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"IT SEEMED SOMEHOW TO THROW A KIND OF LIGHT ON EVERYTHING ABOUT ME – AND INTO MY THOUGHTS" – KNOWLEDGE OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the link between understanding another person and understanding the Self in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* – a complex novella which raises a whole array of themes connected with human nature and the consequences of the lack of an established frame of reference. In a world where individual subjective consciousness appears to be not only the basic means of cognizance, but also the sole judge, Man is isolated from others and overwhelmed by the dark forces which seem to govern a hostile universe and also his own nature. The possibilities of arriving at any conclusive truths and achieving genuine communication with others are severely limited. However, the disquieting awareness of mortality, the darkness inherent in human nature, the apparent hostility of the universe, the dire lack of universal absolutes and the relativism and scepticism which result from all these circumstances do not in any way exempt us from the moral obligation to at least strive to fulfil the injunction "Know thyself!" – as it is self-delusion that Conrad abhors most of all. In order to overcome these difficulties and existential dilemmas, he proposes a set of simple principles concerning work, discipline, self-restraint, honour, solidarity and human interdependence, for it is usually because of others or in others that we realize the truth about our own nature.

Keywords: understanding, the Self, the Other, subjectivity, communication, self-knowledge, Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*.

In the narrative within a narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow begins the story of his journey to Africa "lifting one arm from the elbow, the palm of the hand outwards, so that, with his legs folded before him, he had the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower" (6). This reference to Buddha appears to foreshadow one of the novella's main themes, namely that of the need for self-knowledge and self-examining meditation. What Lothe calls a "searching narrative method" in pursuit of the elusive truth behind the facts becomes "an ordering and existentially motivated re-experience" (1989, 43, 30) – an epistemological quest for the truth about oneself. Characteristically enough, knowing and understanding other people also seems to have a bearing on one's knowledge of oneself.

Sitting on the deck of an English ship on the Thames as he is about to describe a journey up another great river – "to the centre of a continent […] for the centre of the earth" (13), "the biggest, the most blank [place on the map], so to speak – that I had a hankering after" (8) – Marlow prepares to recount his adventures and also his impressions of Kurtz, a remarkable man and a highly successful agent who would appear to epitomize Western civilization, as "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50), but whose downfall is caused by a fundamental hollowness and by atavistic urges that are tempered by no restraint whatsoever, be it internal or external. At the same time, he is aware of the fact that his knowledge of Kurtz's story – hazy and difficult to define though it may be – has a bearing on his own self-knowledge; moreover, he feels the need to communicate what he has learnt to his audience. However, try as he might to verbalize his thoughts, he soon comes to the conclusion that life has a dream-like quality which seems to make his efforts futile:

> [Kurtz] was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me that I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams.... […] No, it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone … (27-28).

His yarn thus becomes a "story about […] the difficulty of telling the whole story" (Watt 1980, 210). Not only does this passage underscore human isolation and the impossibility of achieving full understanding, but it also seems to reflect a solipsistic streak in Conrad's vision of human existence and perception. Man is entrapped within his own consciousness and isolated not only from the material world, but also from the consciousnesses of other people. This, together with the dream-like nature of life itself, may have reflected general developments and tendencies in Western thought at the time. Far from being governed by a harmonious and purposeful divine plan, the world appeared to be ruled by accident and chance, having no *a priori* truths that could be taken for granted and being devoid of any meaning. This painful indeterminacy, bringing with it a sense of disinheritance, unresolved tensions, relativism of perception and the absence of hope for any sense of completeness are all reflected in the narrative mode. The frame construction "emphasise[s] the interplay of personal and social experience, perhaps dramatising relativism of perception, limitations of knowledge, or conflicts between private and public codes" (Watts 1996, 46) – also by means of ubiquitous uncertainties, unresolved paradoxes and a complicated time scheme with numerous analepses and prolepses. Conrad shows "an individual consciousness in the process of trying to elicit some purely relative and personal meaning from its experience. What Marlow says is not lucidly pondered but random and often puzzled, leaving contradictions unresolved and allowing the less conscious elements of the mind, including those of reverie and dream, to find expression" (Watt 1980, 209). Conrad was a representative of his times; no longer did writers of that era feel entitled to resort to omniscient narrators who presented the chronological devel-

opment of the plot and concluded with a final resolution (*ibid*., 207-209). Experience never seems complete or comprehensible. Sometimes Conrad's scepticism leads him towards the conclusion that knowledge is unattainable. Todorov is greatly struck by "how little we know about Kurtz, who is eagerly anticipated and vividly remembered but scarcely ever present" (qtd. in Levenson 1991, 7); in fact, the exact nature of Kurtz's depravity is never explicitly stated. It is also telling that Marlow spins his yarn in utter darkness: "he does not recount his experiences in the light of gained knowledge, as Dickens's Pip does, for instance, in *Great Expectations*"; his journey towards knowledge – in search of illumination – progresses through darkness (Daleski 1977, 54).

It could be argued that as "a complexly motivated attempt to recover the story of another within one's own", the novella employs "the very motive of narrative" and becomes "a representation of an effort to reach endings that would retrospectively illuminate beginnings and middles" (Brooks 2007, 114). Marlow's journey towards understanding the Other appears to be a journey into the Self, but it is through an encounter with the Other that one can confront and explore the "facets and potentialities of the self" (Guerard 1971, 168) – or, to put it bluntly, recognize your potential self in another person, as "[t]he perception of the self is constituted by the perception of the other" (Bachtin, qtd. in Erdinast-Vulcan 1991, 90). After all, Marlow thinks he sees Kurtz's face when he looks at his own mirror image before entering the Intended's house: "I rang the bell before a mahogany door on the first floor, and while I waited he seemed to stare at me out of the glassy panel – stare with that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe. I seemed to hear the whispered cry, 'The horror! The horror!'" (75). A reflection on another person allows Marlow to reflect on and gain an insight into his own nature. He appears to recognize his own characteristic traits in the young Russian he meets at the Inner Station – traits such as his hunger for adventure, his curiosity, his devotion to work and to its straightforwardness, or his interest in eloquent intellectuals (Canario 1963, 256-257). Later in the novella, Conrad builds up a sense of affinity between Kurtz and Marlow, who suggests a further direct link with his audience. Finally, the reader is also invited to acknowledge the darkness which – although it is specifically identified in Kurtz – is inherent in human nature and so is common to all of us.

Marlow's ostensible mission to reach the Inner Station and rescue Kurtz in fact becomes a quest for illumination, self-knowledge, meaning and a lost sense of completeness. Although Marlow claims that in retelling his experience he does not "want to bother [his audience] with what happened to [him] personally", he says that

> to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts. It was sombre enough too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light. (7)

His thirst for knowledge – symbolized by a yearning to reach the "blank spaces on earth" (8) – together with his boyhood fascination with the exploration of the unknown and the feeling of restlessness that prompted him to apply for a job with the Company all contributed to his urge to embark on the voyage up the River Congo in search of the truth about himself, the Other, the world and the possibility of establishing universal values: "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth" (13). "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest origins of the world" (34). Marlow acknowledges that he did not know himself before he set out on his journey, but when he returns he is revolted by the people he sees in the streets of Brussels: "They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew" (72). Indeed, it requires courage and a certain depth of thought to dare to reach an insight, but Marlow – in accordance with the ancient Greek precept "Know thyself!" – sees the undertaking of the effort of self-discovery as a human duty and a moral imperative, despite the apparent meaninglessness and arbitrariness of the world – to say nothing of the limited possibilities of reaching any clear conclusions:

> Droll thing life is – that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope of it is some knowledge of yourself – that comes too late – a crop of unextinguishable regrets. I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. (71-72)

It would seem that it was the moment of death that proved to be the ultimate epiphany in the case of Kurtz:

> […] I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. 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!'
>
> […] I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. (71)

Brooks is of the opinion that "Kurtz's final articulation should perhaps be typed as more than anything else anaphoric, pointing to the unsayable dumbness of the heart of darkness and to the impossible end of the perfect narrative plot" (2007, 123). Nor can language ever definitely capture that which is beyond itself and thus "end its quest for that elusive, final meaning just beyond the threshold of expression" (White 1981, 123). Knowledge – in Kurtz's case, at least – comes too late, whereas the heart of darkness is 'unspeakable', to use one of the frequent adjectives that Leavis famously criticized as Conrad's "adjectival insistence" (1948/2008, 204). Expressing

the inexpressible becomes the text's actual meaning. (Thorburn qtd. in Hawthorn 1979, 30). Given Marlow's ambivalent attitude towards Kurtz throughout the novella and the numerous paradoxes with which the text is interwoven, it seems difficult to establish a single and straightforward interpretation of this famous passage – or, indeed, of *Heart of Darkness* as a whole. What "the horror" actually signifies is never explicitly revealed and it seems deeply ironic that Kurtz's eloquence and mastery of language should give way to such a "cry". However, it would appear that Kurtz's final cry either expresses his dismay at the realization of mortality or is tantamount to a condemnation of himself – his hollowness, his self-centredness and the fact that he has succumbed to the dark atavistic forces that are generally inherent in human nature. According to Watt, it is also "a verdict on the essential depravity of man and his civilisation" (1980, 236). It is all the more telling that the "moral victory" inherent in the final articulation of truth and wisdom – the moment of death appearing to be that of contact with reality – is nothing more than a semi-articulate cry and the failure of a voice which used to subjugate others with its power. "Kurtz's final words answer so poorly to all of Marlow's insistence on summing-up as a moment of final articulation of wisdom, truth and sincerity, as affirmation and as moral victory" (Brooks 2007, 121). However, Marlow's subsequent loyalty to the memory of Kurtz may stem from his acknowledgment of their momentarily shared and rather hazy vision of the dark potential in every person – a potential that can be experienced most acutely in the proximity of death, as in the case of Marlow, who nearly died as a result of his traumatic experiences in Africa:

> Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up – he had judged. […] After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth […] perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. (72)

Like the obligation to seek self-discovery, finding the courage to face the truth should also be seen as proof of humanity: "Marlow maintains, indeed, that it behoves a man who has the courage of his manhood to refuse a flabby blindness and to look underneath the cloak, being prepared to see unabashedly what is there" (Daleski 1977, 64). Indifference, thoughtlessness and self-deception should be avoided and are worse than the recognition of the harshest and most pungent realities. Thus, documenting the passage from innocence and ignorance to bitter experience and the resulting "expanded moral awareness" (Watt 1980, 198) of the protagonist – who undergoes a series of tests – *Heart of Darkness* could perhaps be considered to be a *Bildungsroman* with a twist. As Haugh notes:

> To Marlow [Kurtz] was a hero who had shown him the limits of the mortal spirit; and the situations penetrating into the human condition became more illuminating the closer we came to Kurtz's darkness. His remarkable energies, his stature, his amazing appeal to fellow humans in his moments of darkest savagery, the very magnificence of his plunge into the pit of the universe, all those showed Marlow a moral universe, dark though it was. (1963, 166).

The novella is not merely an attempt to examine the individual consciousnesses of Marlow or Kurtz. What appears to be the underlying (and more profound) theme is an inquiry into man's hold on and loyalty to the broadly defined heritage of civilization – especially at a time when Darwin's theory of evolution greatly influenced thinking about Man and the conditions that shape him. It is "a descent into man's history, a return to his primordial origins. The darkness into which Marlow ventures has a heart which can be found within his own breast" (Berthoud 1978, 44). His quest resembles an inquest – not only in retracing the steps of his precursor Kurtz, as Brooks claims (2007, 118), but also in rediscovering Man's heritage in his origins. Indeed, Marlow himself notes: "I remember I confounded the beat of the [native] drum with the beating of my heart, and was pleased at its calm regularity" (66). Whether Kurtz can be analysed as Marlow's *id*, his anti-self or inverted double – as has been argued by Guerard (qtd. in Watts 1993, 88) and Berthoud (1978, 57) – is a matter for debate, but his case certainly allows Conrad to explore the potentialities of the atavistic urges that we have inherited from our ancestors.

These issues, together with the crumbling of long-standing systems of values, seem to have had an impact on Kurtz's idealism which, though initially presented as the motivating force of this "remarkable man", leads to his horrifying depravity, degradation and ultimate demise because it is superficial and hollow:

> Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, […] there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of his deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think 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. …(58-59)

Without the external constraints that are usually imposed by the rules of a civilized society – and prompted by his own overambitious and egotistic consciousness – Kurtz succumbs to the darkness inherent in his heart. The very value of the ideals underpinning Western civilization is called into question. In one of the novella's most disquieting passages, Marlow – by undertaking the effort to fight for the agent's soul because he feels the need to determine whether "wilderness and darkness have an invincible power over man's moral being" (Watt 1980, 232) – only just manages to prevent the sick Kurtz (who is on the boat) from escaping back to the native tribe and their "unspeakable rites" :

> I tried to break the spell – the heavy mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of the forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest, to the bush, towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations; this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations. And, don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head – though I had a very lively sense of that danger too – but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had, even like the niggers, to

> invoke him – himself – his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air. (67)

There is a solipsistic aspect to the fact that Kurtz "had kicked himself loose of the earth", especially as the uncanny sense of floating in a vacuum seems to be contagious, but – more importantly – what this excerpt highlights is the utter ideological and ethical void in which Marlow finds himself. His soul,

> [b]eing alone in the wilderness, […] had looked within itself, and, by Heavens! I tell you, 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. (68)

In the wilds of Africa Kurtz's soul was put to the test and he was given an opportunity to catch a glimpse of its intrinsic darkness, which – uncurbed by any restraint whatsoever, as it is generally only an individual's consciousness and not any convention or established moral system that governs human conduct and is the source of meaning – brought about madness and "the horror" of his corruption. Marlow himself is horrified and – as Dryden observes – his shock at Kurtz's barbarity is characteristic of "European distress at recognising [our] own potential" (2007, 87). Addressing his audience, Marlow challenges their sense of stability and self-complacency by claiming that they owe their respectability and apparent righteousness to the strictly organized conditions in which they live: "moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal" (48), "where restraint had been institutionalised and was no longer an individual responsibility" (Hawthorn 1979, 18). They are ignorant of the dark potential in each and every one of them, for Society fails to provide the circumstances for attaining self-knowledge:

> You don't understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums – how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude – utter solitude without a policeman – by the way of silence – utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (50)

It is in the wilderness that Man discovers he is free to do and to be anything he likes, whether it be good or evil. In building civilization and Society, he has over the ages developed ways – artificial though they may be – of keeping at bay whatever is dark and sinister in him. However, when he finds himself beyond the pale of Society and free of any self-imposed constraints, the evolutionary process may be put into reverse, as in the case of Kurtz:

> At home everything conspired to keep Kurtz in ignorance of his true self; the police stopped him from devouring others or being devoured; but in the solitude his 'forgotten and brutal instincts' revealed themselves as potent forces in his biological inheritance, and therefore as powerful arguments against the widespread distortion of evolutionary theory to support the Victorian faith in economic, social, political and national progress, the faith which originally animated Kurtz. (Watt 2007, 75)

In the absence of external restraints, Man ought to rely on his own inner strength. Paradoxically, it is not Kurtz – the epitome of European civilization – but the native crew manning Marlow's steamer on the River Congo who display this inner strength. Despite the dire conditions in which the journey takes place, they do not resort to their cannibalistic habits, which causes Marlow to acknowledge their human dignity and their capacity for restraint: "I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint!" (42) Social constructs and ideologies, artificial and arbitrary as they may be, are at least helpful in governing dangerous instincts. White comments that "[i]t is […] the artificiality of civilised values which enables the individual to survive" (1981, 70), while Watt notes that "although the sceptical mind knows all ideological structures are really illusions, they may in practice be necessary restraints upon human egoism, laziness, or despair" (1980, 248). It is Marlow himself who, at the outset of his narrative, comments on the need for the regulating force of "an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. …" (7).

One of the few tangible points of reference to which one can have recourse is work and it was this – Marlow claims – that saved him from the call of the darkness:

> You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no – I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes – I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (37)

Indeed, devotion to work is sometimes presented as an antidote to darkness, as is exemplified by Marlow's comment on the textbook (*An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*) which he finds in the Russian's cottage: "[n]ot a very enthralling book; but at first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than professional light" (38). The manual made him "forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real" (39). As White notes, "Fidelity, Duty, Courage, Honest Work, these are a few of the solid virtues which often act as anchors" (1981, 108). Not only is attending to one's duties the underlying rule of civilization ("What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency." 6), but it also helps people to preserve some sense of purposefulness of action and sanity in a bewildering world: "I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on the station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life" (23). During the

first part of his journey, on the way to the Company's station where he is to take command of the steamer, Marlow's torpor gives rise to an acute (and solipsistic) sense of emptiness:

> The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies steamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps – but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts; but the feeling would not last long. (13-14)

The natives' physical effort and vigour, "the capacity for work [which] implies an abandonment of self-consciousness, a submergence of the intellectual function in the practical task at hand" (Levenson 1991, 3) – all of which literally and metaphorically keeps them going and allows them to feel at ease with the world in which they live – is something that the white employees of the Company generally lack. Hawthorn claims that "[w]ork for Conrad is at the centre of moral reliability: through work human beings (or men, as Conrad usually expresses the matter) find out the truth. It is work which acts as the reliable mediator between what people think and what is actually the case" (1979, 8). Watt (1980, 144) notes that this is precisely why well-to-do leisure-class women like Marlow's aunt or Kurtz's Intended are denied access to true understanding: "They – the women I mean – are out of it – should be out of it. We must help them stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse" (49). Work allows us to fulfil a crucial obligation, as it offers "a chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means" (29). This redeeming effort brings us in touch with reality, but also appears to entail a more pessimistic premise:

> Since Marlow believes that it is only through work – more generally through a direct personal striving to master some external and objective force – that anyone can find 'his own reality', it follows that the practical truths of life are not transferable from one individual to another, whether verbally or otherwise […] the cognitive role of work is often made the dialectical opposite of another secondary theme – the self-deluding tendency of verbal communication. (Watt 2007, 78)

Although it may be possible to find one's own reality, communicating whatever one has learned seems to be doomed to failure; if one can find it only for oneself, no reciprocity appears to be possible. Throughout the novella, at the Company offices and the Central Station, Marlow meets "hollow men" who are emotionally, spiritually and morally empty and with whom he fails to establish any deeper contact. He is not aware of the reasons for his sense of discomfort, nor does he find any reassurance

in the fact that the actions of these people fall short of the ideals (the spread of progress, knowledge and general welfare) which purportedly motivate them. Instead, he experiences "an overpowering sense of […] fateful induction into the vast overarching network of the silent lies of civilisation […] [an] absence of shared understanding […] a general intellectual and moral impasse [and a] breakdown of the shared categories of understanding and judgment" (Watt 1980, 195). As Watt explains, "real communication is blocked by the invisible barriers of egoism, indifference, misunderstanding, insensitivity and suspicion" (ibid., 245). In his isolation, Marlow longs for real dialogue with Kurtz, of whom he has heard so much: "that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz" (48). His hopes are soon frustrated, however. As the young Russian informs him, "[y]ou don't talk with that man – you listen to him" (54). Kurtz can offer no reciprocity: his magnificent gift of eloquence serves only to enhance his own status, to manipulate others and to present depravity and utter corruption in a better light. His enormous self-preoccupation is one of the reasons why he has "kicked himself loose of the earth" (67).

Communication with the Russian and the Intended, who initially appear to be more disinterested and well-meaning than the others, is also impossible owing to their blind admiration for Kurtz. In their case, the illusory nature of their convictions has a direct bearing on the failure of their communication with Marlow, thus interweaving these two Conradian themes. The young woman insists on remaining faithful to a striking misconception: "to the memory of a sham she never really knew" (Watt 1980, 246). It is highly ironic that, in her interview with Marlow – who is modest enough to say: "I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another" – she claims, "no one knew him as well as I! I had all his noble confidence. I knew him best. […] I am proud to know I understood him better than anyone on earth – he told me so himself" (76-77). Marlow's only comment on this unfaltering conviction is: "And perhaps she did. But with every word spoken the room was growing darker, and only her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love" (76). All in all, however, Marlow is impressed by the young woman: "bowing my head before the faith that was in her, before that great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness, in the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her" (77). Berthoud explains that "[t]he girl's belief in the essential virtue of mankind, as instanced by her faith in her betrothed, is an illusion, for it is contradicted by the facts; yet it is not unreal, for it is held with all the force of a truly unselfish conviction." (1978, 63). At the same time, despite his respect for her selflessness, Marlow is aware of the fact that the limitations of Man's ability to know and to understand are so great that they would frustrate any attempt to convey what one has learnt to someone else. Realizing this – and with the aim of sparing the woman's feelings – he lies to her in an ironic finale to his own personal quest for truth, telling her that Kurtz's last utterance was not "the horror" but her own name, thus allowing her to continue to delude herself, as the truth would have been "too dark – too dark altogether. …" (79). Alhough it does bring him some insight, Marlow's quest ends in disillusionment, while his awareness of the impossibility of destroying the delusions of others merely deepens his solitude and

sense of failure: "[i]t was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush, which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul" (75).

What Marlow also experiences is an acute sense of Man's insignificance in the universe, as even when he has resorted to a lie – something which he professes to detest – "nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle" (79). On the one hand he claims that attaining self-knowledge is a process that is unique for every individual and untransferable to others, while on the other hand he seems to have participated in Kurtz's self-revelation and now has to share the burden of that knowledge and his inability to communicate it. White argues that "[t]here is no dénouement, no explanation" (1981, 63). "[W]hatever system of belief he may have attained has too dubious and private a status in his own thoughts to be presented as an alternative to the illusions of the Intended. Marlow never feels certain his own truth is not an illusion" (Watt 1980, 248). Truth, ideals and principles – which at times seem to be more or less real – are unprovable and impermanent. The insurmountable darkness as well as its social implications cause Levenson to draw very grim conclusions from the novella's ending: "What makes the lie so ghastly and so compelling is that it preserves a social idea by creating opacity between individuals; it founds community on the basis of estrangement" (1991, 63). Interpersonal and social relations are therefore founded on assumptions which may have very little in common with objective truth.

The ultimate form of delusion – which at the same time gives vent to whatever is darkest in man's nature – is an idealistic form of self-deception that results from an attempt to take the place of God. Kurtz's self-absorption and egotism – which are ungrounded in any transcendental value – allow him "to continue to believe in himself as the apostle of disinterested altruism. Unquestionable virtue added to inviolable power instantly produces self-deification" (Berthoud 1978, 54). It could be argued that the figure of Kurtz may well have been grounded in ideological developments during the period in question:

> Kurtz's return to barbarism exemplifies the dangers in the attempt to make technological and evolutionary optimism a functional substitute for more traditional views of the social and moral order. […] From the traditional religious point of view this faith in man's self-propelled spiritual ascent was essentially heretical; nevertheless the idea that the world's salvation could be expected from a boundless increase in individual development had been supported by all the strongest new forces in nineteenth-century life: by the developing imperatives of Romantic idealism, with its Faustian ideal of absolute liberation from religious, social, and ethical norms in the pursuit of experience; by the utilitarian view that leaving individuals free to pursue their own good would increase the sum of human happiness; by the democratic egalitarianism of liberal political theory; and by evolutionary positivism which followed Herbert Spencer's belief that the progressive differentiation of individuals was the sufficient aim of the evolutionary process. The ultimate logic of these expectations was the assumption that progress would eventually lead to man's self-deification. […] Marlow is horrified, and so, just before the end, is Kurtz, to understand what happens to a man who discovers his existential freedom under circumstances which enable him to pervert the ultimate direction of nineteenth-century thought: not the disappearance but the replacement of God. Many had thought that man's last evolutionary leap would in fact be down and back into the darkness (Watt 1980, 163-164, 166).

Lacking restraint and humility, Kurtz "had kicked himself loose of the earth" (67) and had to "struggl[e] blindly" (69) with his own soul. According to Hodges, the sin he is most guilty of is that of Messianic egoism:

> Proud of his idealism, Kurtz imagines himself a Messiah to African tribesmen. In reality he becomes at once a voracious tyrant and a debased devotee of their devilish cults. His tendency to idealise, to see himself regenerating the dark continent, has made him capable of far worse evils than the petty hypocrites and efficiency-minded materialists also portrayed in the story. (1967, 38)

One's delusions about oneself – one's omnipotence or total self-reliance – pose the greatest threat, not only to the self-assured individual himself, but also to those who – because of their self-doubt or moral naivety – are vulnerable to manipulation. Such is the case of the young Russian sailor, who is characteristically dressed in patchwork, harlequin-like clothes (which appear to suggest a lack of fixed identity) and who is fascinated by Kurtz's sham greatness, claiming that the agent "made [him] see thing – things" and "enlarged [his] mind" (55, 56). Marlow is horrified by the corrupting influence of Kurtz and the young man's blind devotion to what is fundamentally evil. The harlequin's description of Kurtz brings one of the grimmest comments in the whole novella from Marlow himself: "I looked around, and I don't know why, but I assure you that never, never before, did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of the blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness. […] The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions" (56-57). As Ian Watt observes:

> Romantic idealism had set up the ideal of absolute liberation from religious, social, and ethical norms; and this ideal, later reinforced by many other forces of nineteenth-century history, made the spread of freedom and progress depend on the removal of all "restraints". The Russian harlequin thus represents the century's innocent but fateful surrender to that of the total Faustian unrestraint which believes that everything is justified if it "enlarges the mind". (Watt 1980, 228)

Conrad's scepticism, pessimism and his views on mankind have much in common with those of existentialists in the twentieth century:

> The cardinal lesson of experience is a full realisation of our fragile, lonely and humble status in the natural order; and here any theoretical system, whether philosophical, scientific or religious, is likely to foster dangerous delusions of independence and omnipotence. […] in *Heart of Darkness* [Conrad] affirmed the necessity, as Camus put it, 'in order to be a man to refuse to be a God.' (Watt 2007, 83)

Marlow's journey up the River Congo in *Heart of Darkness* would seem to be a quest for much more than exotic adventure and the fulfilment of boyhood dreams. The lesson he learns is that of the dark instincts which strive to govern our conduct. He is appalled by the degradation of Kurtz, who fails to restrain himself when he is freed of the artificial constraints that are imposed by civilization and who – in a terrifying self-deification – arrives at a macabre distortion of the ideals which he used to espouse so fervently but which have proved to be as rootless and hollow as he himself. What Marlow discovers during his symbolic retracing of the origins of man in

the heart of dark Africa is – to his consternation – a sense of the frailty of human nature and the evil that lurks in all of us. He is devastated by the recognition of his own potential self in the deranged Kurtz. Caught between human nature – with its echoes of atavistic urges – and the artificial framework of a civilization that is grounded in arbitrary values, we feel desolate and overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of our existence, the lack of any objectivity and the awareness of our mortality. Frustrated and confused by the circumstances of our existence, we may well begin to harbour solipsistic doubts about the essence of reality. Devotion to work and solidarity seem to be the only available remedies by means of which we can anchor ourselves in reality and attain some sense of (admittedly limited) purposefulness and actuality of existence.

Conrad's aim in *Heart of Darkness* would seem to be "to promote a greater understanding of man's destructive tendencies, and at the same time support the modest countertruths on which civilisation depends" (Watt 1980, 167). However, given that the medium of language is far from perfect (as is reflected in the novella's meta-fictional dimension and in the theme of Kurtz's degraded eloquence), it is extremely difficult (or even impossible) to share with others any sense or meaning that one has attained, while self-delusion, relativism and egocentrism hinder every kind of reciprocity. The rift between Man and the universe is aggravated by the unbridgeable gulf that separates individuals from each other and above all by the fact that Man's autonomous will is constantly constrained by chance and the contingencies resulting from the sum of the factors which shape the larger structure in which he exists.

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