

Wayward *Heart of Darkness*: Like some others, Prof. Antonia Maria Alvarez of the Distance University of Madrid, which boasts of 150,000 students, the only institution we've heard of which outdoes the University of South Africa (UNISA) in student population, read the announcement of the Joseph Conrad conference in South Africa in the *European English Messenger* to mean that the JCF was sponsoring the conference and sent her paper on *Heart of Darkness* to us rather than to the conference convenes at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and at Potchefstroom University. Since the mistake made the paper too late for inclusion in the conference, Prof. Alvarez has allowed us to publish it here. Prof. Alvarez was unable to attend the South African conference, but her proposed paper follows:

**JOSEPH CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS:
A JOURNEY IN QUEST OF SELF**

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In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Marlow comes to the Congo for experience and self in the ancient belief that a man is shaped by what he does, that character is formed by what happens to one. But surrounding all of man's efforts in the Congo is a presence: Kurtz listened to it and went mad, and Marlow recognizes it but refuses to listen, neutralizes the appeal of the unknown and survives Kurtz, who succumbed to the fascinating wilderness.

In 1899, eleven years earlier than "The Secret Sharer," Conrad published *Heart of Darkness*, the tale that "delineates the archetypal pattern he continued to refine through his career" (Andreach,1970:44). In this obscure story, he wants to communicate his great conviction that, even if man fails in his attempts at authenticity, the very struggle to attain it gives intensity to an otherwise plain and inauthentic existence.

Heart of Darkness can be seen as a journey--Marlow's mythical journey in search of the self, in order to bring back a new truth, and, through all the pages of the novel, the main character relates his experiences journeying up the Congo River in quest of another white man, Kurtz. This enigmatic man was received by the black natives as if he were a god, but perhaps because he has gone into the jungle without knowing himself, and unprepared for the ordeal, his wrong conduct took him beyond the limits of his heart, paying the price in madness and death. On the contrary, Marlow did not transgress his limits and came back without fully understanding his experience, and although the heart of darkness tried to exercise its influence on him, too, he was able to restrain himself--he recognized its fascination and its abomination, but resisted his desire to join in those unspeakable rites. Marlow was saved because his aim was self-knowledge, the mystery of existence, which demands a great humility.

The heart of darkness evoked by Conrad is hard to understand, since the story has different levels: instead of concentrating on the account of the events, the reader has to observe the effects which the re-creation of the narrative produces on the narrator, Marlow, since "recent criticism has insisted on the story's being about Marlow, rather than Kurtz, regarding it as a journey into Marlow's consciousness." (Kirschner, 1968:47) Thus, although Marlow does not want to bother his audience with what happened to him personally, "yet 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." (p.5) For this reason, the main purpose of this paper is to look for the clues which can illustrate those changes produced on Marlow by the events which take place while penetrating into the heart of darkness.

Marlow's story -- which starts after a kind of frame-narrator, employing the first person plural, has already introduced us into the narrative--tells us how he had a passion for maps since he was a little boy:

"I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth...by this time it was not a blank space any more...It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery... It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar." (pp.5-6)

The opening of Marlow's own story recalls his childhood fascination with the blank spaces on maps, by way of explanation for what happens to him one day when he looks for an encounter with darkness. We have a prophetic vision of the darkness that Marlow will find in his journey through wilderness almost at the beginning of his experience in the jungle:

"But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning." (p.13)

In the increasing darkness, Marlow is losing his notion of the story, and, what seems most important, he compares it to a dream, which can be responsible for the kind of discursive distortion that affects the story itself:

"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, 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." (p.24)

After advising the reader that the story is a dream, Marlow is free to tell his subjective experience, involving his audience in his drama of darkness which has no solution: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence -- that which makes it s truth, its meaning -- its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream -- alone." (p.24) Here the narrator introduces the seeming theme: in this journey looking for Kurtz, nothing is real but just what it seems to Marlow, thus his confession "Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know..." (p.24)

At this point the darkness was so intense that the listeners could hardly see one another. However, the frame-narrator, as an ideal reader aware of the mechanism of Marlow's story-

telling does not lose a word of what is being told:

"For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night air of the river." (p.24)

Marlow's perceptions go on relentlessly, for the narrator to make the whole story out of them, out of what Marlow sees, hears and understands--or fails to. In fact, from the beginning of the story we can see the effect of Marlow's words on his audience: "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth." (p.3) On this occasion Marlow has said something rather odd, and his remark is received with silence, which is even more odd. But then the silence is explained by the narrator as natural, not odd at all, as if nothing unusual has happened; Marlow has simply made a Marlow-like remark, so typical of him as to be literally unremarkable: "His remark did not seem at all surprising. It was just like Marlow. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even..." (p.3) No response is called for. Apparently Marlow often says this sort of thing, so often that Marlow and the remark fit together, in a sense, and no further comment or explanation is required.

During the journey through the forest, most times Marlow is silent, listening. And the effects this world has on him are mainly abstract feelings that the wilderness raises in his imagination:

"There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect." (p.30)

Marlow is rather excited at the prospect of meeting Kurtz, the only one who can solve the enigmas of this world. But now he is aware of his defenses against wilderness, and is used to it not seeing this vengeful aspect any more. His way to fight against the powerful nature which surrounds him consists in keeping his imagination busy: "I had no time. I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones...I had to keep a lookout for the signs of dead wood..." (p.30) However, he distinguishes between the mere incidents of the surface and reality, and, as Richard Ambrosini remarks, "what should have been only a device -- that is, the structure of the narrative -- has become the main agent of the tale's effect. What Conrad had sought by extending the tension produced by rhythm, rhetoric and imagery" is achieved in *Heart of Darkness* by "involving the reader in an intellectual drama without a solution." (1968:114) All kinds of responses have been asked, and every time Marlow asks his audience "Do you understand?" But he is the one who cannot understand what he is hearing in his imagination; thus his journey through the wilderness looking for Kurtz, his last chance to understand -- he is sure that speaking to Kurtz will help him to interpret the silence of the jungle: "Towards the evening of the second day we judged ourselves about eight miles from Kurtz's station. I wanted to push on..." (p.35) But at the end of the journey Marlow will see

how savagely has Kurtz interpreted the appeal of wilderness.

The uneasiness the travellers feel on their approach to Kurtz's station is expressed by using other narrative methods; by Conrad introducing the hearing-seeing theme, in order to express the change from silence/stillness into noise/action:

"...a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise." (p.37)

Marlow's worst moments in *Heart of Darkness* are when he is compelled to understand that the great adventure of his life, to which he is devoting such great efforts is really a business of death. Congo is splendid -- like its people it has a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement; but it is marked by death -- streams of death in life in the extremity of an impotent despair; the jungle drives white men mad because of its solitude; there is nobody, not a hut; there is only "death -- the death of many men, the death of ethical behaviour, the death of goodness and civility, the death, crucially, of our authority as selves." (1976:198) Thus, Marlow's decision to adventure after authenticity is not easy: he has been told in Brussels that white men find death, go mad, and only will discover a nightmare in Africa, but Europe had already become an oppressing dream,

"...the earth for you is only a standing place -- and whether to be like this is your loss or your gain I won't pretend to say. But most of us are neither one or the other. The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove !" (p.45)

And this dream is for Francis A. Hubbard "the glow, the story" (1984:67); the rest of the elements of physical discomfort -- hardship, danger, isolation, death -- which envelop the story will be explained in a Marlow-like way to his audience, so that they can judge the significance of all these elements on the narrator:

"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 up on him. The fascination of the abomination--you know, imagine the growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate." (p.4)

The whole series of these adjectives and nouns: incomprehensible, detestable, savagery, mysteries, fascination, abomination keep the deepest meaning of the story and they have a great effect on the reader, in order to obscure the interpretation of events. Darkness is the presence that does not permit to perceive the reality of that mysterious life. This presence that surrounds all of man's efforts in the jungle is listened to by Kurtz and he goes mad; Marlow recognizes it but refuses to listen. At this critical point, when his sense cannot perceive reality, he turns to Kurtz, the only one who can help him. Through all the journey,

different voices have announced the white man being as an artist, as an interpreter of life, and Marlow is longing to meet Kurtz, longing for the shade of Mr. Kurtz. As Hubbard suggests, "Kurtz's painting is the first thing about the Congo that has arrested Marlow"; but what surprises him more is that Kurtz had painted "the sombre, sinister sketch" when, like himself, he had been "stuck in the Central Station." This makes Marlow feel an affinity with "this prodigy he had earlier dismissed, with this emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else". (1984:214) In fact, Kurtz is the only man in whom he can feel interest. And Marlow's interest is quickened to passion when he learns that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. Through Conrad's irony, the reader is informed that, at last, Marlow has created an image of Kurtz that may be the prototype of the man he himself would have liked to be. He thinks that Kurtz can tell him things about himself which he does not know. And so intensely does he feel the possible connection between himself and the man, that he follows him even though he has no clear sense of his behaviour:

"this must have been before his -- let us say -- nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which -- as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times--were offered to him--do you understand?--to Mr. Kurtz himself." (p.45)

In fact, Marlow knows that Kurtz's experience has become a whole horror, but he cannot avoid loving his genuineness, his authenticity:

He won't be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power, to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch dance in his honor; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking. (p.46)

Moreover, in spite of how much he may admire him, as Marlow adds, he is "not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him." (p.46) For Hubbard this means that, contrary to the clown, Marlow is still "European enough to suppose that behavior matters, that what one does has at least something to do with who one is" (1984:226):

One evening coming in with a candle I was started to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' ...Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated...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!' (p.64)

However, when Marlow at last compares himself to Kurtz, who has felt such a horror, he feels nothing for his life, nothing strong or worthwhile. This is the difference between himself and Kurtz: he feels he has lived incompletely, while Kurtz -- gross and brutal -- has broadened the range of human life. Although he may have done barbarous things, he has reached new experiences of the self, and against the indifference of the universe and all the insipidity of men, he has felt all the excitement that life can yield. Now, when Marlow thinks of Kurtz's native woman, she appears to him as a wild apparition:

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. (p.56)

Marlow remembers her savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. If he compares this splendid savage with Kurtz's European fiancée, "we are setting side by side dynamic energy with sterile hypocrisy, life with death." (Cox,1974:45) Anyway, once back in Brussels, Marlow understands that he will be loyal to her sorrow rather than to Kurtz's death, and -- as Richard Ambrosini suggests--he uses Kurtz's memory as "a shield against the superficial sanity of its citizens". The white man who died with such a vision of the horror "has been left behind in the protected world of ideal truthfulness." (1991:114) His dialogue with Kurtz' Intended illustrates the price Marlow is going to pay for the girl's sanity:

'You knew him well,' she murmured, after a moment of mourning silence.

'Intimacy grows quickly out there,' I said. 'I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another,'

'And you admired him,' she said. 'It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?' (p.69)

Throughout the scene the ambiguity of language creates an unbearable tension. Marlow uses the uncertainties that language can offer him in order to obscure the whispers which are echoing in his head: "He was a remarkable man...It was impossible not to--"(p.69)

In this atmosphere and listening to the Intended's words, Marlow asks himself which Kurtz was more actual: the one in his memory or the one living on in this woman's sorrow?: "'You knew him best,' I repeated. 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." Marlow has indeed entered a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for human beings to understand. As Allan Hunter suggests, Marlow can see what Kurtz has done but...he begins to understand how it came about, and is thrust into complicity, eventually agreeing to lie for Kurtz, to cover up his crimes. He has to lie because he cannot agree to shatter the moral world of the Intended. Her world is based on love for Kurtz that shows itself in deepest mourning a year later. Love is prima facie a generous emotion. Her wait for him is self-abnegation, but is there not a hint of dramatic self-indulgence in the scene, in the egoism of having a hopeless cause to believe in? (1983:53)

Marlow feels the world more and more unsteady about him, and when the Intended demands Kurtz's last words: "'Repeat them,' she murmured in a heartbroken tone. 'I want--I want--something-- something--to--to live with,' she insisted. 'Don't you understand I loved him--I loved him--I loved him!'" (p.71) he was forced into saying a downright lie: "I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. 'The last word he pronounced was--your name.'" (p. 71)

This last scene, like the rest of *Heart of Darkness*, is an example of how Conrad's prose is actually as vague as it is rich, precisely because of the "absence of concretely visualized

outlines of tangible features not so much in language itself as in some of the situations and impressions it evokes. (Senn, 1980:57) The Marlow who at the end of his narrative admits: "Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark -- too dark altogether" (p.71) is an eloquent portrait of the character who has grown out of the telling of the tale while attempting something that seemed impossible, i.e, to render the meaning of a dream. For this reason, the narrative -- shaped by the contours of a voyage, a pilgrimage -- is associated with impotence. And in this continuous progress in darkness, Conrad's use of Marlow permits him "a sense of narrative complicity" complemented by "a sort of human involvement":

...we have the guilty complicity of an involved observer--and, moreover, an involved narrator who takes care further to involve his listeners/readers. His achievement is based upon a set of ideological perceptions which, linked together artistically, constitute an understanding of imperialism as a particular system, a set of connections, influences and determinations. (Hawthorn, 1990:171)

Moreover, since "Marlow's narrative is retrospective"--as Daleski suggests--"he does not recount his experiences in the light of a gained knowledge." (1977:52) In fact, Marlow does not understand the meaning of his experience at the beginning of his narrative, and for this reason the tale itself becomes an attempt to penetrate its significance -- thus the figure of the Buddha at the end of the novel, trying to get to a valid conclusion. According to William W. Bonney, for twenty years a critical debate has continued concerning the significance of what have been termed "the Buddha tableaux" in *Heart of Darkness*. Critics consider that "it is not clear why the narrator compares Marlow to the Buddha," but "Conrad does not provide enough information." (1980:7) The fact -- as Jean-Aubryis Georges had suggested -- is that Conrad seems quite incapable of "believing in any kind of thought-form, and his contempt is directed acidly towards a humanity that doesn't know what it wants" (1927,11:121). In fact, *Heart of Darkness* ends with the suggestion that truth is unendurable in the context of everyday life, that what one needs in order to maintain an assurance of safety and comfort is some sustaining illusion to which one can be faithful. The story closes with the frame-narrator looking over the tranquil waterway of the Thames, which seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

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