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## Preface

The present paper by Professor J. Hillis Miller was given as a lecture at a close-reading session at Aarhus University, May 11, 1998. In the paper Hillis Miller gives a close analysis of the veiling and unveiling forces in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. The paper is a strong argument in favour of the close reading also of this novel that by many cultural critics have come to be regarded as a controversial, if not downright racist and sexist, novel.

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(KMS)



## Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?

The inaccessible incites from its place of hiding. (Jacques Derrida)

Should we read *Heart of Darkness*?<sup>1</sup> May we read it? Must we read it? Or, on the contrary, ought we not to read it or allow our students and the public in general to read it? Should every copy be taken from all the shelves and burned? What or who gives us the authority to make a decision about that? Who is this "we" in whose name I speak? What community forms that "we"? Nothing could be more problematic than the bland appeal to some homogeneous authoritative body, say professors of English literature everywhere, capable of deciding collectively whether "we" should read *Heart of Darkness*. By "read" I mean not just run the words passively through the mind's ear, but perform a reading in the strong sense, an active responsible response that renders justice to a book by generating more language in its turn, the language of attestation, even though that language may remain silent or implicit. Such a response testifies to having been changed by the reading. Part of the problem, as you can see, is that it is impossible to decide authoritatively whether or not we should read *Heart of Darkness* without reading it in that strong sense. By then it is too late. I have already read it, been affected by it, and passed my judgment, perhaps recorded it for others to read. Which of us, however, would or should want to take someone else's word for what is in a book? Each must read again in his or her turn and bear witness to that reading in his or her turn. In that aphorism about which Jacques Derrida has had so much to say, Paul Celan says, "No one bears witness for the witness." This might be altered to say, "No one can do your reading for you." Each must read for himself or herself and testify anew.

This structure is inscribed in *Heart of Darkness* itself. The primary narrator bears witness through exact citation to what he heard Marlow say that night on the deck of crusing yawl *Nellie*, as he and the other men, the Lawyer, the Accountant, the Director of Companies, representatives of advanced capitalism and imperialism, waited for the tide to turn so they could float down the Thames and out to sea, presumably on a pleasure cruise.<sup>2</sup> They have enough wealth and leisure to take time off to do as an aesthetic end in itself what Marlow has done for pay as a professional seaman. The profession of the primary, framing narrator is never specified. He cites with what the reader is led to believe is conscientious and meticulous accuracy just what Marlow said. What Marlow said, put within quotation marks throughout, is a story, the

recounting of and accounting for a what he calls an "experience" that "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."<sup>3</sup> (7). That recounting and accounting centers on an attempt to "render justice," as Marlow puts it, to Kurtz, the man he meets at "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience." What Marlow says at the beginning is also an implicit promise to his listeners and to us as readers. He promises that he will pass on to them and to us the illumination he has received.

Nor have Conrad's readers failed to respond to this demand for interpretation. A large secondary literature has sprung up around *Heart of Darkness*. These essays and books of course have a constative dimension. They often provide precious information about Conrad's life, about his experiences in Africa, about late nineteenth-century imperialism, especially about that terrible murdering devastation wrought by King Leopold in the Belgian Congo, as it was then called, about the supposed "originals" of characters in *Heart of Darkness*, and so on. This secondary literature, however, often also has an explicit performative dimension. Conrad's novel is brought before the bar of justice, arraigned, tried, and judged. The critic acts as witness of his or her reading, also as interrogator, prosecuting attorney, jury, and presiding judge. The critic passes judgment and renders justice. *Heart of Darkness* has often received a heavy sentence from its critics. It has been condemned, often in angry terms, as racist or sexist, sometimes in the same essay as both. Examples are the influential essay of 1975 by the distinguished Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe ("Conrad was a bloody racist"), or an essay of 1989 by Bette London: "Dependent upon unexamined assumptions, themselves culturally suspect, the novel, in its representations of sex and gender, supports dubious cultural claims; it participates in and promotes a racial as well as gender ideology that the narrative represents as transparent and 'self-evident'."<sup>4</sup> Edward Said's judgment in *Culture and Imperialism*, though giving Conrad his due as a critic of imperialism and recognizing the complexity of doing justice to *Heart of Darkness*, is in the end equally severe in his summing up: "The cultural and ideological evidence that Conrad was wrong in his Eurocentric way is both impressive and rich."<sup>5</sup> These are powerful indictments. If what they say renders justice to *Heart of Darkness*, if their witness may be trusted, it might seem inevitably to follow that the novel should not be read, taught, or written about, except perhaps as an example of something detestable. Nevertheless, according to the paradox I have already mentioned, you could only be sure about this by reading the novel yourself, thereby putting yourself, if these critics are right, in danger of

becoming sexist, racist, and Eurocentric yourself. Even so, no one bears witness for the witness, and no one else can do your reading for you.

To pass judgment anew it is necessary to take the risk and read *Heart of Darkness* for yourself. I shall now try to do that. I begin by claiming that *Heart of Darkness* is a literary work, not history, autobiography, travel writing, journalism, or any other genre.

In just what way does *Heart of Darkness* invite reading as literature rather than, say, as a historical account or as an autobiography? The most obvious way is in the displacement from Conrad to two imaginary narrators, neither of whom is to be identified with Conrad, any more than Socrates, in the Platonic dialogues is to be identified with Plato. The reader who says Conrad speaks directly for himself either in the words of the frame narrator or in Marlow's words does so at his or her peril and in defiance of the most elementary literary conventions. Whatever the frame narrator or Marlow says is ironized or suspended, presented implicitly in parabasis, by being presented as the speech of an imaginary character.

A second way *Heart of Darkness* presents itself as literature is in the elaborate tissue of figures and other rhetorical devices that make up, so to speak, the texture of the text. The simplest and most obvious of these devices is the use of similes, signalled by "like" or "as." These similes displace things that are named by one or the other of the narrators and asserts that they are like something else. This something else forms a consistent subtext or counterpoint defining everything that can be seen as a veil hiding something more truthful or essential behind. The first use of the figure of screens that are lifted to reveal more screens behind, in a structure that is apocalyptic in the etymological sense of "unveiling," as well as in the sense of having to do with death, judgment, and other last things, comes when the frame narrator, describing the evening scene just before sunset, when the sky is "a benign immensity of unstained light" (4) as it looks from the *Nellie* at anchor in the Thames estuary, says: "the very mist on the Essex marshes was *like* [my emphasis: JHM] a gauzy and radiant fabric, hung from the wooded rises inland, and draping the low shores in diaphanous folds" (4). These similes, as they follow in a line punctuating the text at rhythmic intervals, are not casual or fortuitous. They form a system, a powerful undertext beneath the first-level descriptive language. They invite the reader to see whatever either of the narrators sees and names on the first level of narration as a veil or screen hiding something invisible or not yet visible behind it, though when each veil is lifted it uncovers only another veil behind it, according to a paradox essential to the genre of the apocalypse. Apocalypse: the word means "unveiling" in Greek. If one had to name the genre to which *Heart of Darkness*

belongs the answer would be that it is a failed apocalypse, or, strictly speaking, since all apocalypses ultimately fail to lift the last veil, it is just that, a member of the genre apocalypse. The film modelled on *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* was brilliantly and accurately named, except for that word "now." Apocalypse is never now. It is always to come, a thing of the future, both infinitely distant and immediately imminent.

In *Heart of Darkness*, it is, to borrow Conrad's own words, as if each episode were like "some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth" (13). The novel is structured as a long series of episodes each one of which appears with extreme vividness before the reader's imaginary vision, brought there by Conrad's remarkable descriptive power, only to vanish and be replaced by the next, as though a figured screen had been lifted to reveal yet another figured screen behind it, with the darkness behind all, like that "sinister back-cloth" Marlow names.

A third distinctively literary feature of *Heart of Darkness* has already been named. The novel is ironic through and through. The reader might wish this were not the case and deplore Conrad's radical irony, but there it is, an indubitable fact. *Heart of Darkness* is a masterwork of irony, as when the eloquent idealism of Kurtz's pamphlet on "The Suppression of Savage Customs" is undercut by the phrase scrawled at the bottom: "Exterminate all the brutes!" or as the dying Africans in the "grove of death" are called "helpers" in the great "work" of civilizing the continent (17). Marlow's narrative in particular is steeped in irony throughout. The problem is that it is impossible to be certain how to take that irony. Irony is, as Hegel and Kierkegaard said, "infinite absolute negativity," or as Friedrich Schlegel said, a "permanent parabasis," a continuous suspension of clearly identifiable meaning. It is a principle of unintelligibility, or, in Schlegel's word, "Unverständlichkeit." Irony is a constant local feature of Marlow's narrative style, saying one thing and meaning another, as when the Europeans at the Central Station engaged in the terrible work of imperialist conquest, the "merry dance of death and trade," are said to be, in yet another simile, like "pilgrims": "They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence" (23). This stylistic undercutting is mimed in that larger structure in which each episode is replaced by the next, so that each is suspended by the reader's knowledge that it is only a temporary appearance, not some ultimate goal of revelation attained. Each is certain to vanish and be replaced by the next scene to be enacted before that sinister black back-cloth.

A fourth ostentatious literary feature of *Heart of Darkness* is the recurrent prosopopoeias, the personifications of the darkness (whatever *that* word means

here). This begins in the title. The darkness has a "heart." Prosopopoeia is the ascription of a name, a face, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate, or the dead. By a speech act, a performative utterance, prosopopoeia creates the fiction of a personality where in reality there is none. All prosopopoeias are also catachreses. They move the verbal fiction of a personality over to name something unknown, unknowable, and therefore, strictly speaking, unnamable in any literal language, something radically other than human personality: something absent, inanimate, or dead. It is no accident that so many traditional examples of catachresis are also personifications: "headland," "face of a mountain," "tongue of land," "table leg." "Heart of darkness" is another such catachrestic prosopopoeia, to give it its barbarbarous-spounding Greek rhetorical name. We project our own bodies on the landscape and on surrounding artifacts. We give the darkness a heart. In *Heart of Darkness* prosopopoeias are a chief means of naming by indirection what Conrad calls, in a misleading and inadequate metaphor, "the darkness," or, "the wilderness," or, most simply and perhaps most truthfully, "it." More than a dozen explicit personifications of this something, that is not really a person, but an "it," asexual or trans-sexual, impersonal, indifferent, though to Marlow it seems like a person, rhythmically punctuate *Heart of Darkness* like a recurring leitmotif. The wilderness surrounding the Central Station, says Marlow, "struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion" (23). Of that silent nocturnal wilderness Marlow asserts, "All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man [one of the agents at the station] jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. . . . Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us? I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk and perhaps was deaf as well" (27). "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey-tricks, just as it watches you fellows [his listeners on the Nellie] performing on your respective tight-ropes for--what is it? half a crown a tumble----" (34). The wilderness destroys Kurtz by a kind of diabolical seduction: "The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball--an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and--lo!--he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. He was its spoiled and pampered favourite" (49). The Africans at Kurtz's Inner Station vanish "without any perceptible movement of retreat, as if the forest that had ejected these beings so

suddenly had drawn them in again as the breath is drawn in a long aspiration" (61).

This last citation indicates another and not unpredictable feature of the prosopopoeias in *Heart of Darkness*. The personification of the wilderness is matched by a corresponding transformation of the African people who intervene between Marlow and the "it." Just as, in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* the extravagant personification of the heath in the night time that opens the novel leads to the assertion that Eustacia Vye, who rises from a mound in the heath to stand outlined in the darkness, is, so to speak, the personification of the personification, its crystallization or visible embodiment, so in *Heart of Darkness* all the Africans Marlow meets are visible representatives and symbols of that "it." Though it may be racist for Marlow (not necessarily Conrad, the reader should remember) to see the Africans as an inscrutably "other," as simple "savages" or "primitives," when their culture is older than any European one and as complex or sophisticated, if not more so, this otherness is stressed for the primary purpose of making the Africans visible embodiments and proofs that the "it," the darkness, is a person. This is an underlying feature of all Marlow's prosopopoeias, but it is made most explicit in the scene where Kurtz's African mistress appears on the shore: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. . . . She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (62).

This passage, like the one describing the way the wilderness has seduced Kurtz, seems to indicate that this "it" is after all gendered, that it is female, a colossal body of fecund and mysterious life. Since the wilderness is supposed to represent a mysterious knowledge, "like evil or truth," this personification does not jibe very well with the "sexist" assertions Marlow makes about the way women in general are, like Kurtz's Intended, "out of it," invincibly innocent and ignorant. At the least one would have to say that two contradictory sexist myths about women are ascribed to Marlow, the European male's tendency to personify the earth as a great mother, full of an immemorial, seductive wisdom, and the European male's tendency to condescend to women as innately incapable of seeing into things as well as men can.

All four of these stylistic features constitute a demand that *Heart of Darkness* be read, read as literature, as opposed to being taken as a

straightforwardly mimetic or referential work that would allow the reader to hold Conrad himself directly responsible for what is said as though he were a journalist or a travel writer. Of course any of these features can be used in a non-literary work, but taken all together they invite the reader to declare, "This is literature." In the name of just what higher responsibility does Conrad justify all this indirection and ironic undercutting, suspending, or redirecting of the straightforwardly mimetic aspect of his novel? In the name of what higher obligation is everything that is referentially named in a pseudo-historical or mimetic way displaced by these ubiquitous rhetorical devices and made into a sign for something else? If *Heart of Darkness* is a literary work rather than history or autobiography, just what kind of literary work is it, just what kind of apocalypse? What lies behind that veil? The frame narrator, in a passage often cited and commented on, gives the reader a precious clue to an answer to these questions, though it is left to the reader to make use of the clue in his or her reading:

"The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside [the Ms has "outside in the unseen"], enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." (5)

"To spin yarns" is a cliché for narration. To tell a story is to join many threads together to make a continuous line leading from here to there. Of that yarn cloth may be woven, the whole cloth of the truth as opposed to a lie that, as the proverbial saying has it, is "made up out of whole cloth," a cloth making a web, screen, or veil covering the truth that remains hidden behind or within. This inside/outside opposition governs the narrator's distinction between two kinds of tales. The first is the sort of seaman's yarn it was assumed by many reader's and critics Conrad was telling in his stories and novels. Its meaning lies within, like the shell of a cracked nut. I take it this names a realistic, mimetic, referential tale with an obvious point and moral. Marlow's tales, on the other hand, and, by implication at least, this one by Conrad, since so much of it is made up of Marlow's narration, have a different way of making meaning. All the visible, representational elements, all that the tale makes you see, according to that famous claim by Conrad that his goal was "above all to make you see," are there

not for their own sakes, as mimetically valuable and verifiable, for example for the sake of giving the reader information about imperialism in the Belgian Congo. Those elements have as their function to make something else visible, what the manuscript calls the "unseen," perhaps even the unseeable, as the dark matter of the universe or the putative black holes at the center of galaxies can in principle never be seen, only inferred. Conrad's figure is a different one from those black holes about which he could not have known, though it is still an astronomical trope. It is an example of that peculiar sort of figure that can be called a figure of figure or a figure of figuration. Just as the mist on a dark night is invisible except when it is made visible as a circular halo around moonlight, light already secondary and reflected from the sun, and just as the mimetic elements of Marlow's tale are secondary to the real things they represent at one remove, so the meaning of Marlow's yarns is invisible in itself and never named in itself. It is not inside the tale but outside, "brought out" indirectly by the things that are named and recounted, thereby made visible, just as, for example, Marlow when he visits the Intended hears Kurtz's last words breathed in a whisper by the dusk: "The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! The horror!'" (79). The reader will note the way the whispered sound is onomatopoeically echoed here in the repetition three times of the word "whisper," with its aspirant and sibilant "whuh" and "isp" sounds. The illumination provided by the tale is "spectral." It turns everything into a ghostly phantom, that is, into something that is a revenant, something that has come back from the dead, and that cannot die, that will always, sooner or later, just when we least expect it, come again. The miniature lesson in aesthetic theory the frame narrator presents here is an admirably succinct distinction between mimetic literature and apocalyptic, parabolic, or allegorical literature. In the latter everything named, with however much verisimilitude, stands for something else that is not named directly, that cannot be named directly, that can only be inferred by those that have eyes to see and ears to hear and understand, as Jesus puts it in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. All these genres have to do with the promise, with death, with the truly secret, and with last things, "things," as Jesus says, "which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35). It is not so absurd as it might seem to claim that *Heart of Darkness* is a secular version of what are, originally at least, intertwined religious or sacred genres: apocalypse, parable, allegory. Conrad himself spoke of the "piety" of his approach to writing and of his motive as quasi-religious. "One thing that I am certain of," he wrote in a letter to Arthur Symons, "is that I have approached the object of my task, things human, in a

spirit of piety. The earth is a temple where there is going on a mystery play childish and poignant, ridiculous and awful enough in all conscience. Once in I've tried to behave decently. I have not degraded the quasi religious sentiment by tears and groans, and if I've been amused and indifferent, I've neither grinned nor gnashed my teeth" (154).

In the case of *Heart of Darkness* just what is that "something else" for the revelation of which the whole story is written? The clear answer is that the something else is that "it" that Marlow's narration so persistently personifies and that Kurtz passes judgment on when he says "The horror!" Everything in the whole story, all the mimetic and verisimilar elements, is for the sake of bringing out a glimpse of that "it," the revelation of which is promised by the frame narrator when he defines the characteristic indirection of meaning in Marlow's yarns. Many critics, perhaps even most critics, of *Heart of Darkness* have made the fundamental mistake of taking the story as an example of the first kind of seaman's yarn. That is certainly the way Achebe reads it. Those critics, like F. R. Leavis, who have noticed all the language about the "unspeakable" and "inscrutable" "it" have almost universally condemned it as so much moonshine interfering with Conrad's gift for making you see, his gift for descriptive vividness. At least such critics have taken the trouble to read carefully and have noticed that there are important verbal elements in the text that must be accounted for somehow and that do not fit the straightforward mimetic, descriptive paradigm.

Is the "something," the "it," revealed, brought into the open where it may be seen and judged? The clear answer is that it is not. The "it" remains to the end "unnamable," "inscrutable," "unspeakable," falsely, or at any rate unprovably, personified as having consciousness and intention by Marlow's rhetoric, named only indirectly and inadequately by all those similes and figures of veils being lifted. How could something be revealed that can only be revealed to those who have crossed over the threshold of death? The reader is told that "it" is "The horror!" but just what that means is never explained except in hints and indirections. Nothing definite can be said of the "it" except that it is not nothing, that it is, though even that is not certain, since it may be a projection, not a solicitation, call, or demand from something wholly other. Of the "it" one must say what Wallace Stevens says of the "primitive like an orb," "at the center on the horizon": "It is and it/Is not and, therefore, is." If "it" is wholly other it is wholly other, and nothing more can be said of it except by signs that confess in their preferring to their inadequacy. Each veil lifts to reveal another veil behind.

The structure of *Heart of Darkness* is the structure of the endlessly deferred promise, the implicit promise that Marlow makes at the beginning of his tale

when he says that though his meeting with Kurtz, "the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience," was "not very clear," nevertheless "it seemed to throw a kind of light" (7). Marlow promises to pass this light or illumination on to his hearers. The primary narrator passes it on to us, the readers. The fulfillment of this promise to reveal, however, remains always future, something yet to come, eschatological or messianic rather than teleological. It is an end that can never come within the conditions of the series of episodes that reaches out towards it as life reaches towards death, or as *Revelations* promises an imminent messianic coming that always remains future, to come, but only beyond the last in the series, across the threshold into another realm and another regime. It is in the name of this unrevealed and unrevealable secret, out of obligation to it, in response to the demand it makes, while still remaining secret and inaccessible, that all *Heart of Darkness* is written. The presence within the novel of this inaccessible secret, a secret that nevertheless incites to narration, is what makes it appropriate to speak of *Heart of Darkness* as literature.

The place where this ultimate failure of revelation is made most explicit is Marlow's comment on the difference between Kurtz, who summed up at the moment of his death, giving words to "the appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (72), and his own illness that took him to the brink of death and then back into life again, therefore not quite far enough to see what Kurtz saw:

"And it is not my own extremity I remember best--a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things--even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seemed to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; 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. Perhaps!"  
(72)

How would one know without crossing that bourne from which no traveler ever returns? If you know you are, necessarily, no longer around to tell the tale. Even knowing this remains, necessarily, a matter of "perhaps." It is, however, in the name of this non-revelation, this indirect glimpse, as the moon spectrally illuminates a ring of mist, that Marlow's judgment of imperialism is made. The "it" is the black back-cloth before which all the serio-comic antics of those

carrying on the merry dance of death and trade, including their racism and sexism, are ironically suspended, made to appear both horrible and futile at once. The ubiquity of the "it" allows Marlow to imply the identity between Kurtz's African mistress and his Intended that is so crucial to the story, as well as to assert an all-important identity between the early Roman conquerors of Britain, present-day British commerce as represented by the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, and the Accountant, and the enterprise of imperialism in Africa. Of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, Marlow says, "To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (31). The same thing, however, is said about the Romans near the beginning of Marlow's narration in a way that gives it universal application: "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" (7). *Heart of Darkness* looks into it. It was seen by early readers as an unequivocal condemnation of Leopold II and of Belgian imperialism in the Congo. I note in passing that now (1998) that a new regime has taken over in the Congo, transnational companies are fighting for the rights to exploit mineral deposits there, for example copper. The new global economy is not all that different from the imperialism of Conrad's day. It is not surprising that the novel represents in Marlow Eurocentric views. It was written by a European. Nor is it surprising that it represents sexist views, however much those are to be deplored. It was written to dramatize the views of an imaginary protagonist, a white male of Conrad's class and time, just as Conrad's critics represent their times, races, sexes, and nations. I claim, however, that by being displaced into Marlow as narrator and by being measured against the "it" these views are radically criticized and shown as what they are, that is, as elements in a deadly and unjust ideology.

What of Kurtz, however? Is he not different from the other agents of imperialism, who are possessed by "a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (17). They have no insight into the way they are victims of the imperialist ideology as well as victimizers of those it exploits. Kurtz, however, "was a remarkable man," as Marlow himself repeatedly asserts, in a phrase he picks up from one of the agents.

On the one hand the story of Kurtz's degradation is the familiar narrative cliché of the European who "goes native." Kurtz, like Lingard, Lord Jim, and even Charles Gould, in other novels by Conrad, crosses over a border, ceases to be European, sets himself up as a sort of King in the alien land, thereby anticipating the destiny of most colonies to become ultimately independent

nations and thereby betray in one way or another ideals, the ethos, the laws and conventions, of the colonizing country. The United States did that in 1776. The somewhat ludicrous fear that this will happen, or that it will necessarily be a disaster if it does happen, has haunted the colonial enterprise from the beginning. On the other hand Kurtz never completely makes that break. After all, he allows Marlow to rescue him when he has crawled back ashore to join the Africans who have become his subjects. He dies oriented toward Europe and toward the hope that he will "have kings meet him at railway stations on his return from some ghastly nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things" (69).

The reader will perhaps have foreseen the conclusion toward which my evidence is drawing me. The complex contradictory structure of Kurtz's ideology of imperialism repeats exactly the complex ideology that sees a literary work as the apocalyptic promise of a never-quite-yet-occurring revelation. It would not be a promise if it were not possible that the promise might not be kept. The literary promise of an always postponed revelation is strikingly exemplified not only by Marlow's narration but also by *Heart of Darkness* as a whole. Conrad's work, not just Marlow's fictive work, fits this paradigm. This makes a chain of spectral duplications that is already prepared by the formal and figural features I have described. But just how does Kurtz's ideology repeat that of Marlow and of Conrad? The literary work, for example *Heart of Darkness* or Marlow's narration within it, is governed by what Derrida calls "the exemplary secret of literature,"<sup>6</sup> that is the endlessly deferred promise of a definitive revelation that never occurs. This structure is not only literary but also linguistic. It depends, I mean, on the fact that a work of literature is made of language and not of any other material or substance. Marlow stresses over and over that though Kurtz was a universal genius, an artist, musician, journalist, politician, and so on, his chief characteristic was his gift of language: "A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper. . . . Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart" (61, 69). Kurtz, in short (a pun there on Kurtz's name, which means "short" in German; Marlow makes a similar joke), has a magnificent mastery of language that is similar to Marlow's own, or to Conrad's. "An appeal to me in this fiendish row--is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (37). What does Kurtz talk or write about? The reader is told of the lofty idealism of the pamphlet on the Suppression of Savage Customs. He has bewitched the particolored Russian, as Marlow ironically attests, by "splendid monologues on,

what was it? on love, justice, conduct of life--or what not" (59). Most of all, however, Kurtz's discourse is dominated by unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable promises made to the whole world on behalf of Eurocentric imperialist capitalism and in support of his role as its embodiment. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (50). Kurtz is like a John the Baptist announcing the new capitalist messiah, or perhaps himself that messiah. That Kurtz's betrothed is called "the Intended" is the emblem of this future-oriented, proleptic feature of Kurtz's eloquence. "I had immense plans," he "muttered," when Marlow is trying to persuade him come back the boat. "I was on the threshold of great things" (67). Later, as he lies dying on the ship that is taking him back toward Europe, his "discourse" is all future-oriented, all promises of great things to come: "The wastes of his weary brain were haunted by shadowy images now--images of wealth and fame revolving round his unextinguishable gift of noble and lofty expression. My Intended! my station, my career, my ideas--these were the subject for the occasional utterances of elevated sentiments" (69). The fulfillment of these promises is cut short by a death that seals a secret or "mystery" that Kurtz carries with him to the grave and that is the necessary accompaniment of his grandiose promises. In being inhabited by this mystery Kurtz is the embodiment not just of the ideology of European capitalist imperialism but of its dark shadow, a ghost that cannot be laid, the "it" that is the inescapable accompaniment of imperialism and that Marlow identifies, in figure, with both Kurtz and with the "wilderness" that has invaded his soul. Since Kurtz embodies the darkness it is logical or inevitable that he himself should become the "god" that the Africans worship and crawl before, in striking anticipation of the fascist or violent authoritarian possibilities within capitalist imperialism. Kurtz's soul, like the "it," was "an inconceivable mystery" (68). He has "a smile of indefinable meaning" (68). "His was an impenetrable darkness" (70). Marlow's allegiance to Kurtz buries him "in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets" (63), just as Kurtz's African mistress matches the wilderness in having "an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (62), an "air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence" (57). It was "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (34). Kurtz's is no more able to remove the last veil in an ultimate revelation than Marlow or Conrad can in their narrations. In all three cases a promise is made whose fulfillment or definitive non-fulfillment always remains yet to come.

What can one say to explain this contradiction, that Kurtz's magnificent idealistic eloquence is at the same time inhabited by an impenetrable darkness? Both Marlow's narration and Kurtz's eloquence, since both are based on that

special speech act called a promise, are subject to two ineluctable features of any promise: 1) A promise would not be a promise but rather a constative foreknowledge if it were not possible that it will not be kept. A possible non-fulfillment is an inalienable structural feature of any promise, whether that promise is made in literature or in politics. 2) Any promise is an invocation of an unknown and unknowable future, of a secret other that remains secret and is invited to come into that hollow uncertainty of the promise. In the case of Marlow's narration, which I am taking as an exemplary literary work, what enters the narration is all that talk of the inscrutable, the impenetrable mystery, the unspeakable secret, and so on that has so offended some of Conrad's readers. In Kurtz's case the millennial promise made by imperialist capitalism, since it is hollow at the core, cannot be separated from the possibility or perhaps even the necessity of invasion by the "it," what Conrad calls the "heart of darkness." Kurtz's case is exemplary of that, a parable or allegory of that necessity. No imperialist capitalism without the darkness. They go together. Nor has that spectral accompaniment of capitalism's millennial promise of world-wide peace, prosperity, and universal democracy by any means disappeared today, when the imperialist exploitation of Conrad's day and its accompanying philanthropic idealism has been replaced by the utopian promises made for the new global economy and the new regime of scientifico-bio-medico-techno-mediatic-telecommunications. As Jacques Derrida and Werner Hamacher have recognized,<sup>7</sup> the political left and the political right are consonant in the promises they make. The promise of universal prosperity made for the new scientific economy dominated by technology and transformative communications techniques echoes the messianic promise, a messianism without messiah, of classical Marxism. It also echoes the promise made by rightwing ideologies, even the most unspeakably brutal, for example the Nazi promise of a thousand year Reich. We are inundated, swamped, engulfed every day by the present form of those promises, in all the media, in newspapers and magazines, on television, in advertising, on the Internet, in political and policy pronouncements--all guaranteeing that everything will get bigger, faster, better, more "user-friendly," and lead to worldwide millennial prosperity. These promises are all made by language or other signs, "the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (48).

I return to my beginning. Should we, ought we, to read *Heart of Darkness*? Each reader must decide that for himself or herself. There are certainly ways to read *Heart of Darkness* that might do harm, for example if it is read as

straightforwardly endorsing Eurocentric racist and sexist ideologies. If it is read, however, as I believe it should be read, as a powerful exemplary revelation of the ideology of capitalist imperialism, including its racism and sexism, as that ideology is consonant with a certain definition of literature that is its concomitant, including a non-revelatory revelation or invocation in both of an "exemplary" non-revealable secret, then, I declare, *Heart of Darkness* should be read, ought to be read. There is an obligation to do so.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup>This essay was originally given at a conference on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* held at the University of Potchefstroom in South Africa in March, 1998. It is reprinted here by permission.

<sup>2</sup>The "original" (but what is more problematic than this concept of an original base for a fictional work?) of the framing scene was, if Ford Madox Ford is to be believed, Conrad's residence in Stamford-le-Hope in Essex from September 1896 to September 1898. There he knew various businessmen who did indeed take weekend cruises on a yawl. "[H]e was still quivering," says Ford, "with his attempt, with the aid of the Director, the Lawyer, and the Accountant, to float a diamond mine in South Africa. For Conrad had his adventures of that sort, too-adventures ending naturally in frustration....while waiting for that financial flotation to mature, he floated physically during week-ends in the company of those financiers on the bosom of that tranquil waterway [the Thames]" (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text; Backgrounds and Sources; Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition [New York: Norton, 1963], 127). "To float a diamond mine in South Africa"! Nothing is said about this in the story itself, and Marlow, the reader must always remember, must be kept strictly separate from Conrad himself, as separate as the narrator of "The Secret Sharer" must be kept from his ghostly double. Ford's testimony, however, shows that Conrad himself was complicit, or wanted to be complicit, if he could have raised the money for it, in an exploitative imperialist enterprise that is not so different from Leopold II's merciless and murderous exploitation of the Congo or from Kurtz's raiding the country for ivory. Conrad appears momentarily to have fancied himself a miniature Cecil Rhodes.

<sup>3</sup>All citations from *Heart of Darkness* are from the first Norton Critical Edition, identified in the first footnote above. Numbers in parentheses after quotations refer to page numbers in this edition.

<sup>4</sup>These citations are from the valuable "Critical History" in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Ross C. Murfin, Bedford Case Studies, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston; New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1966), 107, 109.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Derrida, "Passions," trans. David Wood, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>7</sup>See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge), and Werner Hamacher, "Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*," forthcoming from Verso in a volume of essays about Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.