

“Unspeakable Secrets”: The Ideology of Landscape in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

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How then, asked the stone, can the hammer-wielder who seeks to penetrate the heart of the universe be sure that there exist any interiors? Are they not perhaps fictions, these lures of interiors for rape which the universe uses to draw out its explorers?

John Coetzee, *Dusklands*

Over the years, a number of heroic efforts have been made to restore Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to its historical moment.¹ A meticulous unearthing of sources has occupied a good deal of the energy of Conrad scholarship. Much has been made, for example, of Conrad’s claim that “*Heart of Darkness* is . . . experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.”² Yet, there is equally a highly important sense in which the Congo of *Heart of Darkness* is not the Congo of any history book. That is to say, the apparently innocent activity of source-hunting masks a number of serious methodological problems. Perhaps the most important of these can be broached by invoking Conrad’s contemporary, Nietzsche, for whom “there is no set of maxims more important for the historian than this: that the actual causes of a thing’s origins and its eventual uses are worlds apart.”³ Put in another way, between the text and its historical origins, between *Heart of Darkness* and the events in the Congo, there lies an area of ideological shadow. So as to confront this shadow, I will explore Conrad’s troubled representation of landscape as one aspect of the ideological terrain of *Heart of Darkness*. If, as Octavio Paz would have it, “a landscape is not the more or less accurate description of what our eyes see . . . [but] always points to something else, to something beyond itself . . . [as] . . . a metaphysic, a religion, an idea of man and the cosmos,” then, at the simplest level, I will be exploring what idea of the cosmos Conrad’s landscape secretly figures.⁴ More specifically, I will argue that Conrad draws on a number of different representations to image the Congo and that these appear, on scrutiny, to be curiously contradictory. They alternately figure the universe as penetrable, as impenetrable, as absurd, as anthropomorphic, as malign, and as primitive. A historical account of the ideological contradictions that these representations betray may restore the book more productively to its historical moment.

Near the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, when Marlowe voices his uneasy suspicion that he is about to set off for “the centre of the earth,” he is invoking

one of the most cherished and enduring notions of western thought: that of the cosmos as interiority.⁵ There is an ancient tradition of mysticism behind this notion, whereby the soul finds redemption in its approach to a sacred center. Plotinus was the first to capture the mystical emblem of the circle in his notion of “epistrophe,” the return to the creative source. Purely by virtue of its distance from the center, matter contains the possibility of evil. Redemption enacts the reverse: flowing back to the center, the soul approaches absolute unity in the One. This idea of salvation as a return to the center was to hold the fascinated imagination of following thinkers for centuries.⁶ Yet, if the image of the circle could figure—with the greatest elegance and power—some of the fundamental relations between soul and cosmos, the nature of its metaphysics suffered continual and subtle shifts as centuries of thinkers drew it into their cosmologies.⁷ Thus, for example, God assured Dante: “I am the center of the circle to which all points of the circumference are equidistant; you are not.”⁸ When he spoke again three centuries later to Pic de la Mirandole, it was, however, to say, “I have placed thee at the center of the world so that thou shalt more conveniently consider everything that is in the world.”⁹ In this way, with the Renaissance a significant transformation had taken place in the image of the circle, whereby the center was no longer the emblem of God as a separate and external point, but rather, coincided now with the soul itself. Now: “The whole universe surrounds man as the circle surrounds the point.”¹⁰ From here on, the journey would be not only a quest for the redeeming center but also a penetration into the innermost secrets of the human soul.¹¹

Unchanged throughout, however, remains the privileged and all-powerful implication of the idea of the universe as interiority. According to this belief, the universe encloses a secret center, the penetration of which yields a new order of knowledge (which in fact was there all along, timeless and absolute). The circle contains in its circumference the attributes of immeasurable time and space, and, at its center, the fixed point, the arrested moment. Geometrically, then, it implies the redemption of all contradiction. It is the place where ambiguities are resolved; it implies a unity. The journey into the interior, by rehearsing perpetually the hope of reaching the center, thus rehearses the hope of unity, the recovery of a single, transcendent meaning by which all may be reconciled. In *Heart of Darkness*, one finds Conrad deeply troubled in his efforts to wrest a sign and message for his time from this idea of the cosmos as interiority. Yet, at the same time, there is another level at which the narrative itself resists this effort. If the narrative contains traces of a deep nostalgia for the center, it is arguable that the trauma which the book suffers in its efforts to retain interiority may be seen to prefigure the imminent collapse of the idea in western thought.¹²

On the third page of *Heart of Darkness*, the journey to the center is invoked only to be at once transvalued. The dark interlopers of colonial trade go out

“into the mystery of an unknown earth” (p. 7), not in quest for spiritual truths, but as “hunters for gold or pursuers of fame” (p. 7). From the outset, the organic movement of penetration and return is bound to the rhythm of trade: “a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass-wire sent into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory” (p. 26). The spark from the sacred fire borne out by the knights of trade returns as a trickle of white bones, the light of redemption as a reified token of economic exchange. The mystical journey is figured in this way as darkly infused by colonial trade, as corrupted, and thereby secularized. At the same time Marlowe offers the first hint that, if the labyrinth of nature encloses a secret heart, the penetration of which has always promised a single, transcendent meaning, then it may now harbor in its depths nothing but danger and ambiguity. More than this, it may be dead, or, at the very least, deadly: “I was going into the yellow. Dead in the center. And the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake” (p. 15).

This darkening of the center represents in part the moment of a betrayal. In *Last Essays*, Conrad writes that, in the idealism of childhood, he had once put “his finger on a spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa” and “declared that some day I would go there.”¹³ When he did, it was to discover himself as the victim of an enormous betrayal. The Congo had been stained by “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (*LE*, p. 17). Marlowe talks equally of a childhood passion for maps, in particular for the blank spaces of “delightful mystery” (p. 12), which were the remaining areas of uncolonized Africa. The blank space on a colonial map represents nothing other than a lure for penetration and, with it, the promise that such penetration would yield the glories of exploration. The blank space is the purest representation of interiority, the center par excellence. With the discovery that this representation is a fiction, nothing other than the invitation for rape which imperialism uses to draw out its explorers, the heart which was once “big and white” (*LE*, p. 14) becomes a “place of darkness” (p. 12). In other words, the failure of the myth of the redemptive center is closely associated with the corruption of an ideal, the failure of empire to sustain its promise.

At the outset at least, associating the dark metamorphosis of the sacred quest with colonial penetration by trade appears to initiate a critique of imperialism: an exposure of the powerful European sentiment, current at the time, that colonizers were the harbingers of light. Leopold II of Belgium had invoked it in 1876, as well as the idea of interiority, in order to encourage the final penetration of Central Africa: “To open to civilization the only area of our globe to which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the gloom which hangs over entire races, constitutes, if I may dare to put it this way, a crusade worthy of this century of progress.”¹⁴ As Marlowe himself says, “there had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time . . .” (p. 18). Nevertheless, if

Conrad refuses the sacred center in this way, he does so only by transvaluing its terms. The center is still there, only ever more darkly ambiguous. Again and again throughout the narrative, not to mention in the title itself, interiority is invoked: "The wilderness without a sound took him into its bosom again" (p. 34); "What was in there?" (p. 38); "the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart" (p. 47). A few examples suffice. Nevertheless, if the narrative presents a deeper and deeper journey into an interior, there are certain decisive moments when the very representation of interiority is itself radically threatened. Indeed, such a moment occurs on the first occasion that Marlowe attempts to represent the coast of Africa.

The first sighting of the African coast is foreshadowed by Marlowe's suggestion that his will be a venture not only to the center of a continent but also to the "center of the earth" (p. 18). Yet, at the very edge of the unknown world, at the moment of penetration, Marlowe discovers that the limits of the familiar landscape are likewise the limits of language and privileged perception. More than anything else, Africa presents itself from the outset as an epistemological problem. Marlowe's relation to the landscape is reduced to that of a spectator to the remote spectacle: "I watched the coast" (p. 19). As he gazes, however, the coast resists his questing eye as an enigma resists knowledge. Penetration by the eye is defeated by the strangeness and density of the landscape. The coast is evoked, not as a tangible, real world, with booming surf and a full array of colors and impressions, but rather, as a world of extreme deprivation and unreality. In the descriptions that follow, there is a struggle that goes beyond the question of perception and involves the very stuff of language itself. If Marlowe's gaze is impoverished and deprived, the failure of perception, and, simultaneously, of penetration, is revealed to be the triumph of the inexpressible. Africa is both protean and "featureless" (p. 19) because it has withdrawn beyond the horizon of known language.

If the coastline conjures up a string of epithets ("smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, inspired, savage" [p. 19]), they are merely opposites, canceling each other as they arise, and so leaving the landscape as enigmatic and monotonous as before. It is a coast without qualities: "featureless," "formless," "uniform," "monotonous" (p. 19). If the jungle can be said to have color, it is "so dark green as to be almost black" (p. 19), that is, almost voided of color. The white surf is merely its irreducible opposite. If the sea is blue, its glitter (always a sinister word for Conrad) is threatened with imminent dissolution in a "creeping mist" (p. 19). No boundary within which the land can be contained and domesticated is allowed to be final. There is an utter failure to obtain "a particularized impression" (p. 21).

The larger narrative events are equally hedged about by qualifications and modals: "perhaps," "presumably," "almost," "as though," "seemed" (p. 19). The use of "seemed" three times in the paragraph insists that what judgments

there are in fact remain tenuous and provisional and implies in turn that the qualities and events described originate in subjective perception, and thus that they cannot claim status as objective features of the external world. Marlowe's comment that, "Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved" (p. 19), conjures the dreadful possibility implicit in the entire description: that appearances radically may belie the true state of affairs and that an unbridgeable gap exists between the perception of a thing and its innermost essence.

In this way, the coast offers the first intimation of that "density" of the world which Camus describes as the climate of the absurd.¹⁵ If the landscape is impermeable both to language and to understanding, this very impenetrability strikes at the heart of the mythology of interiority. The subject is condemned to a sense of the resistance of the world and of the utter deprivation of truth. As Marlowe despairingly notes, "the malign somberness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things" (p. 19). Nevertheless, the sequence ends, and Marlowe enters Africa proper with a return to interiority: "At last we opened up a reach" (p. 20). One has here the beginnings of a contradiction which is to become more intractable as the narrative progresses. Almost as if the threat of impenetrability that the landscape poses to Marlowe is too great, he transfers it back to the landscape itself. By a subtle defensive measure, moreover, he interprets it as the inherent hostility of the wilderness itself: "all along the formless coast was bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders" (p. 20). In other words, the failure to describe is projected as a quality in nature itself, while, in the meantime, nature has become anthropomorphized and invested with malign intention, a calculated hostility. The banks themselves become imbued with Marlowe's transferred impotence, writhing "in the extremity of an impotent despair" (p. 21). This will be revealed later as one of Marlowe's most frequent strategies in his fraught confrontation with the landscape. At the same time, it marks the crossing over from one representation of landscape as featureless, indifferent, and impenetrable, to another that contradicts it, where the landscape is anthropomorphized, animate, and harbors within the recesses of its being a hostile intention.

In this description of the African coast Marlowe is reenacting what has become a recurrent, almost ritualistic, moment in the colonial narrative: the moment of verbal and visual crisis as the colonial intruder stands dumb-founded before an inexpressible landscape. This moment initiates what Wayne Franklin has called "the discovered plot of colonial life." This is "not the grand plot of idealized experience, the easy passage through a strange place, but rather the steady attrition of all such formulas, the slow accumulation of a knowledge won at great expense."¹⁶ The effort to give voice to a landscape that is unspeakable because it inhabits a different history creates a deep confusion, a kind of panic which can be warded off only by adopting the most extreme of defensive measures.

It is in this sense, and at such moments, that the colonial writer can be called a true precursor of the modern. What one witnesses in Marlowe's fraught description of the African coastline is what Barthes has called "the tragic element" in modern writing. That is to say, "history puts into [the modern writer's hands] a decorative and compromising instrument, a writing inherited from a previous and different history, for which he is not responsible and yet which is the only one he can use."¹⁷ Having traveled too far and too suddenly beyond the limits of tradition, the colonial writer discovers a landscape that is still unbaptized. It is drained of meaning because there is no inherited language which can rightfully give it tongue. It withdraws to a distance. It does not conjure from within the writer any familiar allusions, topoi, or habits of speaking, because its history is incommensurate with the colonial's history. Henceforth, the colonial "has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable" (p. 9). Every attempt to describe the landscape, to draw it near, reveals only the failure of language to find out its essence, to penetrate its innermost heart. The writer thus discovers that the inherited language is attended by "ancestral and all-powerful signs which, from the depths of a past foreign to him, impose Literature on him like a ritual, not like a reconciliation" (Barthes, p. 86). Having made this discovery, the writer can never tackle a landscape without at certain moments being "referred back, by a sort of tragic reversal, to the sources, that is to say, the instruments of creation" (Barthes, p. xvi). This moment may be repressed, but the mark of repression will be conspicuous.

This intimate relation between the encounter with a strange continent and the tragic reversal to the sources of creation is illustrated very early in *Heart of Darkness*. The anonymous narrator suggests that Marlowe's difference from the ordinary seamen lies in the fact that he "did not represent his class" (p. 8). Marlowe himself cautions the Company doctor from too confidently taking his measure, by warning him that he "was not in the least typical" (p. 17). He thereby identifies himself as one of those exiles and emigrés whose liminal position in society throws up more starkly the verbal consequences of historical dislocation. The narrator describes Marlowe as refusing the center as a metaphor both for the penetration of a tale and for that of a continent, which the ordinary seamen are said to endorse. To Marlowe, the meaning of an episode does not lie within the tale like a kernel "within the shell of a cracked nut" (p. 8). Rather, it "envelops 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 moonlight" (p. 8). Yet it is telling here that the center has not been resisted fully; it merely has been inverted and obscured.

The tragic referral to the problem of language afflicts Marlowe at a number of critical moments in his telling. At these moments, a turbulence occurs in the narrative as his distraught voices surface to confess his literal loss for words, "How shall I define it?" (p. 92); or the impossibility that his words can cover

the distance in experience which separates him from his listeners, "No use telling you much about that" (p. 28); or, quite simply, to convey the intractable difficulty of what he knows, "it was impossible to tell" (p. 31). This last quotation, "it was impossible to tell," itself carries a burden of ambiguity which implies both a failure of understanding and a failure of language. A double failure of this kind, of both comprehension and words, occasions what comes to be the most severe rupture in the narrative. Finding himself incapable, at one and the same time, of interpreting the mute face of the jungle and of conveying the reality behind Kurtz's name, Marlowe glimpses beyond this a separation of thing and name, a hiatus between word and world: "I do not see the man in the name any more than you do" (p. 39). Such separation radically threatens to undermine the very foundations of human solidarity:

Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me that I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone. . . . (p. 39)

Almost as if the unease inspired by this outburst were too insurgent, its truth too calamitous, the anonymous narrator intervenes at this point to relieve Marlowe of the burden of speaking.

Marlowe's verbal crisis has its origins in his incomprehension before the jungle. Stricken by his inability to tell whether "the stillness on the face of the immensity looking at us were meant as an appeal or as a menace" (p. 38), he finds himself standing in a world of utter strangeness, closely akin to what Camus called "that ravaged world in which the impossibility of knowledge is established" (Camus, p. 29). For Camus, we can live with the gap between what we know and what we imagine that we know "so long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes . . ." (Camus, p. 24). But the moment it speaks, the moment it attempts to capture its condition in words, "this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments" (Camus, p. 24). In other words, the absurd begins at that moment when the rational word attempts to grasp and to contain a world which is suddenly discovered to be but a "vast irrational" (Camus, p. 31). More severely, if before "thought had discovered in the shining mirrors of phenomena eternal relations capable of summing them up and summing themselves up in a single principle" (Camus, p. 23), the vanishing of these mirrors, the collapse of mimesis, provokes a crisis which goes beyond the problem of expressibility and threatens the essential

identity of the subject itself. It becomes possible to contemplate the fact that another being may remain forever unknown, and that there is "in him something irreducible that escapes us" (Camus, p. 17). More than this, one becomes a stranger to oneself.

Similarly, if Marlowe is stricken by his inability to interpret the landscape, this failure occasions the infinitely more severe crisis of not knowing who he and his companions were themselves: "What were we who had strayed in here?" (p. 39). For Camus this tumble before the absurd may be postponed by the illusion that one may know other people through their work, their behavior, by the totality of their deeds, that is, practically: "I can define them practically, appreciate them practically . . ." (Camus, p. 18). Equally, if Marlowe has no natural inclination for work, what he does like is "what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know" (p. 41). Work can temporarily rivet the gap between appearance and knowledge, can "stop the hole" (p. 40). Nevertheless, he surrenders to the admission that others can only see the "dumb show, and never tell what it really means" (p. 41). For as Camus, in turn, puts it: "all true knowledge is impossible. Solely appearances can be enumerated" (Camus, p. 18).

Again one can return at this point to Franklin's "discovered plot" of colonial life. What is inexpressible for Marlowe is now not only the physical surface of the Congo, but, increasingly from this point, the depths of his own being. As Franklin observes: "The question no longer concerns what the new lands are, it centers instead on who the voyager is, on how his experience has altered his essential nature. His location thus matters only as a sign of his identity. And his language, difficult and even eccentric, mirrors the extremity of his actual fate" (Franklin, p. 6). Here one discovers the subtle relation between the colonial predicament and that of the absurd.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus gives eloquent expression to a travail in the modern mind quite similar in its essentials to this crisis in the colonial narrative. If, as Jonathan Crewe has suggested, in this way "the colonial writer is merely a special case of the European writer, and his predicament in the modern age is in some ways only an exaggeration and a portent of the European writer's predicament," then an inquiry into this shared predicament may perhaps most profitably begin by placing Conrad more explicitly alongside Camus, whom he anticipated by forty years.¹⁸

The absurd begins for Camus when the world evades for a moment the attempt to reduce it to the human. All thought is inherently anthropomorphic. Understanding the world is nothing other than "reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal" (Camus, p. 20). When for a moment the world escapes the illusory meaning with which it has been clothed, it becomes itself again, primitive and utterly strange. This is the intellectual malady called the absurd, when something inhuman is discovered to lie at the heart of all reality. At such a

moment, "the primitive hostility of the world rises up to face us across millennia. For a second we cease to understand it, because for centuries we have understood in it solely the images and designs that we had attributed to it beforehand" (Camus, p. 20). Camus would have it that such moments "run through all literature and all philosophies" (Camus, p. 22). If this is so, and it is arguable, it almost certainly would seem that one has here not so much a psychological universal as a recurrent ideological trauma, historically occasioned, when a particular tradition of thought is brought face to face with conditions now discovered by historical change to be utterly unaccountable. In this regard, it is not surprising that the colonial landscape, facing the historical interloper in all its strangeness and inexpressibility, comes at certain moments to reveal, in flashes and intimations, that primitive hostility which is the preliminary to the absurd.

Marlowe's dream-like penetration of the Congo is presented as a regression to the beginning of time, to a time beyond the recall of memory. If the narrative begins with the "august light of abiding memories" (p. 6) lying upon the venerable Thames "crowded with memories of men and ships" (p. 7), then the journey into the interior is a discovery in part of the darkness of cultural amnesia, the exploration of a profound cultural loss: "We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign and no memories" (p. 51). As Dan Jacobson has written, "a colonial culture is one which has no memory."¹⁹ This collapse of memory, however, is, more properly speaking, a collapse of mimesis. Cut off from everything he had once known, Marlowe can find no consoling image in the aspect of the landscape. It becomes a landscape without signs. Yet, in describing the landscape as "pre-historic" (p. 51), as "primeval" (p. 49), as "the night of first ages" (p. 51), Marlowe consequently has effected a curious displacement that projects his own cultural loss outwards on to the landscape as an attribute of Africa itself: primitive, infantile, and incomplete.

This is Marlowe's plight, the impossibility of representing a landscape which has completely escaped all known ways of representing it. The degree to which it becomes "impossible to tell" now encompasses everything before him: "The earth seemed unearthly" (p. 51). This is much less a description of an attribute of the landscape than it is the expression of a failure to describe, of an acute verbal impasse, coupled as it is with Marlowe's recognition that he must speak, whatever the cost. In "unearthly," as elsewhere in Conrad, the negative affix itself comes to carry a thematic value of its own, signaling that the world can be known and described only in terms of what it is not. The negative affix is a grammatical sign of the inscrutability of the universe and of a consequent failure of mimesis. The attribute "unearthly" is nothing more than a dialectical negation of its object "earth," and both are held together uneasily by the suggestion that even this may be mere appearance: "seemed." More suggestively,

because the world has escaped language, it takes on an inimical and hostile appearance: "there you look at a thing monstrous and free" (p. 51). This is the discovery of the absurd, the discovery of to what degree the world is "so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless to human weakness" (p. 79). Yet at this point, I suggest, one finds in Marlowe a resistance to the full implications of the absurd, one which initiates an alternative representation of the landscape and an attempt to return once more to interiority.

At the moment of the absurd, "strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is 'dense,' sensing to what degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us" (Camus, p. 20). There are two notions implicit in this statement. At such a moment, the fiction of interiority collapses. The world no longer encloses a secret meaning, but becomes impenetrable to human thought and, therefore, meaningless. More than this, the trauma provoked by this collapse of the ancient center is projected back onto the landscape itself, becoming invested in it as a "primitive hostility," a malignity capable of negating the human who faces it. Here one has the return to anthropomorphism. Such a moment was prefigured in Marlowe's first confrontation with the African coast. A considerably more severe collision with the "density" of the world is enacted when Marlowe is barely eight miles from Kurtz, paradoxically, that is, at the very moment of penetrating the Inner Station. Dusk falls, preventing further passage, and Marlowe pulls into the center of the stream. What follows is so striking that it may be quoted in full:

The reach was narrow, straight, with high sides like a railway cutting. The dusk came gliding into it long before the sun had set. The current ran smooth and swift, but a dark immobility sat upon the banks. The living trees, lashed together by the creepers and every living bush of the undergrowth, might have been changed into stone, even to the slenderest twig, to the lightest leaf. It was not sleep—it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. About three in the morning some large fish leapt, and the loud splash made me jump as though a gun had been fired. When the sun rose, there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid. At eight or nine perhaps, it lifted as a shutter lifts. We had a glimpse of a towering multitude of trees, of the immense matted jungle, with the blazing little ball of the sun hanging over it—all perfectly still—and then the white shutter came down again, smoothly, as if sliding in greased grooves. . . . (p. 56)

Dark, silent, and unnaturally still, the very magnitude and profusion of the forest becomes an emblem of the limits of understanding. The reach, set so closely with trees, is the physical equivalent of Camus's "absurd walls," denying the assaults of reason and the appetite for conquest" (Camus, p. 25). The

landscape has become utterly dense, changed to stone; the white fog is itself "like something solid." The landscape becomes in this way the tangible expression of the resistance that the world throws up before its invasion by reason. Marlowe characteristically figures the dread this inspires in him in terms of stasis and silence and, once again, with qualifications: "might have," "as if," "seemed," mirror a perceptual indecisiveness, an inability to pass clear judgment on the world. As is often the case in Conrad, impenetrability is closely associated with darkness, with the absence of vision in both its senses. At once Camus's "strangeness" creeps in: "You look on amazed," and the psychic toll that this rite of passage into an irrational world exacts is again projected onto the landscape as an active power to negate the human; it literally strikes Marlowe deaf and blind.

As is the case in almost all of the extended, and in many of the brief, descriptions of the landscape in *Heart of Darkness*, what appalls Marlowe most of all is the refusal of the landscape to speak. With ritualistic insistence, Conrad describes the landscape for most of the book as silent, refusing to yield up its "unspeakable secrets" (p. 89). This is repeated with such frequency that silence gradually becomes the definitive attribute of the landscape. Why should the landscape be figured in this way, by an attribute which is the sign of an absence? In the following passage the jungle is represented almost exclusively by negative attributes, by silence and its associate, immobility:

The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the *high stillness* of primeval forest was before my eyes . . . over the great river I could see through a sombre gap, glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by *without a murmur*. All this was great, expectant, *mute*, while the man jabbered about himself. I wondered whether the *stillness on the face* of this immensity looking at us two were meant as an appeal or as a menace. What were we who had strayed in here? 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. What was in there? (p. 38, my emphases)

What one finds in Marlowe's representation of the landscape as mute is, I suspect, both the imminent recognition of an absurd world and a traumatic resistance to such a recognition. It reflects an unwillingness to surrender interiority ("What was in there?"), which takes the form of accounting for the absence of meaning as a calculated withholding of meaning by a malign but living presence: "The woods . . . looked with the air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence" (p. 81). There are frequent examples of this, but the most revealing occurs as the steamboat penetrates deeper and deeper up-river on its approach to the Inner Station. Despite its deceptive profusion, the jungle is portrayed as a place of extreme deprivation, described again by what it lacks: "An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest" (p. 48). "There was no joy" in the sunshine, only a sense of great loss, a loss of memories, bear-

ings, and senses. This is to say that the plenitude of jungle life only conceals a formlessness deeply hazardous to the explorers. And overshadowing it all is the silence and the realization that this silence “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. . . . The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt its mysterious stillness watching me . . .” (p. 49).

The colonial intruder who cannot find words to fit the landscape stands in a world gone suddenly quiet. The silence of the Congo jungle embodies in this way both Marlowe’s own sense of the inexpressible and his resulting panic at having been deprived of truth and meaning. As Camus expresses it, the absurd is born in this confrontation between the human urge toward unity and reason and “the unreasonable silence of the world” (p. 32). The absence that silence signifies is the absence of meaning, and the absence of meaning for Marlowe is so calamitous that it is seen at moments as capable of threatening the mind with extinction:

We stopped, and the silence driven away by the stopping of our feet flowed back again from the recesses of the land. The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not. (p. 43)

Again the superficial profusion of jungle forms conceals only an implosive chaos. Instead of being penetrable, the landscape reveals its power to invade and to engulf the mind; it embodies an annihilating potential which is arrested here, but barely. Unable to rest with the fact of an utterly meaningless world, Marlowe resists the implications of this confrontation, and, by a curious transformation, anthropomorphizes the landscape, whereupon it becomes a living presence. Meaning is thus upheld, though it may horrify.

If the silence reflects the fact that “the inner truth is hidden,” then it is revealing that, at the very moment in which Marlowe penetrates to the Inner Station, the landscape begins literally to howl: “A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. . . . It seemed as though the mist itself had screamed” (p. 57). Later, “the bush began to howl” (p. 65). If the landscape has at last begun to reveal its “unspeakable secrets,” these are most clearly embodied in the Africans themselves. In this last representation, the fraught and dangerous contradictions in the depiction of the landscape are fully embodied.

At the very moment that the Congo jungle verges on the absurd, its native inhabitants become fully visible for the first time. Yet this does not constitute a return to rationality, a reconciliation with the real world momentarily lost in the inexpressible wilderness. Rather, the Africans become a tangible expression of something intolerable that Marlowe has glimpsed beyond the absurd. In his

description of the Africans, there are no signs of orderly village life, no hints of routine, domestic communality. Marlowe presents us instead with a glimpse into a delirious chaos, a frenzied disorder, a "black and incomprehensible frenzy" (p. 51). The evocation is so powerful that one has to remind oneself how remote it is from what would have been the "actual facts of the case" in the Congo of the time, even if one takes into account the ravages of Belgian rule. Congo Africans were in no sense "Prehistoric man" (p. 51). They were not still belonging "to the beginnings of time," with "no inherited experience to teach them as it were" (p. 58), and were not "rudimentary souls" (p. 72). More properly, these attributes come to be seen as projections outward of Marlowe's own discovery of historical abandonment.

Marlowe's Africans are persistently dehumanized and derealized. They "howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces" (p. 51). There is no unified perspective; their bodies are virtually dismembered. One is offered glimpses of "a whirl of black limbs" (p. 51), stamping feet, clapping hands, a riot of indistinct forms which do not walk or run, but rather leap, glide, flit, and howl. In other words, they betray all the signs of an uninterrupted Dionysiac frenzy. The banks of the Congo present so fantastic a spectacle that Marlowe can only describe it as "an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse" (p. 51). At certain moments, the Africans literally merge with the landscape ("The bush began to howl" [p. 65]), taking on in the process attributes of primeval formlessness that previously have been ascribed to the jungle itself. More suggestively, they become the tangible embodiment of the mysterious presence Marlowe has felt watching him. If the jungle silence has signified a concealed truth, the Africans present the spectacle of this truth made visible: "Still, I had also judged the jungle of both banks quite impenetrable—yet eyes were in it, eyes that had seen us" (p. 61). It is as ritualistic a moment as when Schiller's youth lifted the veil at Sais, and the revelation is as catastrophic: ". . . as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour" (p. 64).

The merging of jungle and African is given fullest expression in the depiction of Kurtz's lover, as Marlowe repeats an almost incantatory formula by which they are equated. Earlier the wilderness was evoked as "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" (p. 48). Now, in almost identical terms, Kurtz's consort has an "air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose" (p. 87). In mating with her, Kurtz has literally mated with those "forgotten and brutal instincts" (p. 94) that Africa is now seen to embody. Africa is itself the purest expression of those "primitive emotions" (p. 98) that lie dormant within rational man as the psychic residue of a primitive past now dangerously awakened from its slumber. Again one witnesses a displacement. The recognition of remote kinship that the African frenzy inspires in Marlowe is projected back to the

landscape: “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” (p. 87). It is much more the case, however, that rational man is being fully challenged here to peer into his own “creepy thoughts” (p. 53).

What Marlowe presents us in this glimpse into psychic uproar is much less an attribute of any approximate African culture than a projection onto the African of a condition of extreme trauma that is, more properly speaking, a feature of the colonial mind. Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, the shape of the colonial experience seems to erupt from the jungle itself, and now much more catastrophically from the “not inhuman” (p. 51) Africans who embody its inner truth. Africa is revealed to be dangerous because the colonial is there delivered to a world where anything can happen. It is, as the manager says, “Anything—anything can be done in this country” (p. 46). At this point one profitably can recall Camus one final time. The absurd “all started out from that indescribable universe where contradiction, antinomy, anguish or impotence reigns” (Camus, p. 28). In other words, it begins with the collapse of mimesis, where the failure of representation delivers the mind to an unintelligible and limited universe. In this universe, “man’s fate henceforth assumes its meanings. A horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end” (Camus, p. 26). That is to say, the question of the absurd begins with the collapse of mimesis and ends with the full irruption of the irrational into the conscious mind.

The undoubtedly racist depiction of the Africans in *Heart of Darkness* as primitive, irrational, and historically abandoned can in this sense be seen to be the overdetermined representation of historical coincidence: that of the emergence of the idea of the irrational in Western thought and the crisis of representation made most acute by the colonial predicament. By escaping representation, Africa literally presents the colonial mind with “a horde of irrationals” with which it must contend; at the same time, it presents it with a fictional arena in which it can dramatize for itself a crisis which is specifically Western. To a large extent, therefore, when Marlowe struggles with the “unfathomable enigma” (p. 60) of why the “cannibal” boatmen do not throw themselves upon him (“Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger didn’t they go for us?” [p. 59]), he is not surrendering simply to a popular racist misconception, but, much more importantly, he is asking that “fateful question” Freud was to ask soon after:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. . . . Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man.²⁰

In other words, what inner restraint may prevent the Western mind from going ashore “for a howl and a dance” (p. 52)? It is in this sense that Marlowe finds the psychological “uproar” of Africa ugly: “Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough” (p. 51). It is the simultaneously fascinated and revulsed recognition with which his fictional contemporary, Dr. Jekyll, was to greet his image in the mirror: “When I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too was myself.”²¹ Both Marlowe and Jekyll represent that moment when, for a number of historical reasons, the irrational can no longer be held underground. As Dr. Jekyll sums it up: “. . . the lower side of me, so long indulged, so recently chained down, began to growl for licence” (Stevenson, p. 446).

In conclusion, I would argue that the darkly ambiguous landscape of *Heart of Darkness* bears the traces of a profound ideological dilemma. It would appear that Conrad denounces the atrocity inflicted on the Congo African as a specifically historical atrocity inflicted on a morally innocent people. In order to do so, he exposes the fiction of colonizers as the harbingers of light by inverting the sacred quest. In effecting this representation, however, he commits himself to an ideology of interiority which is itself attended by certain ideological consequences. These consequences are gradually revealed to be in fraught contradiction with the emergent landscape of the absurd thrown up both by the colonial experience and by the failure of mimesis. The full implications of the absurd are in turn resisted by a return to interiority and the projection of the irrational onto the Africans. In the process, as Francis B. Singh has noted, “the darkness first associated with the west gets reassociated with Africa.”²² This appears to be in part an inescapable consequence of ideological conflict between the idea of interiority and the absurd, a fraught defensive measure against an intractable impasse. Indeed, as Conrad was himself to admit, “It will be a long time before we have learned that in the great darkness before us, there is nothing that we need fear.”²³ It is in this sense, then, that the Congo of *Heart of Darkness* is a country of the mind, a dream-world colonized for western literature where the late nineteenth-century, waking from its dream of the Crystal Palace, could begin to contend with the horde of irrationals springing up around it. Finally, then, if one is to restore *Heart of Darkness* to its historical moment, less attention should be paid to the “reflection” of certain local historical and biographical facts in the book than to the necessarily much more difficult task of accounting historically for the ideological trauma that scars *Heart of Darkness*.

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Notes

1. The most notable of recent times is Hunt Hawkins, “Conrad’s Critique of Imperialism in *Heart of Darkness*,” *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 286–99.

2. Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note" to *Youth* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1959), p. 29.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1956), p. 209.
4. Octavio Paz, *Alternating Current* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p. 15.
5. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 18. All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.
6. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 146-50.
7. See Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1966).
8. Dante, *Vita Nova*, XII, quoted in Poulet, xii.
9. Pic de la Mirandole, *De Hominis Dignitate, Opera* (Bâle, 1601), I, p. 208, quoted in Poulet, xxvi.
10. Paracelsus, *Explicatio Totius Astronomiae, Opera* (Genève, 1658), II, p. 649, quoted in Poulet, xxvi.
11. This generalization, while valid, obscures many of the subtleties of the process. Again I would refer to Poulet for a detailed analysis.
12. This collapse provoked a deep intellectual panic still reverberating. One witness is the current critical obsession with the "gap." This notion of a de-centered universe requires itself to be historically situated.
13. Joseph Conrad, *Last Essays* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1926), p. 16.
14. Neal Ascherson, *The King Incorporated: Leopold II in the Age of Trusts* (London, 1963), p. 94.
15. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 18. All further references to this text will be cited parenthetically.
16. Wayne Franklin, *Discoverers, Explorers, Settlers* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 6.
17. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1961), p. 86.
18. Jonathan Crewe, in *A Collection of Critical Articles on South African Literature*, eds. D. MacLennan and S. Christie (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1975), p. 64.
19. Dan Jacobson, "Olive Schreiner: A South African Writer," in MacLennan and Christie, p. 117.
20. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1961), p. 92.
21. R. L. Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p. 434.
22. Francis B. Singh, "The Colonialist Bias of *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana* X, I (1978), pp. 42-53.
23. Joseph Conrad, *Notes On Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1921), p. 145.