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Heart of Darkness and the epistemology of cultural differences

Abstract

Heart of Darkness has a long history of disagreement about whether to regard it as a daring attack on imperialism or a reactionary purveyor of colonial stereotypes. Taking Achebe's now famous indictment and Clifford's recent praise that Conrad was an exemplary anthropologist, this article argues that Conrad is neither a racist nor an exemplary anthropologist but a skeptical dramatist of epistemological processes. The novella has received these divergent responses because its enactment of the dilemmas entailed in understanding cultural otherness is inherently double and strategically ambiguous. The article argues that the novella is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding presented to the reader through textual strategies which oscillate between affirming and denying the possibility of understanding otherness. The article acknowledges that charges such as that made by Achebe are extremely valuable because they break the aura of the text and establish reciprocity between it and its interpreters by putting them on equal terms, and concludes that a recognition of how unsettlingly ambiguous the text is about the ideals of reciprocity and mutual understanding will empower us to engage in a sort of dialogue with it which Marlow never achieves with Africans or anyone else.

1.   Introduction

Chinua Achebe's well-known, controversial claim that the depiction of the peoples of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* is racist and xenophobic stands in striking contrast to James Clifford's praise of Conrad as an exemplary anthropologist. Where Achebe finds prejudice and dismissive reification in the representations of the Other offered by *Heart of Darkness*, Clifford sees in the text a heteroglossic rendering of cultural differences without any attempt to synthesize them. "Joseph Conrad was a bloody racist," Achebe claims, and *Heart of Darkness* is "a story in which the very humanity of black people is

called in question" – "a book which parades in the must vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities" (Achebe, 1977:788, 790).[1] By contrast, Clifford holds up the novella as an epistemological model for ethnographers because it "truthfully juxtaposes different truths" and "does not permit a feeling of centeredness, coherent dialogue, or authentic communion" which would give the misleading impression that understanding another culture can be accomplished once and for all: "Anthropology is still waiting for its Conrad" (Clifford, 1988:99, 102, 96). It is curious, to say the least, that the same text can be viewed as an exemplar of epistemological evil and virtue – as a model of the worst abuses and the most promising practices in representing other peoples and cultures.

This conflict is only the latest chapter in a long history of disagreement about whether to regard *Heart of Darkness* as a daring attack on imperialism or a reactionary purveyor of colonial stereotypes.[2] The novella has received such divergent responses, I think, because its enactment of the dilemmas entailed in understanding cultural otherness is inherently double and strategically ambiguous. Achebe wrongly assumes that *Heart of Darkness* offers a finished representation of the colonial Other to the metropolitan reader. Instead, the text dramatizes the impossibility of capturing the Other in writing, whether univocal or polysemic, for the very reason that understanding otherness requires an ongoing reciprocity between knower and known through which each comments on, corrects, and

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[1]   For particularly useful analyses of Achebe's charges, see Hawkins, "The Issue of Racism" (1979) and Watts, "'A Bloody Racist'" (1983). Astonishingly, Clifford makes no mention of Achebe. The response of other African and postcolonial writers to Achebe's charges has been mixed. The Indian critic Frances B. Singh claims that Marlow "has no desire to understand or appreciate people of any culture other than his own" and that this failure betrays not only his own but also Conrad's assumption that "primitive people were morally inferior to civilized ones" (Zingh, 1978:45, 52). The Ugandan writer Peter Nazareth, however, finds in Conrad not only an unflinching critic of imperialism who tells his audience "how the Africans are exploited and brutalized by Europeans" but also a potential resource and ally for African writers: "when we 'signify' on Conrad, he becomes one of us" (Nazareth, 1990:107). The Guyanese critic Harris Wilson and the Zambian C. P. Sarvan find *Heart of Darkness* "a frontier novel" which "stands upon a threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself" (Wilson, 263): "Conrad too was not entirely immune to the infection of the beliefs and attitudes of his age, but he was ahead of most in trying to break free" (Sarvan, 1980:285). Also see Hamner (1984) and Kinkead-Weekes (1990) for useful surveys of the postcolonial response to Conrad.

[2]   Among those who see Conrad as a foe of imperialism, see especially McClure (1981), Hawthorn (1990), and Hawkins (1979), "Conrad's Critique of Imperialism". For indictments of his bigotry and implicit endorsement of colonial attitudes, see Brantlinger (1988), Torgovnick (1990), and Parry (1983). Edward Said makes an interesting and important attempt to acknowledge and account for the merits of both sides of the argument in his recent *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 1993:19-31).

replies to the other's representations in a never-ending shifting of positions. Achebe is right to fault the text, however, because it dramatizes a pervasive state of cultural solipsism which it does not itself overcome, and it consequently abounds in representations of the Other which are one-sided and prejudicial. In yet another turn, though, Achebe's very act of writing back to Conrad is already anticipated by the text. Clifford is right that Conrad offers key guidance to anthropological knowing – not, however, because his novel is an ideal ethnography, but because its textual strategies aim to educate the reader about processes which might make possible a dialogue with the Other which is absent from Marlow's monologue.[3]

Conrad is neither a racist nor an exemplary anthropologist but a skeptical dramatist of epistemological processes. *Heart of Darkness* is a calculated failure to depict achieved cross-cultural understanding. The implication of this failure for the reader is deliberately unclear because Conrad is not certain that hermeneutic education or social change can overcome the solipsism dividing individuals and cultures, even as he is reluctant to give up hope that they might. Truly reciprocal, dialogical understanding of the Other is the unrealized horizon which this text points to but does not reach. *Heart of Darkness* strategically refuses to specify whether this horizon is attainable or will forever recede as we approach it. This ambiguity is an expression of Conrad's unresolved epistemological doubleness – his will-to-believe that our essential solipsism can be overcome coupled with his deep skepticism that (in Marlow's words) "We live, as we dream – alone" (30)[4]. Because Conrad cannot resolve this doubleness into a univocal attitude, he stages it for the reader through textual strategies which oscillate between affirming and denying the possibility of understanding otherness.[5]

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3   Clifford's praise of Conrad's narrative strategies reflects the stance of the new ethnographers who have challenged the positivistic assumptions of traditional anthropology by arguing that 'culture' is not a factually describable object but, like writing, is inherently heterogeneous and will vary in how it is understood according to the standpoint of the interpreter. Writers like Conrad who stage the problems of knowing the Other through their strategies of representation seem to Clifford and his allies to offer models for a new style of anthropology which does not claim an impossible objectivity and acknowledges in its very form the necessity of dialogical understanding. See the essays collected by Clifford and Marcus in *Writing Culture* (1986). Also see Geertz, *Works and Lives* (1988). My argument will be that it is wrong to idealize Conrad as Clifford does but that *Heart of Darkness* nevertheless offers an important commentary on the epistemological problems which concern the new ethnographers.

4   Page numbers refer to quotations from Conrad, Joseph. 1988. *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Kumbrough. New York : Norton.

5   *Heart of Darkness* is a much more unsettling text than its detractors often recognize. One problem with critics who angrily attack the text's racism and Eurocentrism is that they assume a position of epistemological righteousness beyond the limitations of ethnic prejudice and cultural provincialism which Conrad doubts anyone can occupy. This is one

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2.   The failed ideal of dialogical understanding

Heart of Darkness represents dialogical understanding as an unfilled void, an empty set, a lack signified by the dire consequences it leads to. It is important to note how little contact – and even less conversation – Marlow has with Africans. He himself observes early on that "Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you – smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering – Come and find out" (16). That is his posture for most of the story – observing at a distance people and phenomena with which he has little or no reciprocal engagement and which consequently seem bewildering and mysterious, even frightening or disgusting ("the incomprehensible ... is also detestable. And it has a fascination too, ... the fascination of the abomination" [10]). What all of these emotions share is the one-sidedness of their response to alterity, an absence of to-and-fro engagement with it. Curiosity, desire, fear, wonder, loathing, or frustration – all are one-way attitudes which do not reduce the Other's distance but only confirm and compound its status as alien, whether marvelous or terrible. "We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings," Marlow notes as he travels up the river; "we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse" (37). This analogy is apt inasmuch as madness both fascinates and terrifies sanity because it recognizes a kinship which it refuses to accept and explore by making madness an interlocutor.

Marlow explicitly criticizes the blindness and will-to-power of non-reciprocal approaches to alterity – for example: the scientist who oddly measures only the outside of the skulls of those travelling to Africa, and only on their way out, or the French man-of-war which shells invisible 'enemies' in the forest. The absurd one-sidedness of these engagements with the unknown suggests that Marlow would endorse Achebe's complaint that "Travellers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves" (Achebe, 1977:791). Marlow indicts the close-mindedness of non-dialogical encounters with otherness but then duplicates it,

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of the fallacies, for example, of Torgovnick's polemic against the novella. She claims that "for all its thematizations of the deviousness and limitations of language, the novella falls into the very traps it exposes" (Torgovnick, 1990:152). I agree, but this seems to me to show that Conrad is aware that his own discourse is subject to the same dilemmas he describes in the linguistic and perceptual operations of others. How one could not fall into those traps is a question he wonders about, cannot answer, and consequently stages for the reader. It is a sign of the naiveté which allows Torgovnick the zeal and enthusiasm of her anger that she assumes those traps do not apply to her. The contradiction she falls victim to, however, is that she practises on Conrad the same scapegoating which homogenizes and demonizes the Other which she criticizes in Eurocentric constructions of the 'primitive'.

replicating the solipsism he exposes and laments. Marlow remains for the most part an observer who does not communicate with the objects of his observation. Marlow's contacts with Africans are sufficient to reveal his self-enclosure and to educate him about the dangers of non-reciprocal impositions of power and knowledge, but insufficient to remove the alien-ness of alterity through dialogue, so that he remains a tourist who sees the passing landscape through a window which separates him from it, and he consequently commits the crimes of touristic misappropriation of otherness even as he is aware of and points out the limitations of that position.

This doubleness is evident in Marlow's complaints about the injustice of naming the Other without allowing revision or response. After seeing a chain-gang of imprisoned Africans, Marlow remarks:

> ... these men could by no stretch of the imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals and the outraged law like the bursting shells [of the man-of-war] had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meager breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill. They passed me within six inches, without a glance, with that complete, deathlike indifference of unhappy savages (19).

The will-to-power in the right-to-name is especially visible when its labels seem anomalous or arbitrary but remain in force by the sheer power of the authority behind the definition. But Marlow challenges this authority by invoking a type – the death-in-life of the 'unhappy savage' – which could be (and has been) seen to be just as much a stereotype as the labels he unmasks.

Part of his dilemma is that he cannot do without names and types in opposing the mis-labelling he despises. When he comes upon the grove where the sick and exhausted prisoners are dying, he thinks: "They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom" (20). He can say what they are not, invoking a type and negating it, but when he tries to specify what they are, he acknowledges their humanity by reducing them to objects – "black shapes," "moribund shapes", "black bones" (20) – images with an inanimate quality which may be appropriate to death but which nonetheless makes the dying seem anonymous, impersonal, unhuman. These images render the suffering of the Africans but position Marlow outside it, at a distance his compassion can register but cannot cross. When Marlow recognizes one of the dying individually, he comments: "The man seemed young – almost a boy – but you know with them it's hard to tell" (20). This sort of denial of the Other's differences is classic racism. Curiously, though, it echoes an observation Marlow had just made about the African guard of the chain gang for whom "white men [were] so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be" (19). Although he criticizes the

blindness of homogenizing the Other by ironically turning the tables on the white imperialists and doing unto them through African eyes what they do to blacks, Marlow then commits the very mistake he has just mocked. Once again Marlow opposes prejudice only to repeat it.

Marlow tries the tactic of ironic counter-labelling, calling the crimes of imperialism "these high and just proceedings", or referring to the guard as "one of the reclaimed, the product of the new forces at work" (19). But the irony is offered to Marlow's audience – and, across them, to the reader – and is not part of a process of negotiation in which the right-to-name is tested and shared among those directly concerned. Marlow's awareness of the power of language to impose perceptions on the Other is not matched by a sense of language as an instrument of reciprocal exchange to mediate conflicting perceptions. Marlow can only counter the right-to-name with strategies of reverse labelling which fight what they oppose by repeating its lack of dialogue. Marlow thus becomes implicated in what he opposes by his very attempts to unmask it.

Marlow takes the first steps toward a dialogical understanding of Africans by recognizing that their mystery and opacity are a sign of their humanity. Africans are a hermeneutic problem for him because he acknowledges that they have a world which he can only construct by reading signs – filling in gaps in the evidence, imagining hidden sides, and engaging in the other kinds of interpretive activity we invoke when we encounter phenomena which we assume are intelligible because they are evidence of other human life. When he tells the story of his predecessor Fresleven's death, for example, Marlow creates from scant evidence a narrative of mutual misunderstanding which tries to reconstruct how the baffling, terrifying, intimidating European must have appeared to African perceptions (see 12-13). The very mystery of their thought-processes which makes their world an interpretive challenge presents them as fellow human beings whose lives can be made intelligible by fitting them to narrative patterns which might also apply to one's own life. Reasoning similarly from the familiar to the unfamiliar, Marlow transforms the emptiness of the abandoned landscape into a sign of human motivation:

> Well if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon (23).

If the hermeneutic circle dictates that we can only make sense of something strange by relating it to what we already understand, Marlow's imaginative reconstruction of other worlds based on the assumption of their resemblance to his own suggests how this circle can be transformed from a trap into a resource for extending our worlds.

His interpretive efforts also demonstrate, however, that the hermeneutic circle becomes vicious and self-enclosing unless it is opened up by making the object of interpretation an interlocutor and a fellow-interpreter. Marlow's attempts at recognition finally end in rejection because he does not move from similarity to reciprocity:

> 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 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 (37-38).

The hermeneutic pursuit of self-understanding by understanding others is initiated only to be abandoned here as Marlow acknowledges a relationship with the Other only to devalue it by consigning it to the remote past or subterranean moral regions. The unfamiliar necessarily seems 'ugly' to the categories and values of the familiar unless the hermeneutic experience becomes not a one-way encounter but a to-and-fro exchange in which the authority of what we know is called into question and its priority over the unknown is reversed.

Benita Parry (1983:34) oversimplifies, however, when she claims that "both Kurtz and Marlow look upon blacks as another genus". Marlow senses a resemblance with the Other here, and that is why he reacts defensively. If the Other were not somehow the same as he is, its apparent differences would not be so threatening. Marlow feels shame because an unexpected similarity undermines his sense of self, and his resulting anxiety and embarrassment prevent him from regarding a surprising kinship as a sign of the equal dignity and worth of a potential interlocutor. Because he perceives resemblance as a threat to be warded off by relegating it to lesser aspects of his being, he cuts off the possibility of articulating and exploring it and using it as an instrument of mediation.

3.   Cross-cultural understanding and contingency

Marlow's ambivalence dramatizes the sometimes ambiguous double nature of hermeneutic encounters with other cultures. The experience of alterity can be both frightening and invigorating – a threat to the self and an opportunity for self-recognition and self-expansion. Discovering unexpected similarities with radically different ways of being entails a disorienting and perhaps distressing loss of self-understanding – one turns out not to be exactly who one thought one was – even as it opens up new possibilities of self-knowledge, self-creation, and rela-

tionship. Marlow's sense of threat and loss paralyzes him, however, and does not allow him to conceive of the destruction of his previous certainties as a prelude to new constructions of himself and his world.

Marlow tacitly acknowledges the equality of the Other's world by recognizing its power to defamiliarize his own conventions and categories. Abdul JanMohamed (1985:65) argues that "genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture". The first step toward engaging in dialogue with another culture is to recognize that one's own is riven with contingency and lacks any essential privilege. Africa has this effect on Marlow by exposing the arbitrariness, the unnaturalness of his customary ways of being and understanding. Although the African rowers he meets early on seem strange to Marlow ("they had faces like grotesque masks"), he nevertheless finds "they were a great comfort to look at" because "they wanted no excuse for being there" (17). Their naturalness exposes the artificiality of European practices which cannot be universally valid if transplantation robs them of authority. Marlow similarly denaturalizes his own customary ways of seeing when he tries to imagine how his cannibal-crew envisions the white passengers: "just then I perceived – in a new light, as it were – how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so – what shall I say? – so – unappetising" (43). Seeing the Europeans as Africans might challenge the self-evidence of the European perspective and opens up new possibilities of perception.[6]

The loneliness of the jungle continues the process of defamiliarization which Marlow's exposure to Africans begins: "... utter solitude without a policeman – ... utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion" (49-50). Without the discipline and coercion of conventional authority (what everyone thinks polices the thinkable), the contingency of a society's practices becomes available for thought. Marlow later finds an "irritating pretence" in "the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety" and calls them "offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend – ... I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their

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6   This is not to say that Marlow gets the African perception of Europeans right. As I will suggest later, he errs by not checking his reading with the crew, which might not be thinking about the passengers as possible food because the occasion does not fit the necessary ritualistic specifications. By reversing perspectives, Marlow begins the process R. S. Khare describes: "... what we need is genuine reciprocity in sharing knowledge, which would include reversing the knower-known relation and ourselves becoming the Other to non-West anthropologists" (Khare, 1992:7). But Marlow does not complete it because he only imagines African perceptions and does not elicit them.

faces so full of stupid importance" (70). They do not share Marlow's sense of the groundlessness and relativity of ways of being which seem simply natural to them but dangerously lack the foundations they assume they have. But this very sense that his world is not necessary but only one of many possible worlds is the precondition for anthropological dialogue between cultures which Marlow would seem to be more ready for than anyone who has not experienced his metaphysical disorientation.[7]

Marlow's experience suggests the two faces of contingency. Recognizing the arbitrariness of one's practices and values threatens one's faith in them even as it opens up the possibility of genuinely reciprocal cross-cultural understanding with other worlds whose ways of being are no less justified than one's own. If all worlds are contingent, they are all equal, and a basis for reciprocity has been established. Marlow's experience in Africa is a tonic blow to the pride of Europeans whose sense of natural privilege he thinks is a lie and a sham. But this realization does not transform him into an anthropological pluralist who is invigorated by the existence of other worlds. Just as he is angry at his recognition of kinship with Africans because it threatens his identity, so he is annoyed and frustrated by his realization that everything he had previously taken for granted is only an arbitrary convention. Discovering the relativity of worlds is only destructive and not potentially constructive for Marlow because it robs values of their underpinnings and does not open up the possibility of new kinds of creation or new modes of relationship which would be closed off if our world were the only one there could be. Anything Marlow might do with his knowledge of contingency would simply create more contingency – another groundless construct (like his lie to the Intended) – and his resentment at its ubiquity is proportional to his inability to transform or escape it.[8]

Marlow's sense of the pervasiveness of contingency deprives otherness of its potentially invigorating difference because the same groundlessness is everywhere. Marlow's appreciation of contingency allows him to approach others across cultural barriers with a sympathy and an imagination remarkable for his time, but one reason why the encounters never lead to a productive exchange of differences is that Marlow only discovers the same thing at every turn. For example, he says of his cannibal-crew: "I looked at them as you would on any human being with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses,

[7]   John McClure points out the political implications of this disorientation: "To recognize [as Marlow does] that the reality of Western civilization is not a revealed truth or a scientific fact but rather an artificial and provisional construct is to raise serious questions about anyone's right to impose that reality on others" (McClure, 1981:149)

[8]   For a further analysis of Conrad's understanding of contingency, see *The Challenge of Bewilderment* (Armstrong, 1987 – especially 112-28)

when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity", but he cannot fathom their reasons for not satisfying their hunger by eating the white passengers: "... these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint!" (43). He attributes to them a kind of existential heroism in the face of absurdity which corresponds to his own ethic of carrying on with one's duties even when they cannot be justified, but he never checks his interpretation by asking them. If he had, he might have discovered what other commentators have pointed out – namely, that cannibals do not typically eat human flesh to appease hunger but for spiritual reasons as part of specific rituals.[9] Marlow's awareness of the contingency of his customs and beliefs allows him to imagine other worlds, but he always only finds in them further evidence of contingency.

His attitude toward the other African members of his crew is similarly appreciative but ultimately dismissive because Marlow is both open and closed to cultural differences. There is a peculiar combination of mockery and respect in Marlow's description of the native fireman:

> He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this – that should the water in that transparent thing disappear the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst and take a terrible vengeance (38-39).

The oddity of this figure exemplifies the anomalies which result when different cultures meet – what Clifford (1988) celebrates as the playful, multivocal effect of "collage" (see 173-77). It is hard to know which looks stranger in the encounter – the 'witchcraft' of the boiler or the superstitions of the African, which after all turn out to be an effective way of negotiating his responsibilities. Much is disclosed about both sides which might otherwise not be so visible (how Western instruction demands taking things on faith, for example, and is therefore not as rational as it pretends, and conversely, how effective superstition can be as an instrument for mastering the world and reading signs). The figure of the fireman is a hybrid, heteroglot innovation which creates new possibilities of being not contained in either culture alone but made available as an unexpected consequence of their resources mixing and combining.

Nevertheless, the semantically and existentially productive potential of this figure never fully emerges in the text. The African's dignity as a worker is undermined by Marlow's overriding sense of his representative value as a sign of the absur-

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9   For a helpful summary of the debates in the anthropological literature about the actual extent of head-hunting and cannibalism and about their social and religious functions, see Torgovnick (1990:147-48, 258).

dity of cultural conventions which seem natural only because we are accustomed to them. His appreciation of the contingency of a culture's habits allows him to be ironic about the native fireman, but it does not lead him to imagine that the fireman might have an ironic view of his situation as well, so that the two of them might play back and forth in exchanging a mutual sense of cultural absurdity instead of the joke all coming from Marlow's side. The fireman remains an object of Marlow's philosophical and cultural contemplation, and his adaptive powers as a creative human subject responding to challenging, bizarre circumstances never receive quite the recognition and respect they deserve. Despite Marlow's appreciation of his efficiency and duty, he is most of all a comic figure of the arbitrariness of cultural practices. Here again the perception of contingency is where Marlow's imagination of cultural differences both starts and stops.

4. Politics, reciprocity and language

An obvious objection is that Marlow could not be expected to engage in dialogue with his crew because he is their master and a representative of the imperialistic powers. Edward Said points out, for example, "the almost insuperable discrepancy between a political actuality based on force, and a scientific and humane desire to understand the Other hermeneutically and sympathetically in modes not always circumscribed and defined by force", and he argues that "an interlocutor in the colonial situation is ... by definition either someone who is compliant ... or someone who ... simply refuses to talk, deciding that only a radically antagonistic, perhaps violent riposte is the only interlocution that is possible with colonial power" (Said, 1989:217, 209-10). What is remarkable, however, is how close Marlow comes to dialogue which the political structure of his situation would seem to preclude. He repeatedly misses his chances in a way that calls attention to them. Although he occupies a position of authority, his alienation from the local powers and his expectation that his days in Africa are numbered give him an ambiguous position as both an insider and an outsider to the colonial structure. This ambiguity blurs the distinctions which the narrator of "Karain" suggests:

> No man will speak to his master; but to a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things, words are spoken ... that take no account of race or colour (Conrad, 1924a:26).

Marlow's status as 'master' may block him from dialogue with his African crew, but as an outsider to the other Europeans he is also a 'wanderer' who is more open to otherness than he would be if he were firmly ensconced in power.

It is perhaps this kind of cross-cultural trust and acceptance which Marlow senses he lost when he recognizes too late "a kind of partnership" with his African

helmsman: "He steered for me – I had to look after him. I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken", when he died and looked at Marlow with an "intimate profundity, ... like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (51). The condescension and inequality of their paternalistic relationship as master and servant prevented Marlow from recognizing until too late that the African was a fellow human being deserving of reciprocal recognition and concern – or even from sensing that such a reciprocity, if in truncated form, was already at work in the exchange of services between them. Their encounter becomes truly dialogical when the African looks back at Marlow, his role as observer thus reversed, but their exchange of vision is cut short – even as it is made possible – by death. Once again contingency has the double effect of uniting and dividing people. The groundlessness of existence which death reveals allows an uncommon moment of intimacy and exchange which it simultaneously destroys. As before, *Heart of Darkness* opens the possibility of cross-cultural reciprocity only to close it.

Prolonging and extending such momentary glimpses of reciprocity would not only require political changes to create conditions of equality which would allow mutual recognition and exchange; building dialogue would also demand that both sides have access to language – if not a common language, at least respect for each other's capacities as language-users. *Heart of Darkness* both denies and affirms that Africans are linguistic beings whose command of language would make communication with them possible. Marlow sometimes refers to African phonemes as "a violent babble of uncouth sounds" (22); "strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language, and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany" (66). Dialogue could not occur with beings whose language is regarded as pre-linguistic or as rudimentary and thus not equal to one's own. But Marlow also at times credits African sign-systems with the same value as European languages: "... the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild – and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (23). When he hears cries emanating from the shore, he invariably attributes significance to them: "... an irresistible impression of sorrow, ... unrestrained grief, ... a great human passion let loose" (44). He assumes that these sounds are signs which carry meaning to their users and which could be translated if he knew the code.

When he scares the attacking Africans away by sounding the steam-whistle, his strategy assumes a reciprocal hermeneutic capacity on their part. He bets that they too will read sounds as signs in a translatable language, here construing the whistle as a meaningful indicator of evil intentions and intimidating powers.

African hermeneutics imply a capacity to negotiate signs which, as in this case, finds exemplary application in the creation of lies and fictions.

Marlow does not, however, try to cross the linguistic barrier between himself and the Africans. His assumption that they are pre-linguistic or at a rudimentary stage of language – or even that their linguistic capacities are somehow demonic (a "satanic litany") – deprives them of the equality as users of sign-systems without which they could not be interlocutors. But his intuition that another world – or worlds – which he cannot penetrate can be vaguely and obscurely heard in the sounds of Africa credits Africans with semiotic capacities which could be, but are not, the basis for further reciprocity and exchange. Once again *Heart of Darkness* suggests a possibility of relatedness which it blocks. Although the conditions of imperialistic domination of Africa might have made reciprocity between Europeans and Africans inconceivable, this novella is remarkable for its time (and perhaps for ours) because it makes such dialogue thinkable. One can imagine Marlow talking with Africans because of the semiotic powers he ascribes to them and because of the limitations he recognizes in his own culture's claims to authority. But this dialogue never takes place, and the result is to confirm the different cultures in their solipsistic isolation from one another. Both sides can construe the obscure signs emanating across cultural barriers as indications of other worlds, but neither side is able to parse or translate these signs sufficiently to understand their full relevance and communicate its own meanings in return.

Marlow demonstrates the power of linguistic innovation – especially through metaphor and analogy – to open us up to new worlds at the same time as he dramatizes how the creation of figurative language is necessarily circular and hence potentially self-enclosing. Commenting on the enigma of the figure *heart of darkness*, Ian Watt explains: "... if the words do not name what we know, they must be asking us to know what has, as yet, no name" (Watt, 1983:199-200). This is how metaphor works in general – extending the epistemological limits of language by creating incongruities which we can only make sense of by inventing new interpretive patterns.[10] If something as diffuse as 'darkness' seems incapable of having a 'heart,' or if the typically affirmative values of a 'heart' seem inappropriately linked with 'dark,' then these anomalies disclose limitations in our customary ways of understanding which we must revise and extend. The problem, however, is that these innovations can never be entirely new but are themselves a product of our customary assumptions, previously learned conventions, and past experiences. Hence the complaints of many critics that Marlow's

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[10]   See the chapter on "The Cognitive Powers of Metaphor" in *Conflicting Readings* (Armstrong, 1990:67-88). Also see Paul Ricocur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975).

metaphors reveal more about European thought-processes than about Africa.[11] If that is true, it is because of the circularity of metaphor and other forms of semantic innovation which attempt to transcend the limits of a language by invoking and manipulating them. The ambiguity of Marlow's metaphors – do they say more about the Other or about him? – calls attention to the dilemma that existing linguistic and hermeneutic patterns are both the trap he is trying to get out of and his only way out of that trap.

5.   Knowing Africans and knowing others

This simultaneously enabling and incapacitating circularity characterizes not only Marlow's attempts to know Africa but also his relations with other Europeans, including most importantly Kurtz, the Intended, and his audience. It is wrong either to brand Conrad a racist or to idealize him as an epistemological model because the same desire to know coupled with an inability to establish dialogical understanding is replicated in all of Marlow's encounters with others, regardless of race, gender, or culture. Marlow comments about Kurtz to the Intended: "I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another" (73). The irony of this claim – how possible is that, after all? – is blind to differences of colour, sex (despite Marlow's wording), or social practices.

Marlow's baffled attempts to make sense of the enigmatic Kurtz repeat all of the epistemological problems which block his understanding of Africans. Like them, Kurtz is available only through misleading names and types: "a first-class agent, ... a very remarkable person" (22), "a prodigy, ... an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (25). Even the title "chief of the Inner Station" seems untrustworthy to Marlow since it is proffered by "the brickmaker

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[11]   The Kenyan novelist Leonard Kibera reports, for example: "I study *Heart of Darkness* as an examination of the West itself and not as a comment on Africa" (quoted in Sarvan 1980:285). Parry (1983:31) similarly claims that "it is by inventing meanings for Africa that [Marlow] exhibits the geography and boundaries of the imperialist imagination, while also illuminating the dislocating effects of a foreign mode on a mind formed by the western experience and devoted to its forms" (31). The circularity of metaphor is responsible for the general phenomenon Torgovnick (1990:11) observes: "For Euro-Americans, ... to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other". I would amend these and many similar pronouncements in the Conrad criticism in two ways. First, Marlow's use of figurative language is more two-sided than these criticisms suggest inasmuch as it reveals not only the self-enclosing quality of linguistic innovation but also its albeit limited capacity to open us up to other worlds. Second, the circularity of metaphor is not something Conrad is blind to but is instead one of the novella's central epistemological themes. It is part of a larger pattern of hermeneutic circularity which the narrative repeatedly calls attention to as it dramatizes how various kinds of interpretive projection attempt to get us outside of our worlds only to return us to ourselves.

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of the Central Station" who makes no bricks (28). As with the Africans, who are not 'criminals' or 'enemies' or 'rebels' or any of the other labels they are tagged with, Kurtz is not any of his names (he is not even 'short'), but what he is remains a blank for Marlow to fill. And as with the Africans, with whom he must similarly extrapolate from the known to the unknown, it is unclear whether his projections about this unfamiliar being say more about himself or the Other.

Nor is Marlow any more able to call on a common language to negotiate their differences or to elicit response and correction to his interpretations. Like the Africans, Kurtz sometimes seems so other to Marlow that it becomes unclear whether he is a linguistic being. "He had kicked himself loose of the earth," Marlow reports, and "the phrases we pronounced ... – common everyday words – the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life" (65) were not adequate for communication and only called attention to their disconnection: "I could not appeal [to him] in the name of anything high or low" (65). No more with Kurtz than with the Africans can language become a vehicle for reciprocal exchange. He speaks where they largely remain silent, but the result is the same: a mystery for interpretation whose opacity is compounded because it cannot be transformed into an interlocutor. Kurtz is "A voice. He was very little more than a voice" (48). As the Harlequin reports: "You don't talk with that man – you listen to him" (53). Marlow's experience is no different. Even Kurtz's famous dying words – "The horror! The horror!" (68) – are a monologue whose meaning remains enigmatic because it is not part of a reciprocal exchange. Marlow's subsequent exegesis is an attempt to reply which comes too late to establish dialogue. The absence of to-and-fro exchange leaves ambiguous whether his reading is an imaginative recreation of another world or a confirmation of his solipsism.[12]

The two-sidedness of hermeneutic circularity – source of blindness, resource for understanding – is thematized yet again in Marlow's encounter with the Intended. His prejudices about women are well known: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are! They live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether" (16); and later: "They – the women I mean – 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" (49). These

[12] See Stewart (1980) and McLauchlan (1983) for a representative example of the conflicting evaluations Marlow's interpretation has received. For my argument, it does not matter whether Marlow should be believed or doubted when he claims that Kurtz's final words constitute "an affirmation, a moral victory" (70); what is important is that the validity of his reading is contestable at all. Its reliability is uncertain precisely because of the lack of consensual communication between Marlow and Kurtz which in turn dramatizes Conrad's desire for and skepticism about the possibility of dialogical understanding.

dismissive, condescending sentiments are, to say the least, not a promising point of departure for making sense of a woman's innermost thoughts and feelings.

But when Marlow first meets the Intended, after they have exchanged only perfunctory greetings, he offers an astonishing series of readings for which he has very little evidence: "I noticed she was not very young – I mean not girlish. She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering"; her "glance was guileless, profound, confident, and trustful; ... she was one of those creatures that are not playthings of Time. For her he had died only yesterday" (73). How can Marlow know these things? Are they evidence of profound imaginative sympathy in constructing another world by extrapolating the implications of the slightest signs, or are they a continuation of his assumption that women live in a beautiful world of illusions? Either his prejudices about women offer an unexpected resource for hypotheses about otherness which transform condescending stereotypes into a respectful appreciation of the integrity and uniqueness of another's otherwise inaccessible being-for-herself, or else all he imagines about her is predicted by and thus confirms the presuppositions with which he entered the room. A repetition of his previous constructions of Africa, the epistemological ambiguity here testifies to the circularity of understanding which allows Marlow to know the unfamiliar only by making projections from the familiar – projections which may either open up the Other or close it off.

His subsequent dialogue with the Intended extends and complicates this ambiguity by demonstrating the capacity of language for multiple meaning. The only prolonged dialogue dramatized in the text, their conversation is a series of equivocations and misunderstandings which play with the ability of words to have more than one sense. Marlow repeatedly makes statements which have one meaning to the Intended and another to him and the reader. "His words at least have not died," she says, and he replies: "His words will remain." "And his example," she continues, to which he responds: "True, ... his example too." "He died as he lived," she concludes, and he replies "with dull anger stirring me": "His end ... was in every way worthy of his life" (75). In each exchange Marlow remains truthful by deceiving her – that is, by allowing her to believe that he means something other than what he is saying, although the reader can sense the sinister twist which Marlow's ironic restatement gives to her words of praise and adoration. If the multiplicity of language allows duplicity, this is already evident before Marlow's famous lie, which only continues the already established hermeneutic pattern whereby the Intended's reading of his words diverges from his and ours.

Polysemy can be a resource for negotiating differences. If conflicting readings can occur because the same words can take on different meanings, semantic multiplicity also provides interlocutors with a meeting ground and a set of shared instruments for negotiating their disagreements. The polysemy of language is

both what allows different worlds to exist in the same language and what requires – and enables – the mutual to-and-fro to monitor whether two interpreters are using words in mutually recognizable ways. As before, however, Conrad dramatizes this possibility in the negative, by its absence, a strategy which leaves unanswered the question of whether linguistic multiplicity is bound to result in mutual misunderstanding and deception or could, if deployed differently, lead to a dialogical exchange of differences which might not result in agreement but which might lead to a shared recognition of the reasons for disagreement.

Where Marlow's conversation with the Intended dramatizes the former possibility, his bond with the audience in the frame narration – and across them, with the reader – would seem to affirm the latter. Ian Watt argues that *Heart of Darkness* refutes solipsism because "the fact that Marlow, like Conrad, is speaking to a particular audience ... enacts the process whereby the solitary individual discovers a way out into the world of others" (Watt, 1979:212). This is a wishful misreading, however, because such intersubjective exchange is explicitly not dramatized by the text but is instead suggested only to be blocked. The ending of *Heart of Darkness* is instructively different from the nearly contemporary story "Youth" where Marlow addresses the same cast of characters and concludes by asking them to affirm the meaning of his tale: "tell me, wasn't that the best time, that time when we were young at sea. ... And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him over the polished table" (Conrad, 1924b:42). Such dialogical response is markedly absent at the close of *Heart of Darkness*: "Marlow ceased and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. 'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director suddenly" (76). The return to the frame narration elicits the possibility of a response from the audience about the meaning of Marlow's narrative only to swerve away from it.

Dialogue to reach the consensus of "Youth" about the meaning of the tale or to negotiate different readings of it remains an empty set which the text explicitly refuses to fill. The frame narration marks its absence by dramatizing it as an unrealized potentiality. It is what is missing both in Marlow's meditative, solitary silence and in the Director's diversion of the group's attention to practical affairs. The frame narrator's final comment is addressed to the reader:

> I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness (76).

Instead of elucidating Marlow's enigmatic metaphor, the narrator repeats it and passes it along to us. It is wrong to regard this narrator as an ideal ethnographer or to credit him with a true understanding of the main story, as Clifford does (see

Clifford, 1988:99), because he simply reiterates Marlow's central image without adding to it. That epistemological position is left for the reader to fill. The narrator's repetition calls for an interpretive dialogue between the reader and the text while re-enacting Marlow's meditative self-enclosure, both reaching out to us and holding back, both affirming the possibility of exchange and refusing it.

Like Kurtz, Marlow is a voice, to be listened to rather than talked with. His lack of reciprocity with his audience replicates the solipsism he attempts to break through in his story but cannot because of the absence of dialogue which he tells about and repeats in his manner of telling. The final irony of *Heart of Darkness*, then, is that Marlow may be as opaque to his audience, including the reader, as the Africans are to him because an absence of reciprocity prevents dialogue in both instances. The canonization of *Heart of Darkness* threatens to make this irony deadly by converting the text from a potential interlocutor into an unquestioned cultural icon or (perhaps the same thing) a set of clichés which are too well known to give rise to thought. Just as Oscar Wilde said of *The Old Curiosity Shop* that no one can read about Little Nell's death without laughing, so perhaps no one can any longer make pronouncements about 'the horror' or 'the darkness' without prompting groans or sly smiles. The value of Achebe's charges is that they break the aura of the text and re-establish reciprocity between it and its interpreters by putting them on equal terms. Venerating *Heart of Darkness* would only confirm Conrad's doubts about the possibility of dialogical understanding and would thus preserve the text under conditions which would distress him. If, however, we recognize how unsettlingly ambiguous this text is about the ideals of reciprocity and mutual understanding which it negatively projects, we can engage in the sort of dialogue with it which Marlow never achieves with Africans or anyone else.

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