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Purging the Ghost of the Past

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Abstract

Upon careful examination, Heart of Darkness reads like an interior monologue, with Marlow telling the whole story in practically one breath, while his foursome audience remains, for all practical purposes, entirely passive throughout Marlow's narration of his African jeremiad. Telling the story in retrospect has the quality of mediating the events of the past through the narrator's present frame of mind. In other words, the whole past is filtered through the prism of the present. This allows Marlow unlimited leverage to edit this past, modify it, alter it, reinvent it, comment on it, and interpret it to his own advantage.

Marlow's obsession with and apologetic attitude towards the evil Kurtz is another problematic issue in the novella. Since Kurtz is dead according to Marlow's own account and, therefore, belongs to the past, then Marlow's present justification is not so much slanted towards him who is long since dead as it is towards him who is still living. So, apparently, Marlow has a vested interest that goes beyond the customary bond and sympathy between two company employees. Can it perhaps be that Kurtz, in the final analysis, is an alter ego of Marlow? Or an embodiment of a dark phase in Marlow's life in the Congo—a phase that he now prefers to suppress and deny? These questions, however unassumingly raised, tend to vitiate the realistic existence of a person named Kurtz. And indeed, there is in the novella enough textual evidence that lends reasonable credence to this argument.

Keywords: *Heart of Darkness,* the uncanny, alter ego, Marlow-Kurtz imbroglio, catharsis by narration.

I

More than a century of diligent critical appraisal and reappraisal of *Heart of Darkness* has proved that Joseph Conrad's masterpiece is a hard nut to crack.[1] On the surface of it, the novella leaves more questions unanswered than those it answers, and consequently, a number of loose ends remain disturbingly untied by the novella's end. That is why any attempt to account for all these questions and loose ends will be beset by not a small number of false starts. But first to these nagging questions: 1) How is it that Marlow's companions aboard the Nellie, excepting the frame narrator, remain entirely silent throughout his narrative? 2) How is it realistically possible for Marlow to tell the whole story in a single night? 3) Is there any significance for telling a story of African horror belonging to the not-so-immediate past from the prism of the present and aboard a cruising yawl anchored at night in the Thames? 4) What is the bearing of Marlow's invocation of ancient Romans coming into the awful climate of England on the remembrance of his own journey to the heart of African darkness? 5) Why does Marlow unexpectedly change from a passionate defender of, and sympathizer with, the colonized Africans in Chapter I to a virulent racist by Chapter II? 6) Why does Marlow occasionally deny any interest in Kurtz precisely when these denials on such occasions seem at their most counterproductive? 7) How is it that Marlow, who of all company employees is presumably the least connected to Kurtz, becomes the most enthusiastic to want to rescue Kurtz out of the heart of darkness? 8) And how is it then that when he meets him face to face, his first impulse is to kill him? 9) Is it by coincidence that Marlow's journey to the Congo comes out in effect not as a business trip by a company employee but as that of a one-man fact-finding mission, while Kurtz stands out as *the* man of action par excellence? 10) Why, on his second visit to Brussels, does Marlow rule his dear aunt out of his schedule of visits in spite of her instrumental role in securing him his employment with the Belgian company?

Upon careful examination, however, *Heart of Darkness* reads like an interior monologue, with Marlow telling the whole story in practically one breath, while his foursome audience remains, for all practical purposes, entirely passive throughout Marlow's narration of his African jeremiad. After a mere five-page expository preface and a few scattered interludes later on by the frame narrator, Marlow tells the remaining one hundred and thirteen pages of the novella in a single night![2] Realistically, this seems an impossible job. So, it is legitimate to wonder whether Marlow's incredibly mesmerized listeners are mere figments of his own imagination.

Indeed, the frame narrator, a fellow sailor like Marlow, uses the first-person plural as if it were an undifferentiated singular voice. In his account, all five (sometimes four) companions are made to share not only the bond of the sea but even the same feelings and thoughts! For instance, while the frame narrator was silently musing on how "farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars," Marlow's first utterance meshes perfectly well with these unarticulated musings, as if by a genius stroke of telepathy, "'*And* this *also*,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'" (emphasis added, 4). The striking use of the couplers (*and*, *also*) in Marlow's opening statement further suggests that Marlow and the frame narrator share the exact same train of thought and that Marlow was simply articulating, verbally and aloud, what the frame narrator was thinking of.

In effect, such matters as have been discussed above tend to argue that the whole novella is nothing but a dream told by Marlow and that his companions have no existence in reality. In

addition, telling the story in retrospect has the quality of mediating the events of the past through the narrator's present frame of mind. In other words, the whole past is filtered through the prism of the present. This allows Marlow unlimited leverage to edit this past, modify it, alter it, reinvent it, comment on it, and interpret it to his own advantage.

Likewise, Marlow's retrospective narration of a story set almost entirely in the Congo while aboard a yacht anchored in the Thames is not without significance. In other words, the act of storytelling can be seen as a *post-factum* attempt to redeem himself in his own eyes—thus making *Heart of Darkness* a record of Marlow's meanderings between slips of the tongue and afterthoughts, or between moral failures and masked attempts to cover them up. For example, his early invocation of a young Roman citizen coming to England some eighteen centuries ago "to mend his fortunes" (6) not only foreshadows his tale of his own experience in the Congo but also sums up its bitter harvest in an epigrammatic nutshell:

> "Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him,—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable. And it has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon him. The fascination of the abomination—you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate."
>
> He paused. (6)

Apparently, Marlow pauses here because he realizes that he inadvertently and vicariously spoke of his personal experience, and, lest his present and future audiences might see through his pathetic mask, he attempts to dismiss such parallels as preposterously out of the question. Hence his hurried warning, "Mind, none of us would feel exactly like this" (6). But we know that that was exactly what Marlow felt after his blunder into the Congo. As it turns out, this is not the only time in which Marlow resorts to this familiar and convenient device of covering up past blunders.

II

Throughout Chapter I of the novella, Marlow poses as a detached but curious skeptic vis-à-vis Kurtz as well as an exceptional sympathizer with the colonized natives. But at the onset of Chapter II, we detect a marked shift of sympathy towards Kurtz, which amounts to total empathy by the end of the chapter. In his retrospective narrative, Marlow sees to it that the telling of an event is couched in the context of apologetics. Notice, for instance, how he tells his audience very curtly of the metamorphosis that Kurtz has undergone while in the Congo: "He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally" (72). In the very next breath, Marlow tells this selfsame audience in a rather reproaching tone how/why Kurtz has become more savage than the putative savages he came to civilize:

> You can'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 asylum—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammeled 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 great difference. (72)

Any careful reader will readily notice the marked imbalance between Marlow's *laconic presentation* of the event of Kurtz's metamorphosis and his *garrulous rationalization* of this metamorphosis. Actually, Marlow's vehement defense of Kurtz goes on for another page or so. We are thus entitled to wonder why Marlow dwells so much on the extenuating circumstances that presumably led Kurtz to 'go native.' We need to emphasize at this point that Marlow narrates the events of the past *in retrospect*. According to Richard Ambrosini, "The telling, rather than the event itself, generates meaning" (90). This means that Marlow is more intensely involved in the present (to which the rationalization belongs) than in the past (in which the actual event took place). This is evident when he addresses his captive audience, "Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain—I am trying to account to myself for—for—Mr. Kurtz—for the shade of Mr. Kurtz" (73). Marlow's hesitation, typographically indicated by long dashes, is very suggestive here. It affirms precisely what he is trying to deny. The use of the present progressive tense also reveals that Marlow is still haunted by Kurtz's ghost.

A reasonable conclusion to be reached here is: Since Kurtz is dead according to Marlow's own account and, therefore, belongs to the past, then Marlow's present justification is not so much slanted towards him who is long since dead as it is towards him who is still living. Ambrosini recognizes that "Marlow's urge to tell the story [is] in order to cope with the painful inheritance of his past" (110). So, apparently, Marlow has a vested interest that goes beyond the customary bond and sympathy between two company employees. Is it perhaps that Kurtz, in the final analysis, is an alter ego of Marlow? Or an embodiment of a dark phase in Marlow's life in the Congo—a phase that he now prefers to suppress and deny? These questions, however unassumingly raised, tend to vitiate the realistic existence of a person named Kurtz. And indeed, there is in the novella enough textual evidence that lends reasonable credence to this argument.

III

But first, let's review Marlow's presentation of Kurtz to his present listeners and future readers. In Chapter I, Marlow first hears from the Company's chief accountant in the Congo that Kurtz is "a first-class agent" and "a very remarkable person" who "[s]ends in as much ivory as the others put together" (25). Then, he learns from the manager of the Central Station, seen by Marlow as "a chattering idiot", that Mr. Kurtz, who is now rumored to be ill, was "the best agent he [the manager] had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company" (31). The brick-maker of the Central Station further tells Marlow, "He is a prodigy…. He is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (35).

> The manager's and the brick-maker's qualification of Kurtz as an exceptional asset to the company recalls how Marlow's own aunt represented her nephew to company officials in Brussels in a similar light:
> … it became quite plain to me I had been represented to the wife of the high dignitary, and goodness knows to how many more people besides, as an exceptional and gifted creature—a piece of good fortune for the Company—a man you don't get hold of every day…. It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital—you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle. (15)

Not coincidentally, just as Marlow's aunt's description of her nephew as an emissary of light was derived from the then-current argot of the press (15), so is the brick-makers description of Kurtz as an emissary of pity, science, and progress (35). Furthermore, the brickmaker notes an

obvious parallelism between Kurtz and Marlow when he addresses Marlow, "The same people who sent him specially also recommend you." Then, in the very next breath, the brick-maker, as if anticipating Marlow's objection to such a conclusion that might be reached by future readers, tells him, "Oh, don't say no. I've my own eyes to trust" (35). Not surprisingly, Marlow, who as a narrator is going through denial, dismisses the parallelism as preposterous.

When he defends Kurtz against the brick-makers accusations, Marlow seems to make no distinction between Kurtz and himself in the same defense, even though he prefaces his defense of Kurtz with a typical avowal of feigned disinterestedness, "I would not have gone so far as to fight for Kurtz, but I went for him near enough to a lie" (38). But unless lying for Kurtz serves Marlow's own interests, why do it? Notice how a few lines down Marlow forgets that a moment ago he pretended to be defending Kurtz, "Well, I went near enough to it [lying] by letting the young fool [the brick-maker] there believe anything he liked to imagine as to *my* influence in Europe" (emphasis added, 38). Here, by a slip of the tongue, Marlow confounds himself with Kurtz!

Marlow's narrative (with its gaps, striking parallelisms, statements, garrulous apologetics, denials) leaves enough clues that point a different reading than he wishes his audience to conclude. For instance, soon after he admits to his sleepy audience that once he lied in defense of Kurtz, he recognizes that his account of Kurtz is unconvincing:

> This simply because I had a notion it [lying] somehow would be of help to *that* Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He 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? *It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation*….(emphasis added, 38).

Marlow's ambivalence is evident in his recognition that his attempt at telling the dream-like story of Kurtz is vain precisely because of "the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams" (38). Then, after a short pause, he tells his passive listeners in rather philosophical tones, "No, it is impossible; 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" (38). Seeing that his audience remains unmoved by his philosophizing, he pauses a while for further reflection. But when it dawns on him that his audience, except his accomplice co-narrator, has already gone to sleep, Marlow says, "Of course in this [story of Kurtz] you fellows see more than I could then" (39). This is a half-confession encouraged by the pitch-dark night and by the fact that the majority of his listeners are asleep by now. Ambrosini comes close to admitting the cathartic effect narration has for Marlow, but he retracts by saying, "Marlow is confronting the actuality of the puzzling and painful feeling his own tale is evoking. One discovers, then, that what had begun as telling a dream has become experiencing a nightmare…" (110).

The pitch black night serves as another face-saving mask Marlow hides behind, a mask that completely depersonalizes him, an event that prompts Marlow's co-narrator to say, "For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice" so much so that even Marlow's awe-inspiring narrative "seemed to shape itself without human lips" (39). When he eventually relates his face-to-face encounter with Kurtz, Marlow tells us of that heated exchange he had with him in an illuminating way that shows his struggle with his alter ego called Kurtz:

> I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? *They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares. Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man.* (Emphasis added, 100)

So, even Marlow wants us to read between the lines of his tale. Marlow's own co-narrator tells us that Marlow is not a typical yarn-spinner like other sailors in that his tales always have a double meaning: "… to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine" (4). In light of this illuminating comment, it follows that Marlow's tale of Kurtz's life sheds light on his own. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan argues that "Not at the center, not at the heart of darkness will meaning be found, but outside the tale, in the act of the telling" (57). Ambrosini, on the other hand, says that, "The frame narrator is drawing the reader's attention to the duality of Marlow's story. He warns his readers that they must not concentrate on Marlow's account of the events in which he is protagonist, but rather on the distortions which the re-creation of his subjective experience produces on the narrative" (90). Ambrosini thus concludes that, "The only way of obtaining a 'meaning' would be to crack the tale's nutshell and thus extract the meaning one wants to find" (90).

In the interval between Marlow's philosophical reflection on ancient empires at the beginning of the novella and his embarking upon storytelling proper, the frame narrator butts in to warn us, "we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to turn, to hear about one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences" (7). In the very next breath, Marlow himself, who informs us that the story he is going to tell deals "with what happened to me personally" and "how I went up that river to the place where I first met that poor chap [Kurtz]" (7), concurs with the frame narrator: "It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber 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).

On more than one occasion, especially soon before and soon after he meets Kurtz, Marlow expresses his desire to beat or even kill Kurtz for no obvious reason. Here are Marlow's two retrospective comments on that encounter:

a. "I fancy I had some vague notion of falling upon him and giving him a drubbing. I don't know. I had some imbecile thoughts." (98)
b. "This clearly was not a case for fisticuffs, even apart from the very natural aversion I had to beat that Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing." (99)

And here are the two 'real-time' statements he reportedly said to Kurtz in case the latter shouted to alert his native devotees to Marlow's attempt to take him away from them:

a. "but if you try to shout I'll smash your head with—" (99)
b. "I will throttle you for good." (99)

One cannot help noticing Marlow's apologetics not just in the content of the two retrospective comments on his previous threats of violence or denials thereof but also in the fact that rhetorically the comments are *presented before*, not after, the violent statements. Although one may be inclined to understand this in light of Watt's explanation of Conrad's narrative technique of delayed decoding (In Moore, 176), Ambrosini argues that, "The way Conrad chose to convey this effect was a

juxtaposition between a *story* of 'what happened' to Marlow and a *tale* of the effect that those events had on him" (85).

Apparently, now that he is back to his senses in the metropolis of civilized England, Marlow realizes what a shamed life, personified as Kurtz, he led in the Congo. Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan,[3] the only critic to recognize Kurtz, a la Freud, as the uncanny double of Marlow, comments by saying that, "What is at stake for Marlow, then, is not his lack of knowledge, but his suppression of knowledge, his failure to respond and to testify to what he has known all along" (57). That is why she sees *Heart of Darkness* as a narrative of failure as well as a "belated testimony of a witness haunted by his own failure to testify. The truth toward which Marlow's narrative inches its way is the truth of his own lie, and his silent complicity in the atrocities he has witnessed. The return of the repressed becomes evident through a failure of language in Marlow's account" (56-57). Erdinast-Vulcan, however, stops short of taking her discussion of Kurtz as Marlow's uncanny double to its Freudian conclusion—a failure this paper hopes to redress.

IV

Marlow feels the need to purge the ghost of Kurtz out of his life once and for all. When he remembers how he lied in defense of Kurtz, he explains how lies stifle his life, "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—*what I want to forget*" (emphasis added, 38). The cathartic effect of storytelling is evident in his desire to forget this taste of death.

In a psychoanalytically illuminating passage, Marlow speaks of his final triumph of overpowering the physically emaciated and weakened Kurtz:

> I kept my head pretty well; but when *I had him at last stretched on the couch*, I wiped my forehead, while my legs shook under me *as though I had carried half a ton on my back down that hill*. And yet I had only supported him, his bony arm clasped round my neck—and he was not much heavier than a child. (emphasis added, 101)

Here Marlow appears to us as both pre-Freudian psychiatrist (stretching Kurtz on the couch) and quasi-Promethean sufferer (carrying half a ton on his back). The contrast between Kurtz's physically insignificant weight (not heavier than a child) and Marlow's feeling him both as a heavy burden on his back *and* an albatross around his neck can only be appreciated and understood in psychoanalytical terms.

One year after the death of Kurtz, Marlow, who is now back in Brussels, reflects on the burdensome legacy the former bequeathed him:

> All that had been Kurtz's had passed out of my hands: his soul, his body, his station, his plans, his ivory, his career. *There remained only his memory and his Intended—and I wanted to give that up, too, to the past, in a way—to surrender personally all that remained of him with me to that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate*. I don't defend myself. I had no clear perception of what it was I really wanted. (Emphasis added, 111)

With these vague ideas in his mind, Marlow decides to deliver in person to Kurtz's fiancée her photo and the letters Kurtz had entrusted him with. On his way to the headquarters of the company,

Marlow is visited by a frightening vision of Kurtz, a vision that threatens not just him but all humanity. Here Marlow realizes how wrong he was in believing that Kurtz is really dead, body and soul, and confined to the Congo. Marlow's lengthy reflections defy all summary here and are, therefore, worth quoting in full:

> I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life—a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage; but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of street as still and decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness. It 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. (111-12)

Marlow's vivid recollections continue for about another page or so, but when he reaches the door of the company headquarters, Kurtz's phantasmagoric image, which has been stalking him since he landed in Brussels, becomes even more vivid now so that it brings back with it the whole African experience of horror Marlow went through with Kurtz, "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!'" (112). Three issues warrant commentary here: First, Marlow's return to the headquarters of the company, where he had signed the contract about two years earlier, signifies that his experience in the heart of darkness has come full circle. Second, the mahogany door is presumably the same door through which Marlow had been summarily inducted to the company then shortly afterwards hurled thence to the African heart of darkness two years earlier. Third, the glassy panel on the mahogany door, which was not mentioned earlier by Marlow when he had signed the contract (see page 11), is perhaps more a mirror symbol of Marlow's own troubled soul than a factual detail of a door.

Marlow's troubles in dealing with Kurtz's heavy legacy are compounded by his encounter with the Intended. Her still undiminished sorrow for Kurtz's death more than a year after the fact as well as her unshakable faith in his so-called absolute benevolence play havoc with Marlow's faith in his ability to come to grips with his burdensome legacy in a practical fashion. "For her he had died only yesterday. And, by Jove! the impression was so powerful that for me, too, he seemed to have died only yesterday—nay, this very minute" (113).

Marlow's determination to surrender Kurtz's legacy of horror is shattered by the unshakable faith of the Intended. Robbed of his will to disambiguate her about the truth of her idol, Marlow feels compelled to acquiesce with her that they both share the same opinion about Kurtz, but he comments, "'Yes, I know,' I said with something like despair in my heart" (115). The "saving illusion" that she innocently lives in irreversibly convinces Marlow of his own vulnerability vis-à-vis "the triumphant darkness from which I could not have defended her—from which I could not even defend myself" (115). Her passionate effusions, which in effect convince Marlow that "I shall

see this eloquent phantom [Kurtz] as long as I live" (116), so unnerve Marlow that his only recourse is verbal irony, "'His end,' said I, with dull anger stirring in me, 'was in every way worthy of his life'" (117). One notices in this comment how she has robbed Marlow even of his susceptibility to anger. And though he finally "felt a chill grip on my chest" and "heard his very last words" Marlow "stopped in a fright" and instead of telling her that Kurtz's final words were "The horror! The Horror", he found himself lying to her, "'The last word he pronounced was—your name'" (117). Marlow's lie is an indication that his moral defeat is final inasmuch as it is an expression of the irreversible triumph of evil. If verbal irony was the best defense he managed to marshal on behalf of truth in the past, then masking t/his now retold evil past behind a phantom he names Kurtz boils down to a half-confession of that truth.

V

Like the narrator in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* through whose eyes the story of Mustafa Said is narrated, Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* tells the story of Kurtz. The one narrates the reprehensible life of Said outside his native Sudan (in London); the other narrates the reprehensible life of Kurtz outside his native England (in the Congo). In my view, the narratees each represent a phase in the life of the narrator, but now, back in the comfort of their native civilized habitats, they frown upon their shameful pasts, but stop short of a candid confession. Hence, Erdinast-Vulcan argues that "Marlow's narrative should be read as performative speech act because it does not represent a given truth but generates its truth in the act of telling" (57).

It is instructive, therefore, to trace Marlow's changing attitudes towards Kurtz as they are expressed in his tale. He is first indifferent, then curious, then fascinated, then loyal, then disgusted, then horrified. But here we need to remember Ambrosini's distinction between the *story* of what really happened to Marlow and a *tale* of the effect that those events had on him. In other words, Marlow's tale of indifference, disgust, and horror are indeed post-historical European editorials that not only mask his original curiosity, fascination, and loyalty to Kurtz but also bracket them, and thus confuse readers. Ralph Maud recognizes the negative impact of Marlow's confusing editorials on his telling the story when he says, "If Marlow had told the story without his editorial 'incomprehensibles' it would have been too plain, too plain altogether" (209).

Here is a brief summary of Kurtz's career in Marlow's tale: as an illusion (37), a word (38), a subject for speculation (44), someone to covet an open conversation with, but it is soon decided that anything one says or does with Kurtz would be "a mere futility" (56), someone whose possible death would render him as "something altogether without a substance" (69), a man who presents himself "as a voice" (69, 91), a gifted creature endowed most preeminently with "the gift of expression" (69), a creature to covet listening to (70), an ivory-like creature of the wilderness (71), a shade (ghost), an "initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere" simply referred to as "it", an "it" that "vanished" rather than died (73), an "apparition" (90), a "nightmare of my choice" (97), and "a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence" (111-12).

When the above citations are coupled with the unmistakable parallels between Marlow and Kurtz, along with Marlow's repeated denials of being interested in Kurtz—against all appearances to the contrary—and his reluctance to share with anyone "the peculiar blackness of that experience" (98), one is compelled to conclude that Kurtz is quite simply the metonymic embodiment of a dark, shameful phase in Marlow's life in the Congo. This explains why, as Marlow's story inches towards

a tale, Kurtz is often represented as a shadow or ghost, a secret sharer who must be guarded from all prying eyes: "I was anxious to deal with this shadow by myself alone,—and to this day I don't know why I was so jealous of sharing with any one the peculiar blackness of that experience" (97-8).

One also must remember that on his second visit to Brussels, Marlow mentions no visit to his 'dear aunt' in spite of her instrumental role in securing him his appointment with the Belgian company, yet he mentions his visit to the Intended. Now, this might seem a glaring omission on Marlow's part, but if we accept the contention that Kurtz is Marlow's fictitious invention of himself, it follows then that the Intended is now Marlow's reinvention of his dear aunt who 'intended' him to be "an emissary of light" (15) rather than an apostle of darkness; and here we need to remember that Marlow's failure is not a failure of intentions but of methods—Kurtz too is criticized for his unsound methods (93). Thus, it is the encounter with the Aunt-cum-Intended that proves to be the turning point in Marlow's tale. If, in the final analysis, it is Marlow who "had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (72)—thus failing to live up to his aunt's benevolent ideals of "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (15)—then fails to tell her the truth of what he *actually* did in the Congo, the convenience of inventing a Kurtz looms as the only way out for cowardly Marlow.

If Kurtz, as John G. Peters argues, "represents good intentions gone terribly wrong" (60), then Marlow's invention of Kurtz—as a metonymic coat rack for his moral blunders—is motivated by his fear of repression. Regelind Farn explains Marlow's lie to the Intended (i.e., Aunt) in light of this fear of social repression:

> It can be seen as a comment on human nature that after Marlow's destablising experience, and after he has felt alienated from people in Europe for a while, his way back to normality is through self-deception that realigns him with society and helps him repress what he can't come to terms with—and what is systematically not permitted to be known in a world dominated by words like Kurtz's (or Leopold's). In this context, the irony and bitterness of his tale can be seen as signs of his acknowledged impotence in the face of a disturbing reality. (11)

It is here that Marlow decides to purge the ghost of Kurtz out of his memory and life, to lift himself out of the heart of darkness that still haunts him even in the heart of 'civilized' Europe. As the personification of a frightening phenomenon, Kurtz represents to Marlow what Freud calls the uncanny. A consideration of Freud's philological analysis of the uncanny is, therefore, warranted here, as it will shed light on how Kurtz is Marlow's double. Freud's term for what is known in English as the uncanny is *Das Unheimliche*. To reveal what *Das Unheimliche* is, Freud contrasts this term with the adjectives *heimlich* ('homely' or 'familiar') and *heimisch* ('native'), and concludes that "what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar" (220). However, Freud's detailed tracing of the etymology of the term leads him to the startling conclusion: "Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (226). He later ascribes this total reversal in the meaning of the uncanny to a process of repression: "for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (241).

Freud, however, argues on the authority of Otto Rank that at the narcissistic stage in the ego's development, the ego invents a double, someone or an object it can identify with. The invention of this double is originally a defense mechanism, "an insurance against the destruction of the ego" (235). Yet, as the ego passes the narcissistic stage, the double loses its original function: "But when this stage has been surmounted, the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (235).

But why does the double become so frightening and uncanny that the ego needs to mobilize all its defenses against it? Why does the ego project that familiar double outward as something foreign to itself? Freud responds that:

> When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted—a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons. (236)

Lastly, Freud adds that since there is in the unconscious mind a strong 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from instinctual impulses, "whatever reminds us of this inner 'compulsion to repeat' is perceived as uncanny" (238). Likewise, Kurtz, who once "wore a more friendly aspect" is now projected as a stranger to Marlow, a threatening nuisance, a superannuated *pied noir* who served his term and is to be sent into retirement, someone who does not belong to the civilized European *Heimat* (homeland) but to the heart of African darkness. Now that he is safe and sound in Europe, Marlow is keen on purging the ghost of his shameful past, conveniently nicknamed Kurtz, out of his life.

Endnotes

1. On the protean appeal of *Heart of Darkness*, see for example Padmini Mongia (85), Ted Billy (77), Cedric Watts (45), Benita Parry (39), and Gene M. Moore (4).

2. I am referring here to *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Second Edition. Edited by Robert Kimbrough. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971.

3. There have been earlier studies that discussed the kinship between Kurtz and Marlow, but none too seriously. Most notable are those by Albert J. Guerard and Stewart C. Wilcox.

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