Connotations
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The Sepulchral City Revisited
Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*

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I

Places are meaningful, and second visits are particularly interesting because they invite comparison. Revisiting a place, we may experience a sense of either *déjà vu* or change. Or perhaps we find that *we* have changed so much that the place has a completely different feel. The latter happens to Marlow, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. When Marlow first goes to a certain European capital—which can but need not be identified as Brussels—in order to sign his contract as captain of a river steamer operating in the heart of Africa, he is thought mad. Who would go into the wilderness of his own accord? Marlow's question to a secretary of the trading company as to why he did "not go out there" himself meets only with the brusque reply: "I am not such a fool as I look, quoth Plato to his disciples"(15).[1] The doctor who conducts his routine medical examination finds a welcome object for his phrenological studies and asks the revealing question: "Ever any madness in your family?" (15).

When Marlow revisits the European metropolis after his journey, he finds in his turn that the inhabitants are mad:

> I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces so full of stupid importance. (70)

There is an irony of fate in the fact that what made people see him as mad, namely his voluntary journey into the heart of Africa, is now cause for Marlow to perceive them as mad. Clearly, Marlow has gained a fundamental insight which causes him to see life in the civilized world as an accumulation of despicable banalities. In fact, to him this life appears as an 'irritating illusion,' a childish naive feeling of security in the face of undreamt of danger.

The question as to who is mad or foolish here is settled by the frame-narrator, who likens Marlow's outward appearance to that of the Buddha. Paradoxically, Marlow is the 'Enlightened One' because he has experienced darkness: "It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of *light* on everything about me—and into my thoughts" (11, my emphasis). What this mysterious darkness means and why its experience allows one to call others 'dead' or 'mad' is something the reader has to figure out from Marlow's relation of his journey into the heart of darkness. It is advisable here to follow the frame-narrator's instruction to the reader:

> 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, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (9)

The metaphors seem to suggest that Marlow's story should be questioned for its symbolic implications. Indeed, the text offers a clear correspondence between the concrete level of the story and an abstract level of reference. This reading is also hinted at in the analogy between geographical specification ("the farthest point of navigation") and personal experience ("the culminating point of my experience"). In other words, the journey into the heart of Africa is, on the symbolic level, Marlow's journey into his innermost self.[2] It is a process of self-recognition which is further specified by a temporal dimension: "We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth [. . .] we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories" (37). Therefore, the journey from the European metropolis into the interior of Africa stands

for the growing awareness of man's suppressed original atavistic nature. In this way, one could say there is a second inner place revisited which determines Marlow's reaction to the outer place he revisits.

The various stages of the journey represent various stages of Marlow's changing awareness. Two major phases can be distinguished here: on the one hand, the growing distance from the civilized world in Europe, which symbolizes a gradual fading of the norms of civilization and, on the other hand, the growing closeness to the wild ('the heart of darkness'), which refers to the gradual realization of the suppressed and forgotten atavistic dimension in man. The first phase is conveyed through the presentation of the whites, the civilized, the second phase through the blacks, the savages (with one significant exception: Kurtz).

II

Significantly, the European metropolis is not named but introduced as the "sepulchral city" (13, 70). It symbolizes the repressive social mechanisms the civilized world has developed in order to contain the atavistic forces in man and to ensure a smooth and peaceful coexistence. The most important norms of behaviour here are humanity and rationality, which finds expression in the causality and finality of our behaviour.

These norms of behaviour are illustrated by the characters that live in "the city of the dead" (14): The director of the (Belgian) commercial company, for instance, manifests the principal of finality. He uses a brief talk with Marlow to test his knowledge of French, which is obviously crucial for an efficient performance in the colony (cf. 14). The doctor represents the principle of causality in his scientific ambition to detect some connection between the shape of skulls and human nature (cf. 15). Finally, Marlow's aunt stands for the principle of humanity in her hope that the savages might be converted to 'human' behaviour: "She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways'" (16).

The ensuing voyage to Africa symbolizes in its growing distance from the civilized world a gradual dissolution of its norms. The landing of "custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness" (16) suggests the loss of the principle of causality. For where

no borders exist, there is no occasion for customs duty. The end of finality is signalled by a warship that shells the bush without a concrete target: "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech—and nothing happened. Nothing could happen" (17). To Marlow this has "a touch of insanity" (17) which cannot be "dissipated by somebody on board assuring [him] earnestly there was a camp of natives—he called them, enemies—hidden out of sight somewhere" (17).

The increasing loss of humanity is evident in the lack of compassion for the drowning soldiers who have been 'put ashore' to protect the customs officers: "Some [soldiers] I heard got drowned in the surf, but whether they did or not nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went" (16).

The loss of norms—which constitute the reality of human relationships in the civilized world—is experienced by Marlow consequently as a loss of reality that is conveyed by his theatrical metaphors: "sordid farce" (17), "lugubrious drollery" (17) as well as his references to "delusion" or "nightmares" (17).

This development intensifies in the trading company's Outer Station. "An undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air" (19) appears as an emblem of a topsy-turvy world. Here—for example—explosions are carried out for the building of a railway line that can be neither explained in terms of causality: "the cliff was not in the way of anything, but this objectless blasting was all the work going on" (19), nor seen as effective in terms of finality: "A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock" (19). Further indications of the decay of norms are "a vast, artificial hole" (20), whose purpose remains unfathomable, and "a lot of important drainage pipes" (20) which appar ently have been wilfully smashed, pointing to some uncontrolled aggression.

The complete loss of humanity is demonstrated in the so-called "grove of death" (22) where exhausted and sick black workers are pitilessly abandoned to waste away and die. Again, Marlow's reactions serve as

a yardstick or standard of civilization, according to which these experiences are judged. Not only is he deeply affected by the observed inhumanity—"I stood appalled" (20), "I stood horror-struck" (21)—but also refuses to accept senselessness, the irrational, as the new norm.[3] Thus, he perseveres in finding an explanation for the 'vast hole' that satisfies the principle of finality, and be it ever so secondary or remote: "It wasn't a quarry or a sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole. It might have been connected with the philanthropic desire of giving the criminals [the savages] something to do. I don't know" (20).

The irrationality and inhumanity remain constant factors. On the way from the Outer to the Central Station Marlow meets a white man in the middle of the jungle who is responsible for the maintenance of the road. Marlow comments: "Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep [. . .]" (23). Roads and road maintenance are a metonymy for the institutions of civilization which claim to exist but have in actual fact become functionless and therefore absurd. Inhumanity also persists but with one significant difference: It is now Marlow's own reaction which starts to show an inhuman unconcern. He simply registers "now and then a carrier dead in harness" (23) or "the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead" (23), without becoming emotionally involved.

That the loss of rationality and humanity will not be the final stage of the development, but that the very standard for the perception of irrationality and inhumanity may be lost, is something that rings ominously in the Swedish captain's musings about the white man's further penetration of the jungle: "I wonder what becomes of that kind when it goes up country?" (18).

That final stage is actually reached in the Inner Station (the heart of darkness) and manifested in Kurtz. Due to a splitting of consciousness, the values of civilization and the 'principles' of the wilderness exist for him independently of one another. A striking example is his pamphlet for the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (50). Altruistic flights of fancy and the deepest contempt for mankind sit here irreconcilably side by side, without any awareness on the part of the author:

> It was very simple and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you luminous and terrifying like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' The curious part was that he had apparently forgotten all about that valuable postscriptum because later on when he in a sense came to himself, he repeatedly entreated me to take good care of 'my pamphlet' (he called it) as it was sure to have in the future a good influence upon his career. (51)

It is only in Kurtz' last epiphany that the link is re-established between the reality of the wild and the norms of civilization. The result is a deep shock (cf. 68).

As the yardstick for the detection of irrationality and inhumanity has lost its validity in the heart of darkness, the early atavistic, wild stage of human nature comes to the fore. The most striking symbol of this stage is the impaled heads in front of Kurtz' house. There is neither a recognizable reason or purpose for them, nor are they seen as an expression of inhumanity. They are simply described as manifestations of an urge:

> These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic [. . .] there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts [. . .]. (57)

However, before the atavistic in man gets the upper hand, before the change from civilization to wilderness is complete, a neutral transitional stage has to be gone through.

III

The Central Station, which lies between the Outer and the Inner Station, symbolizes above all a neutral stage, in which the norms of civilization are no longer valid and the ways of the wilderness do not yet prevail. Marlow's state of consciousness develops accordingly: On the one hand, he registers how his memory of the civilized world recedes progressively[4], and on the other hand, he senses by intuition that the atavistic world is not yet open to him.[5]

In order to represent this paralysing neutrality, Conrad has peopled the Central Station with characters that recall the 'lukewarm' in *Revelations* 3: 15-16[6], Dante's 'hosts of ghosts' (those having lived without disgrace

and without honour)[7] and T.S. Eliot's 'Hollow Men,' in short, characters who are seen as the despicable species of man that has never had 'the guts' to make a clear decision in favour of the good or the bad. Therefore they have not lived and cannot die.[8] As regards the manager of the station, Marlow suspects: "Perhaps there was nothing within him" (25). The manager himself sees this hollowness as the reason for his immunity against fatal diseases and thus asserts: "Men who come out here should have no entrails" (25). The loss of innards is understood by him as a precondition for the inability to die, for guts make one susceptible to disease. The same applies to the manager's clerk: "[. . .] it seemed to me [Marlow] that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe" (29). The typical personality structure of the manager is the 'neither . . . nor': "He inspired neither love nor fear" (24); "he was neither civil nor uncivil" (25). All characters at the station are victims of a paralysing contradiction "Between the idea and the reality / Between the motion and the act"[9]:

> The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account—but as to effectually lifting a little finger—oh no. By Heavens! There is something after all in the world allowing one man to steal a horse while another must not look at a halter. Steal a horse straight out. Very well. He has done it. Perhaps he can ride. But there is a way of looking at a halter that would provoke the most charitable of saints into a kick. (27)[10]

Inactivity and inefficiency turn out to be the main features of the Central Station. Here we meet a brickmaker, who is faulted by Marlow: "There wasn't a fragment of a brick anywhere in the station, and he had been there more than a year—waiting" (27). Even more drastic is the encounter with a 'fireman' who tries to extinguish a burning shed: "a tin pail in his hand, [he] assured me that everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,' dipped about a quart of water, and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of his pail" (26).[11] It is significant that Marlow is also caught up in the loss of finality and efficiency in the Central Station, for the ship which he is supposed to take over has been run aground and holed: "Certainly the affair was too stupid [. . .] I asked myself what I was to do there—now my boat was lost" (24).

IV

After the stage of paralysing neutrality the wilderness begins to assert itself. Accordingly, the focus shifts from the loss of the norms of civilization, as shown in the whites, to Marlow's confrontation with the blacks, who represent the wild in man. The various steps in the development of consciousness are marked by changes in the perception of the savages, who appear first as 'shackled monsters,' then as free monsters, and in the end as fellow beings, before the wild is actually located within one's own self.

At the first station in the wilderness the savages still appear in shackles—"each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain" (19). Thus, they symbolize "the shackled form of a conquered monster" (37). In other words, the wild part in human nature is still checked by the norms of civilization; albeit these norms are only claimed to exist. The inhumanity of the whites is still glossed over with legal arguments: "They [the savages] were called criminals and the outraged law like the bursting shells had come to them [. . .]" (19), just like the pointless blasts that are legitimized by the pretext of building a railway.

As the checks of civilization lose effect, scope is given to the wild in man. As the manager of the Central Station puts it: "Anything—anything can be done in this country" (34). The freedom that arises in this wilderness reflects the inner freedom that is actually given to man, namely the potential for unlimited choice: "The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (38).

It is worth noting that beyond the Central Station the relationship between whites and savages gradually moves towards coexistence and cooperation and finally to a complete supremacy of the savages (cf. 59). The blacks no longer appear in chains, but are 'enlisted' for work on the ship by contract (cf. 42). On the symbolic level this marks the change from 'shackled monster' to "a thing monstrous and free" (37). The repressive checks of civilization no longer function, so that the wild in man becomes ever stronger and at the same time loses its 'monstrous', strange character:

> Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their [the savages'] not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough, but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response [. . .]. (37f.)

At the next level of development the hideous and distant gives way to identification, when Marlow can relate to the savages' "tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair": "I will never hear that chap [Kurtz] speak after all—and my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush" (47f.). That the occasion for the sadness is the same, namely the apprehended loss of Kurtz, is something Marlow will learn later on (cf. 54).

The savages' attack on the steamer (cf. 46f.) shortly before it reaches the Inner Station (the heart of darkness) symbolizes the onslaught of the wild in man's nature, which allows three responses:

> Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. I take it no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil. The fool is too much of a fool or the devil too much of a devil—I don't know which. Or you may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds. Then the earth for you is only a standing place—and whether to be like this is your loss or your gain I won't pretend to say. But most of us are neither one nor the other. The earth for us is a place to live in [. . .]. (50)

These three responses are again illustrated on the literal level in various characters. The 'fool' who does not perceive that he is assaulted by the forces of darkness is the young Russian. His 'part' is already evident in his clothes that are covered with many colourful patches, which remind Marlow immediately of a "harlequin" (53) "in motley" (54). Burgess is certainly right when he sees him as "the Fool, the royal jester, the court buffoon"[12] at Kurtz' court.

The young Russian's child-like naivety is already evident in Marlow's description: "A beardless boyish face, very fair, no features to speak of

[. . .] his little pug-nose [turned] up to me" (53). The outer appearance corresponds with the analysis of his personality, which grants him only a limited intellectual capacity. That he is "thoughtlessly alive" (55), with "unreflecting audacity" (55) and the imagination of "a baby" (54) prevents him from adopting a critical view of Kurtz: "He had not meditated over it [his devotion to Kurtz]" (55). Therefore the Russian is taken in by Kurtz' "splendid monologues on [. . .] love, justice, conduct of life" (58). He does not understand that Kurtz has completely abandoned himself to the wilderness; to put it another way, that Kurtz has been reclaimed by the wild.[13]

The second position towards the (inner) wild—a kind of holy detachment—is exemplified in the female characters of the civilized world: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are! They live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset" (16). The imagery of 'heavenly sights and sounds' reminds one of Marlow's aunt, who idealizes her nephew in his 'mission' as "something like a lower sort of apostle" (15). So much so that he tries to call her back to ugly, sober reality: "I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (16). In a similarly idealized world lives Kurtz' "Intended" (cf. 49). Despite his intense loathing of lying (cf. 29), Marlow does not tell her the truth about Kurtz and leaves her in "that great and saving illusion" (74). Coherent with this presentation is the fact that there are no white women in the wilderness. The barbaric component of man remains forever hidden to them. The ideal world of the (white) women, which never becomes reality, refers to another symbolic function of the 'Intended'. She is not only intended to be Kurtz' bride, without ever becoming so, but also stands for other frustrated intentions: the humanizing projects for the savages and Kurtz' "moral ideas" (33), which let him appear as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (28) at the beginning of his career. While these noble intentions are betrayed by Kurtz in the face of overwhelming darkness, they remain, ironically filtered, present in the 'Intended'. Trusting her knowledge of human nature, she maintains: "no one knew him [Kurtz] so well as I" (73) and still at the end of the novel she declares: "[. . .] his goodness shone in every act [. . .] He died as he lived" (75).

Kurtz and Marlow belong to those people who do not shut their eyes to that wilderness. As we are informed about Kurtz' fate:

> 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. (49)

The metaphors of love and tenderness—"the wilderness had [. . .] caressed him [. . .] it had taken him, loved him, embraced him"—also throw some light on the symbolic function of another being, namely the "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" (60)[14] embodying the wilderness—"she stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself [. . .]" (60). She has cast a spell on Kurtz with her "bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch-men, that hung about her" (60) and is, in contrast to the 'Intended', Kurtz' 'true love'.

This 'wilderness' "had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating" (57). Kurtz' insight into himself reveals a part of human nature which has been suppressed to such a degree by the norms of the civilized world that it is deemed no longer to exist.

Like Kurtz before him Marlow is "assaulted by the powers of darkness" (50). Shortly after the attack by the savages, Marlow manifests for the first time reactions that are offensive even to the 'Pilgrims'. Thus, he focuses his whole attention on trifling things, although he has just experienced nothing less than the cruel death of his helmsman: "[. . .] I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks. 'He is dead,' murmured the fellow [the agent] immensely impressed. 'No doubt about it,' said I tugging like mad at the shoe-laces" (47). Similarly cold and pragmatic he disposes of the body—"then without more ado I tipped him overboard" (51), which shocks all those present: "[. . .] there was a scandalised murmur at my heartless promptitude" (51f.).

After Kurtz, Marlow also falls under the spell of the wilderness in the symbolic figure of the "wild and gorgeous woman". Important in this

context is the symbol of the shadow, which is used synonymously with the symbol of darkness: although the shadow of the jungle has already cast its gloom over Kurtz' house, the impaled heads and the slope to the river, Marlow is still in bright sunlight on his steamer (cf. 58); this situation changes abruptly with the appearance of the wild African woman, whose movements show the steamer and Marlow (the relics of civilization) to be also caught up by the darkness, that is the wilderness:

> Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. (60f.)

The metaphor 'shadowy embrace' suggests that the wilderness has now also become Marlow's 'mistress'. It is therefore only consistent, when Marlow directly afterwards corrects his destination: "I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried" (62). Nevertheless, Kurtz is still a means to an end here, for Marlow's real confrontation with the wilderness happens via Kurtz. First of all, Marlow is put into one category with Kurtz by the 'Pilgrims' for his partisanship—"my hour of favour was over; I found myself lumped along with Kurtz as a partisan of methods for which the time was not ripe" (62). Then Marlow gains insight into Kurtz' inner life by direct contact with him (cf. 65), and through an identification with him, he almost falls victim to the perception of his own inner wilderness: "It is his [Kurtz'] extremity that I seem to have lived through" (69). Marlow's own experience of the 'darkness' is therefore not a result of Kurtz-like deeds, but something that happens in his imagination, for he himself acknowledges in relation to his subsequent 'process of recovery': "My dear aunt's endeavours to 'nurse up my strength' seemed altogether beside the mark. It was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing" (70). In this way, Kurtz could be understood as a symbolic correlate of Marlow's inner "culminating point of experience" (11). That Marlow's advance into the atavistic layers of his self is first illustrated by his growing familiarity with the savages but reaches its climax in the identification with Kurtz, stresses once more that 'darkness' is not a characteristic of the black but an existential possibility of man.

V

The unsuspected human dimension behind the term 'wilderness' is for the main part only suggested in allusions, such as "various lusts" (57), "monstrous passions" (65), "forgotten and brutal instincts" (65) and "primitive emotions" (67).[15] But these few hints already show that we are dealing with an atavistic way of being which is diametrically opposed to the rational and humanitarian demands of the civilized world.

Still, more features can be gathered from Kurtz' behaviour: There is first the egomania which strikes Marlow in Kurtz' speech: "You should have heard him say, 'My ivory.' Oh yes, I heard him. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my . . .' everything belonged to him" (49). Then, his obsession with power which demands nothing less than utter subjection: "[. . .] the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl . . ." (58) and, not least, his boundless cruelty which does not follow any specific ends, as the impaled heads around his hut show: "[. . .] there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there" (57). Thus, Kurtz has cut himself loose from all known norms and made himself at home in a world Marlow initially cannot relate to: "[. . .] the terror of the position was [. . .] in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low [. . .] He had kicked himself loose of the earth" (65). We have a crossing of borders here into a strange world of values. Kurtz crosses over and has ultimately to pay for it, as Marlow is later able to understand with some empathy: "True, he [Kurtz] had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge [. . .]" (69). This is obviously the phenomenon which has been called 'tragic crossover' in the context of drama. The tragic hero unwillingly enters a new world of values, which alienates him from his community and eventually leads to a kind of exclusion by his death.[16]

Kurtz corresponds to this type of tragic hero in so far as he leaves the world of light (civilization) and goes with fatal consequences "beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (74). But this experience does not remain unique and subjective. For the epiphany in which Kurtz realizes the monstrous possibility of both worlds, the range of human freedom, and reacts with dismay—"The horror! The horror!" (68)—, is described by Marlow as "that supreme moment of complete knowledge" (68); a

knowledge which shows man in a new light: "No eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his [Kurtz'] final burst of sincerity" (65-66).

In Marlow we have the extraordinary case that somebody survives this formidable experience and carries it into the world of unawareness: "[. . .] they very nearly buried me [. . .] I had peeped over the edge myself [. . .] he [Kurtz] had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (69).

It is this discrepancy between insight and ignorance which explains why Marlow on his second visit to the 'sepulchral city' feels that the inhabitants are fools or "too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know [they] are being assaulted by the powers of darkness" (50). He perceives that they mistakenly believe that the norms of the civilized world governing their lives are their own nature. They forget that these norms have only been developed to keep their true nature at bay. Therefore they lack self-knowledge and one could also say freedom, because they cannot fully realize their choices or as Marlow puts it: "this choice of nightmares" (67). This means that they are not confronted with "the appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (69) and have not to face up to the terrible challenge of the atavistic alternative of existence, which breaks Kurtz, and almost kills Marlow. In actuality, one cannot talk of 'life' in an existentialist sense here, as people neither realize their true nature, nor live it. The term 'sepulchral city' highlights exactly this fundamental deficit. The darkness, the wild, the untamed is however always latently present: In the form of the "old knitter of black wool [. . .] guarding the door of Darkness" (14) and in the symbolic description of London: "The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (7); not least, in the symbolic description of the Thames, which recalls the river Congo "the infernal stream, the stream of darkness" (75), a warning résumé in which the novel ends: "[. . .] and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness" (76). At this point, the image of the 'heart of darkness' reveals its full meaning: Just as the heart feeds the blood vessels that run through the whole body, the 'dark' spreads from

the heart of Africa through countless channels into the world; the atavistic which 'pulses' freely in innermost Africa exists latently everywhere.

If we see it in this way, man's folly becomes obvious. There is no cause for this 'mad' feeling of security, because the monster in man is only hidden by repressive social mechanisms:

> You can't understand? How could you—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums [. . .]. (49)

The neighbours, the fear of scandal, the police and the gallows safeguard above all the principle of humanity, while the lunatic asylum guarantees the etiquette of rationality. Where our atavistic nature threatens to break through—as in the case of slaughter—it is contained by means of 'specialisation'.

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NOTES

[1]Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. R. Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988).

[2]It is said about Kurtz, for instance: "Being alone in the wilderness, it [Kurtz' soul] had looked within itself and, by Heavens I tell you, it had gone mad" (65), and Marlow undergoes an analogous process of realization: "I had—for my sins, I suppose—to go through the ordeal of looking into myself" (65). The journey as a symbol for the exploration of the self in *Heart of Darkness* has been repeatedly affirmed in criticism; cf. H. J. Guerard, "The Journey Within," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. R. Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1988) 243-50; Stewart C. Wilcox, "Conrad's Complicated Presentation of Symbolic Imagery in 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Philological Quarterly* 39 (1960): 1-17. However, many symbolic interpretations of *Heart of Darkness* focus on intertextual relations; cf. Lilian Feder, "Marlow's Descent into Hell," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 9 (1955): 280-290; R. O. Evans, "Conrad's Underworld," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough (1971) 218-23; Kelly Anspaugh, "Dante on his Head: Heart of Darkness," *Conradiana* 27 (1995): 135-48. A systematic thorough investigation of the symbolism has as yet hardly begun.

[3]Cf. Barry Stampfl, "Marlow's Rhetoric of (Self-)Deception in 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 37 (1991): 183-196.

[4]"You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps" (35).

[5]"We could not understand [our surroundings] because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories" (37).

[6]"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

[7]Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Canto III.

[8]Cf. Jerome Thale, "Marlow's Quest," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough (1971) 180: "They are not evil, for they are not even alive, not capable of the humanity involved in making a choice for good or evil."

[9]Eliot, "The Hollow Men," V.

[10]If one understands the critical image of 'hollowness' in the sense that words and thoughts (be they evil or good) have no substance in the form of deeds, Kurtz' hollowness—"he was hollow at the core" (58)—must not be seen as a logical inconsistency in Conrad's system, since Kurtz' altruistic rhetoric is not followed by deeds either.

There is of course a trenchant contrast between the manager of the Central Station and Kurtz, the manager of the Inner Station: While the Manager of the Central Station is categorized as a 'commonplace' and his lack of charisma conveyed in the phrase "he inspired neither love nor fear" (24), Kurtz is presented as follows: "Whatever he was he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten [. . .]" (51). And in contrast to the inhabitants of the Central Station that intend evil, but do not have the courage to do it, Kurtz in the Inner Station is almost exclusively defined by his evil deeds.

[11]Cf. M. Krieger, *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, 1960) 157: "The cause-and-effect pragmatics of civilization has been replaced by a nightmarish futility."

[12]C. F. Burgess, "Conrad's Pesky Russian," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough (1971) 249. In the same volume, other interpretations of the Russian can be found in Mario D'Avanzo, "Conrad's Motley as an Organizing Metaphor," 251-53, and John W. Canario, "The Harlequin," 253-61.

[13]It is therefore to be understood as dramatic irony when the young Russian confesses: "I tell you [. . .] this man has enlarged my mind [. . .] he made me see things—things" (54-55).

[14]A similar interpretation can be found in T. Boyle's essay "Marlow's Choice in 'Heart of Darkness,'" *The Modernists: Studies in a Literary Phenomenon*, eds. Lawrence B. Gamache and Ian S. MacNiven (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1987) 101. It is certainly not without foundation when Chinua Achebe interprets the black woman as "mistress to Mr. Kurtz" ("An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough [1988] 255), but he overlooks the character's symbolic meaning and therefore comes to the conclusion that Joseph Conrad shared racist prejudices.

[15]The text in the manuscript as well as the *Blackwood's Magazine* edition of 1899 appears slightly more explicit in this point than the last authorial version: "More blood, more heads on stakes, more adoration, rapine, and murder," *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Kimbrough (1988) 72.

[16]Bruce Henricksen also sees in "the fall of Kurtz a traditional tragic pattern" (52), which he explores on the background of the gnostic myth ("'Heart of Darkness' and the Gnostic Myth," *Joseph Conrad's* Heart of Darkness, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1987] 45-55).