should mention that while at the Central Station he knew no more about Kurtz "than if I had been told an angel or a fiend was in here" (81). The world of the Company pilgrims in which morality has atrophied into a mere economic calculus, in which even robbery and murder are evaluated solely from the point of view of practical utility, does not belong to this essentially religious dimension of significance.

Although he is careful to explain that he "had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz", Marlow is able to declare to the Russian youth who faithfully attends the dying man that he too is Kurtz's friend "in a way" (138). In selecting this alternative Marlow has entered Kurtz's moral universe, recognizing that the outlaw's case can tell him something about his own, and it is because of the essentially private nature of this commitment that he remains "loyal to the nightmare of my choice" (141) and does not alert the pilgrims when Kurtz makes a final effort to return to the wilderness. Being the only man on the steamer capable of perceiving the renegade's true significance, he alone is equipped to deal with him in terms of that significance. There is moreover an obscure psychological necessity to this personal confrontation, for Kurtz represents an aspect of Marlow's own self which, having been kindled into active life, must now be subdued to some kind of order. By the time he succeeds in accosting him Kurtz

has become “that Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing,” (143), and Marlow is wrestling for his very soul. But it is also for his own salvation that Marlow is struggling. He has accepted the dark relevance of Kurtz’s emancipation to his own life, and must now either master this liberty, shatter “the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness” (144), or else acquiesce in the logic which has already destroyed his predecessor. But actually confronted with the outlaw, it is borne heavily upon Marlow that he has no recourse to any set of values; that no formula, no conventional ideal, can be invoked to curb the terrible freedom to which Kurtz has acceded: “I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (144). Yet the darkness is tamed somehow, and it is the voice that gains the day: “I did say the right thing” (143). This achievement, which represents the triumph of the spoken word, is in a certain sense a cosmic event, signifying the restoration of a world of order, a word wrested from chaos. But it is not a victory easily come by:

I’ve been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what’s the good? They were common everyday words [...] But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man. [...] But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and [...] it had gone mad. I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself. No eloquence could have been so withering to one’s belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity. He struggled with himself, too. I saw it, I heard it. I saw the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself. (144-5)

This “inconceivable mystery” is as little to be expected, in view of the absolute nature of Kurtz’s freedom, as the mystery of the cannibals’ restraint in not devouring their white masters. Kurtz acknowledges no fealty to anything—not even to fear, that last bulwark of social order—yet, inexplicably, he is struggling to dominate his own atavistic cravings. The dying man’s contest with his own regressive impulses continues until the end, and “both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul” (147). It is an epochal quarrel, with enormous implications for mankind; yet Kurtz is the only man capable of waging it, for he alone has compassed in his own life the whole of human potential—he alone is truly free. And when the outlaw at last delivers his verdict, it is one which admits of no qualification:

Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath

“The horror! The horror” (149)

Thus it is that Kurtz’s voice, which has been placed at the service of so many false gods, has in the end struggled towards a genuine moral statement, a “judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth” (150), and Marlow’s choice of nightmares is vindicated after all. The voice he has hungered to hear has finally

pronounced. and it speaks in accents foreign to the world of the Company pilgrims. It perhaps does not very much matter what, exactly, this judgement refers to; whether it applies solely to Kurtz's own life or to life in general, to his individual crimes or those of humanity at large. What signifies is that it *is* a judgement, the formulation of a truth arrived at only after the last remaining shreds of illusion have been torn away. Its utterance implies that a truth can exist, a reality exist, which is not purely instrumental, or self-actualizing, or in any way defensive; and it is delivered by a voice issuing from beyond the dream of life, a voice which can evaluate that dream and find it wanting. As soon as a "horror" is apprehended which does not belong to any of the contingent modalities of truth with which Marlow has been experimenting, the moral world comes into being and life acquires a new dimension of significance.

Marlow himself is very much aware that there is something positive in the mere possibility of a judgement such as this, even if its formulation can only be in negative terms:

He had summed up—he had judged. "The horror!" He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction ... it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth. (151)

No one else can duplicate this victory, because no one else will assume the total liberty which severs Kurtz irrevocably from the human lie in all its forms. Marlow confesses that even he himself, poised some time later like Kurtz on the brink of death, has not been capable of emulating the other's triumph:

I was within a hair's-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. (151)

Estranged by illness from all comforting illusions, Marlow is beset only by a "careless contempt for the evanescence of all things" (151), a nihilism that cuts through moral judgements rather than occasions them. And having known such an experience he insists on the greatness of the man who, arriving at the same point, the "threshold of the invisible", has at least been able to deliver a verdict which implies a bedrock of moral commitment:

I like to think my summing-tip would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last. (151)

Although he has discarded the blood-soaked shoes he "stepped into" after Fresleven's death in order to advance with "untrammelled feet" into his inner darkness, Marlow later donates another pair to Kurtz's inadequately shod disciple at the Inner Station (140). In making this gift Marlow would appear to be symbolically reaffirming the civilization he has provisionally relinquished so as to achieve contact with Kurtz, even though the new pair of shoes can perhaps represent no more than one more patch to the chequered adventurer who

receives them. The last instance of shoe -imagery in this novel is located in the shoestring with which the letters and the photograph entrusted to Marlow by Kurtz are tied together (148). As it is this photograph which induces Marlow to confront the Intended directly, and once again preserve civilization by means of a linguistic act, this latter event assumes its place—through the emblematic shoes—within the overall symbolic pattern.

Marlow's famous "lie" consists in his telling the Intended that the last word pronounced by Kurtz was her name, and it seems to me that this culminating act, like Jim's final gesture in delivering himself up to Doramin's wrath, is rather more equivocal than a great deal of critical commentary has implied. On the surface, admittedly, Marlow's statement to the Intended appears to be redemptive, meant to ensure the "salvation of another soul" (156) by maintaining one specimen of womankind at least in "that beautiful world of their own" (115). Although it is obvious that this lapse from his customary veracity costs Marlow a great deal, he nonetheless recognizes that the "truth" would be far worse, "would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (162). Considered in these terms, Marlow's final choice of nightmares might be interpreted as a choice between a devastating truth and a tolerable fiction which he is only now in a position to make, or even to recognize, and his deciding for the saving lie would therefore represent a final implicit affirmation of the ordering power of the word, an acknowledgement of its capacity to structure the world into meaningful patterns of moral significance. If the voice has discovered in the course of its trials that all verbal formulations are deceptive in the final analysis, at least it has not overlooked the corollary that it is empowered to select those deceptions on which can be founded a viable civilized existence.

Nevertheless there is a deeply rooted ambivalence in Marlow's attitude to the civilization he is helping to sustain by confirming Kurtz's fiancée in her illusions, and this ambivalence attaches to the figure of the girl herself. From one point of view she is exactly what she seems, a noble and defenseless victim tragically though obscurely betrayed by the man in whom she has innocently invested her faith. But she can also be seen as a destroyer, a personification of the life-in-death which characterizes existence in the sepulchral city, and the imagery in which her drawing room is described is ominously mortuary in suggestion:

I had to wait in a lofty drawing-room with three long windows from floor to ceiling that were like three luminous and bedraped columns. [...] The tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner; with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus. (156)

Since this room is evidently linked with the "house in a city of the dead" in which the Company offices are situated, there is something disconcertingly sinister about the cry "of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain" with which its occupant receives Marlow's assurances of Kurtz's unwavering fidelity (162) For if it is true that Kurtz has betrayed his "intentions" by surrendering to the aboriginal it is also true that those intentions are no more than another aspect of the civilized lie which is trying to impress itself upon the vital wilderness of the human

soul, a lie whose effects are exhibited in the automatism of the traders who are themselves scarcely more human than the black zombies they yoke together into chain gangs.

After his perceptions have been enlarged by his partial duplication of Kurtz's dark exploration, Marlow finds it impossible to take seriously the inanity and bland criminality of civilized life, and confesses to feelings of revulsion before the spectacle of the denizens of the "whited sepulchre" bent upon their business (152). At several points indeed the world of European civilization is expressly likened to that of savage life, the implication being that progress is yet another illusion, and that the apparent diversity of human societies reduces in the final analysis to the difference between more or less elaborate variations on the same cultural theme. As the parodic religious allusions make clear, the pilgrim traders have consecrated their lives to a cult of ivory which differs very little from any other kind of idolatry, and Marlow observes at one point that the distant drumming he bears in the forest perhaps has "as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (71). In the drawing room of the Intended too, Marlow feels that he has "blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold" (157), and he goes on to elaborate the associations between this room and the wilderness by explicitly assimilating the Intended herself to Kurtz's savage mistress, who as her lover was borne away from her on the steamer "opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head" (136):

She [the Intended] put out her arms as if after a retreating figure [...] 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. (160-1)

As I have already suggested, then, the Intended who represents the ideals of civilization, and the savage woman embodying primitive passion, amount in the end to the same thing: Fate-figures spinning out the destinies of men, personifications of the controlling dreams of the world, reflected as inverted black images of each other in the dark waters of the infernal stream. The final irony of Marlow's lie might therefore consist in the possibility that it is not fully a lie at all, that the otherwise unnamed Intended, incarnating the hollow "intentions" which proliferate in the charnel house of European civilization, is in fact an element in the horror which Kurtz apprehends in its true aspect in the final moment of his life, and that his culminating judgement "names" her no less than it does the other evils also recognized in that climactic moment of vision.

In a revealing letter to Cunninghame Graham Conrad formulated a view of social life according to which civilization, while admittedly indispensable, is also inevitably criminal:

L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. Le crime est une condition nécessaire de l'existence organisée. La société est essentiellement criminelle—ou elle n'existerait pas.¹¹

The final ambiguity surrounding Marlow's lie conveys the radical ambivalence of this attitude to civilization. If the spectacle of unbridled human nature gratifying its every impulse in the vacuum of absolute freedom is morally repugnant, the social order which in the secular world offers the only possible bulwark against that dangerous liberty is scarcely to be preferred. Stripped of the luminous lies which envelop it in a counterfeit radiance, civilization harbours at its core an essential darkness indistinguishable from the darkness of chaos to which it opposes itself. Society may be necessary, but behind the facade of pious pretences it is a sepulchre teeming with corruption. Not surprisingly, Marlow remains uncertain after he has told the lie which is perhaps not entirely a lie, that he has done the right thing. As he leaves the house of the Intended he half expects the heavens to fall on his head (162), but of course nothing of the sort occurs, and he is left to flounder in his perplexity. It is even possible that he thinks better of his decision, for it must not be overlooked that although Marlow has consoled Kurtz's fiancée with what he believes to be a lie, he is now besieging the complacency of his audience with what he is convinced to be the truth. The possibility must therefore be admitted that this interview with the Intended is not so much the culminating incident which sets the seal on Marlow's experience and marks the final phase of his inner development, as it is one more ingredient in the ferment working within him which finally breaks the surface with the recapitulation of the entire episode that he undertakes on board the *Nellie*.

If this is so, then the real revelation and coming to terms is achieved not in the course of the events which the story relates, but at the moment of the narration itself, when Marlow interrogates his experience and attempts to elicit from it a coherent significance. As his younger self has submitted itself to the ordeal of following Kurtz's voice into the heart of darkness in order to assist at what might be described as the resurrection of the Word, so in the course of its self-exploration does his own disembodied voice journey to the very frontier of the linguistic world in order to regenerate itself through a confrontation with prelingual chaos. Only after such an ordeal by silence can language again become the forger of the human world and not merely its mirror, become creative and not epiphenomena, an agent and not a reflex; for the voice as hero must duplicate the lesson which Conrad's questors are all obliged to learn in the course of their trials, which is to recognize the inescapable ambiguity of action without at the same time renouncing action. The final determination of the voice to speak in the full knowledge that to formulate is necessarily to falsify, that verbal definition must inevitably fall short of its object, is the linguistic equivalent of this triumph of the double vision, and Marlow's exclamation that "for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (97) the defiant manifesto of a voice which, having travelled alone the way of silence, is alone qualified to meet the truth of that silence with its own true stuff.

NOTES

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- ¹ Various critics have touched on this theme. James Guetti believes that *Heart of Darkness* illustrates its own incapacity to construct a “coherent metaphorical structure”, and argues that “Conrad presents a narrative and simultaneously demonstrates that to give it a disciplined and final meaning is impossible, suggesting that the fictional world he has created can only be approached by verbal contradictions and a sense of mystery”. *The Limits of Metaphor* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1967), pp.1, 139. J.Hillis Miller discusses this “language theme” in his *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 36, while similar considerations enter into Bruce Johnson's discussion of *Heart of Darkness* in Chapter V of his *Conrad's Models of Mind* (Minneapolis, 1971). Jeremy Hawthorn deals extensively with Conrad's preoccupation with language, his discussion of *Heart of Darkness* comprising Chapter I of his *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness* (London; 1979). It is Tony Tanner, however, who in my view best formulates the ambivalence implicit in Conrad's attitude towards language when he emphasizes “the tension between two feelings: first, the recognition that language can never hold any substantial reality, a realisation which leads in one direction to a sense of both the autonomy and futility of language; and secondly, the recognition that language must constantly attempt to establish some kind of relationship to non-lingual realities, a realisation which leads in the other direction to a sense of the heteronomy and purposefulness of language”. “‘Gnawed Bones’ and ‘Artless Tales’—Eating and Narrative in Conrad”, in Norman Sherry, ed., *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration* (London, 1976), p. 33.
- ² Some of these arguments have been collected by R. W. Stallman in *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium* (East Lansing, Michigan, 1966). See Jerome Thale, “Marlow's Quest”, originally published in the *University of Toronto Quarterly XXIV* (July 1955), pp. 351-8, and reprinted in Stallman, pp. 154-61, which argues that *Heart of Darkness* depicts a grail quest; Lillian Feder, “Marlow's Descent into Hell”, originally published in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction IX* (March 1955), pp. 280-92, and reprinted in Stallman, pp. 162-70, which suggests that there is a direct parallel between Marlow's journey and Aeneas's descent into Hades in the *Aeneid*; and Robert O. Evans, “Conrad's Underworld”, originally published in *Modern Fiction Studies 11* (May 1956), pp. 56-62, and reprinted in Stallman, pp. 171-8, which locates the prototype of Marlow's journey in Dante's *Inferno*.
- ³ Letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 20 December 1897; in Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, eds, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1 1861-1897 (Cambridge 1983), p. 425.
- ⁴ *The Rescue*, p. 412.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 392-3.
- ⁶ *Tales of Unrest*, p. 123.
- ⁷ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1980), p. 221.
- ⁸ *Lord Jim*, p. 313.
- ⁹ *Chance*, p. 210. Emphasis in the original.
- ¹⁰ Letter to Marguerite Poradowska, dated 20 July 1894 by editors; in Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, eds, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1 1861-1897 (Cambridge 1983), p. 162.
- ¹¹ Letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham, 8 February 1899; in Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, eds, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 2 1898-1902 (Cambridge 1986), p. 159.