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HEARING THE DARKNESS:
THE NARRATIVE CHAIN IN CONRAD'S HEART OF DARKNESS

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There it is before you--smiling, frowning, inviting,
grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with
an air of whispering, Come and find out.¹

When the wilderness in Heart of Darkness whispers, it is a whisper that is passed along in an interlocking narrative chain that extends from Kurtz in the Congo all the way to the actual reader sitting in his armchair today. At each level in that chain, one hearer/reader responds to the haunting voice from the darkness, and becomes in turn a narrator. At its most significant, the response to narrative is another narrative; those "hearers" who are most affected become narrators themselves almost by an inner compulsion. Thus Heart of Darkness can be read as a dramatization of the hearer/reader's response to narrative--this narrative and, potentially, any narrative.² Few works of modern literature, in fact, demonstrate so explicitly the process of transmission of experience from teller to hearer as does Heart of Darkness. In addition, Conrad's tale contains within it instructions for both "good" and "bad" readings of the text.

The privileged hearers in Heart of Darkness, those who hear a voice from the darkness and are in turn compelled to become voices themselves, not only hear, but "see." Marlow uses the word "see" in several significant places. He attaches a special meaning to the word, using it to suggest an understanding that goes beyond mere perception or language: "at the time I did not see [Kurtz]--you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see anything?" (p. 27) This vision, or ability to penetrate beyond language and ordinary sense perceptions, is characteristic of those whom Frank Kermode calls "insiders." Kermode, in The Genesis of Secrecy, explains the role of insiders in Biblical terms:

"For to him who has will more be given;
and from him who has not, even what he
has will be taken away." To divine the
true, latent sense, you need to be of the
elect, of the institution. Outsiders
must content themselves with the mani-
fest, and pay a supreme penalty for doing
so. Only those who already know the
mysteries--what the stories really mean--

can discover what the stories really mean.³

Kermode's statement can be applied quite directly to Heart of Darkness. While the "instructions" are radically different, in both cases the insiders "divine the true, latent sense." The insiders in Heart of Darkness feel the pull and eventually sense the true horror of the wilderness because the message of that wilderness is the darkness already contained in their own hearts. The wilderness awakens for them the mysteries of their own souls. For the outsiders, however, this awakening never occurs. The penalty they pay for attending always to the "incidents of the surface" (p. 34) is the loss of their "own reality" (p. 29), the knowledge of self,⁴ and the victory that comes from being able to sum up and judge one's own existence (pp. 71-72). The knowledge the insiders gain, however hazy and inarticulate, is so powerful that it both changes their lives and compels them to take up the chain of narration. The outsiders may hear the same stories, may be in the same places at the same times--and may, in fact, even tell stories--but they remain outside, without "seeing," and hence do not become voices from the darkness.

The original voice from the darkness in the narrative chain of Heart of Darkness is the wilderness. Although it is repeatedly characterized as silent and brooding, for Kurtz and Marlow the wilderness acquires a voice--a voice from the darkness. As early as Marlow's sea-voyage to the Congo, he senses the power of this voice: Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you . . . whispering, Come and find out" (see epigram). On his journey to the Central Station, Marlow hears the voice again, though still faintly, and senses both its appeal and its profound truth: "Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild--and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (p. 20). While still at the Central Station, Marlow carries on a sort of "dialogue" with the wilderness: "A frightful clatter came out of that hulk, and the virgin forest on the other bank of the creek sent it back in a thundering roll. . . ." (p. 30). When Marlow overhears the manager and his uncle from his boat, he half expects the wilderness to speak aloud: ". . . I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I expected an answer of some sort. . . ." (p. 33).⁵ Shortly after this scene, Marlow actually does hear sounds from the wilderness, significantly at night (in darkness): "At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain suspended faintly as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day" (p. 34).

The hovering, pervasive sound of drums then breaks into a cry: ". . . a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, soared slowly in the opaque air . . . The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap . . . to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed . . ." (p. 35).⁶ The voice of the wilderness, which Marlow senses but never completely confronts, is inviting, pervasive, haunting, narcotic, mournful--and, at one point, even amused: "It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst forth into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places" (p. 49). Interestingly, several of these references to the voice of the wilderness suggest an echoing quality. When Marlow jumps on his boat, the forest sends the noise back amplified to a "thundering roll." At the end of the overheard conversation between the manager and his uncle, Marlow expects an answer. The hovering sound of the drums suggests a continuing echo, and the cry of desolation is answered with a "complaining clamour" (p. 35). When Kurtz hears the voice, in fact, it is said to have "echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (p. 59). In a very real sense, the message--the "tale"--of the wilderness is an echo of what is inside the soul of man. It is this tale, "this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips," that is passed along from hearer to hearer in Heart of Darkness (p. 28).

Although Marlow senses the voice of the wilderness in Heart of Darkness, to him it is still obscured. To Kurtz, however, the wilderness has spoken directly: "[The wilderness] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things which of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude--and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating" (p. 59). Not only has the wilderness whispered to Kurtz, but he has "taken counsel" with it--and in "taking counsel" with the wilderness, Kurtz is taken over. The wilderness tells him "things about himself," and because of these "things," he becomes a voice of darkness, a voice that controls the natives and fascinates Marlow. While the darkness of that voice is the metaphorical darkness of the inner recesses of the soul, it is significant to note that Kurtz's voice (and the voices of the other narrators as well) is usually heard speaking at night or in shadow--a literal darkness. Marlow, in fact, first hears Kurtz's voice coming to him from a hill shrouded in shadow:⁷ "A deep voice reached me faintly . . . A voice! a voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper" (p. 61). The adjectives Marlow uses to describe Kurtz's voice--"profound" and "vibrating"--are similar to those he used earlier to describe the voice of the wilderness, thus subtly linking the man's voice with that of the wilderness. But Kurtz has two voices. Marlow describes Kurtz's "ability to talk" in paradoxical terms: ". . . 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 impentable darkness" (p. 48). Kurtz's "burning noble words" (p. 51) have the power to inspire and illuminate. Although the manager, who is in some ways Kurtz's opposite, finds Kurtz's talk "pestiferous absurdity" (p. 33), his eloquence and noble ideas have won him friends, admirers, and followers both in Europe and in the Congo. Even after Marlow has seen the blackness of Kurtz's soul, he still begins his narrative on the Nellie by talking of the "idea" that "redeems" conquest of the dark places (p. 7), echoing the eloquence of the early Kurtz. Kurtz's noble ideas, as expressed in his report, are belied, however, by his brutal postscript ("exterminate all the brutes!" [p. 51]), and his words become hypocrisy, a "deceitful flow." Although, as Marlow says, "no eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity" (p. 68) ("The horror! the horror!" [p. 71]), at least it is sincere; it is a moment of raw truth. This is the voice from the darkness, whispered and inarticulate. It is neither a "pulsating stream of light" nor a "deceitful flow"; it is "an affirmation, a moral victory" (p. 72). It is the truth told by this voice of darkness that Marlow passes on to his hearers.⁸

Marlow, of course, hears Kurtz's voice directly. Because he hears in the way he does, and because he feels the attraction to the wilderness in his own soul, Marlow is taken over in a "forced partnership" with Kurtz (p. 69). And Marlow's experience with Kurtz has such a profound effect on him that he, too, becomes a voice speaking from the darkness: "It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice" (p. 28).

When Marlow, like Kurtz and later the frame narrator, becomes a voice from the darkness, his individuality is obscured and what becomes important about his narrative is not his personality or response, but his attempt as a voice to transmit the narrative "shaped without human lips."⁹ This explains why it is difficult, and somewhat irrelevant, to discuss Marlow's "reliability." His vision of the events he relates may be clouded or unreliable--undoubtedly is, from the perspective of the manager, for example--but that is really beside the point because in this narrative it is Marlow's voice that is the story, rather than the events he relates. That is what his friend, the frame narrator, recognizes when he says he listened on the watch for the clue to this narrative--not for the "true" account of events in the Congo or even for a story of "my old friend Marlow." Thus when Henry James objected to "the narrator mixing himself up with the narrative in 'Heart of Darkness,'" he clearly missed

the point: the narrator of Heart of Darkness is the narrative.¹⁰

While Marlow, an insider, hears and responds to Kurtz's powerful voice of darkness, there are other characters who hear and yet do not "see": the manager, the pilgrims, and, in a different sense, the Russian.¹¹ The pilgrims have all heard Kurtz's voice, and yet are untouched by it. Kurtz's voice speaks from the darkness of the wilderness, while these men--these "sordid buccaneers" (p. 31) and fools "too dull even to know [they] are being assaulted by the powers of darkness" (p. 50)--have chosen a different evil, the "flabby devil" who inhabits a "whited sepulchre." Although some, like the manager and his uncle, the accountant, and the brickmaker, briefly fill the role of narrator, their primary roles are not as voices, and they do not come out of the darkness, metaphorically or literally.¹¹ Their voices, in fact, are described usually as "jabbering," "chattering," and "running on,"¹³ a direct contrast to Kurtz's, Marlow's, and even the frame narrator's eloquence.

A parallel narrative situation occurs aboard the Nellie on the Thames. Marlow, hearer-turned-teller, speaks from the darkness to yet another group of hearers. ". . . I have a voice, too," Marlow tells his companions, "and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (p. 37). One of the group, the anonymous frame narrator, is this time singled out to become the responsive hearer, while the other three, the representatives of civilization and commerce, hear without "seeing," just as the pilgrims do.¹⁴ "The others might have been asleep, but I was awake," says the frame narrator. "I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative. . ." (p. 28). The response of the others is notably different: "Absurd," one of them remonstrates (p. 48). At the conclusion of Marlow's tale, the Director's only comment is practical; he is apparently untouched by Marlow's narrative: "'We have lost the first of the ebb,' said the Director suddenly" (p. 79).¹⁵ The frame narrator's response, however, indicates the powerful effect of the voice on his consciousness. In recreating his experience with Marlow's narrative, this narrator begins his own narration by describing the river scene with images of light and beneficence ("serenity," "exquisite brilliance," "pacifically," "benign immensity of unstrained light" [p. 4]).¹⁶ His closing description contrasts markedly with the serene view ("black bank of clouds," "sombre," "overcast," "immense darkness" [p. 79]). Peter J. Glassman describes the frame narrator's reaction:

. . . although he is permitted only two lines in which to respond to Marlow's

astonishing tale, the narrator is quick to announce that he shares in Marlow's pain--and that he is, therefore, a crucial character in Heart of Darkness, not merely its agent of transmission. . . . Marlow's story has eroded all the narrator's first, uninformed serenity about men, life, the river, the world, himself. . . . In their tonality of distress, their dreadful suggestion of fear and disgust, the narrator's last words define a completed sympathy with Marlow, an understanding of his misery so extreme as to imply communion with it.¹⁷

Like Marlow, the frame narrator has heard not only the language of the voice telling him the story, but also hears, however distantly, the voice of the wilderness itself.¹⁸

At each level in this chain of narrative interaction, then, a voice speaks from the darkness. An insider, a sympathetic responding ear, hears and "sees," while a larger group of outsiders hears without "seeing"--without even knowing they are being "assaulted." What distinguishes Marlow and the other insiders in this forced partnership is their ability to penetrate the surface of language and vicariously (or directly, in Kurtz's case) experience the essence of the truth told, however frightening or horrifying it may be. All three of the hearer/tellers, though obviously eloquent speakers, are faced with extreme difficulties in trying to use language to express this essence, which testifies to a divorce between language and meaning in Heart of Darkness. The frame narrator recognizes this in his famous description of Marlow's storytelling: ". . . to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only a glow brings out haze. . ." (p. 5).¹⁹ Marlow repeatedly laments his inability to express what he has learned from Kurtz: "I remember it, but I can't explain it" (p. 22); "You can't understand. How could you?" (p. 50); "I've been telling you what we said--repeating the phrases we pronounced--but what's the good?" (p. 67). His most eloquent assertion of the difficulty is often quoted:

It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream--making a vain attempt, because no relation of the dream can convey the dream sensation . . . 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. (pp. 27-28)

Even Kurtz, so renowned for the "unbounded power" of his eloquence when speaking "burning noble words," is reduced to one inarticulate phrase when he tries to express the truth of his experience with the wilderness. The frame narrator, for his part, simply recreates the narrative as he heard it, unable to express his own profound reaction except indirectly. "I raised my head," he says, describing his attempt to pull himself back to "reality"--but all he is able to see is the darkness he describes in his closing line. The brevity of his closing remarks contrasts markedly with the eloquence of his opening description. He, too, is unable to articulate clearly the essence of what he has experienced.

One of the difficulties which Marlow faces in attempting to express the essence of his experience in language is what Daniel Schwarz calls the power of his "recurring nightmare" that "begins not only to compete with his effort to use language discursively and mimetically, but to establish a separate, more powerful telling. This more inclusive tale, not so much told as revealed by Marlow as he strains for the signs and symbols which will make his experience intelligible, transcends his more conventional discourse."²⁰ This suggests an interesting way of looking at Marlow's narrative. While the bulk of the narrative follows the pattern of "conventional discourse," where language is used "discursively and mimetically" (as one would expect an old sailor to do), there are a number of points where Marlow slips into a more evocative and symbolic style of discourse. Early Conrad critics, notably F. R. Leavis, objected to the story, particularly these passages, because of the "adjectival and worse than superogatory insistence upon 'unspeakable rites,' 'monstrous passions,' 'inconceivable mystery,' and so on."²¹ It is, however, in these passages that the power of the nightmare really "begins to compete" with the "more conventional discourse." The heavy narcotic effect created by the rioting of words that Leavis called "adjectival insistence" reflects the wilderness not only mimetically but symbolically: "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances" (p. 34). Marlow then moves from "adjectival insistence" to dream-like imaginings: ". . . you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against the 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" (p.

34). This passage, though it refers literally to the jungle experience, can also be read metaphorically to describe Marlow's narrative course--he has strayed so far from ordinary story-telling that he is "lost" and "cut off" from everyday reality.

In the earlier sections of the story, whenever Marlow begins to move beyond his "more conventional discourse" to "strain for the signs and symbols which will make his experience intelligible"--losing his way in the narrative--he pulls himself back to "reality" with direct addresses to his listeners on the Nellie: "The inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows. . . ." (p. 34). Often these comments are embarrassed or apologetic: "You know the foolish notions that come to one sometimes" (p. 33). At other times, he merely reverts suddenly to his more straightforward yarn-spinning: "The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling. Towards the evening of the second day we judged ourselves about eight miles from Kurtz's station. . . ." (p. 39). In one section, Marlow first pulls himself back to his listeners, but then pauses. This is one of the few points at which we see Marlow's face, and the effect of his struggle is evident: "There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids, with an aspect of concentrated attention; and as he took vigorous draws at his pipe, it seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame. The match went out" (p. 48). Immediately after, he apologizes to his listeners again, but all his efforts to return to normal discourse--his addresses to them, lighting his tobacco--are ineffectual. He is so taken over by the "recurring nightmare" that even his syntax breaks down:

"I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard--him--it--this voice--other voices--all of them were so little more than voices--and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices--even the girl herself--now--"

He was silent for a long time." (p. 49)

At points such as these, where Marlow's mimetic discourse alternates with his more evocative language, and he even seems to be caught in a vision of the original experience, the competition between these two types of discourse is clear. As he moves further into his story, however, Marlow stops less frequently to pull himself back. His addresses to the listeners become less frequent and, when they do occur, are no longer apologetic or embarrassed: "However, as you see . . ." (p. 71) and "as you shall hear directly" (p. 61). As he becomes more and more involved in his experience, such asides become almost aggressive: "Believe me or not. . ." (p. 67). His re-absorption into the nightmare becomes complete in the scene with the Intended. While Marlow describes how the vision of Kurtz arose with such force during that interview, we feel that both the original vision of Kurtz and the vision of his meeting with the Intended are present simultaneously for Marlow again in the narrative present of the Nellie.

Marlow's difficulty in narrating his tale, then, is compounded not only by the inadequacy of language but by the competing force of the recurring experience itself. Yet it is because of the "recurring nightmare" and Marlow's struggle both to express and repress it that he is able to overcome the inadequacy of language and to communicate, at least to some extent, the essence of his experience--to one responsive listener. While the difficulty of shaping the narrative with human lips is great, Marlow--as well as the other voices from the darkness--does succeed in reaching one hearer, because in each case the hearer is attuned to the voice, as the outsiders are not.

Marlow calls his loyalty and receptivity to Kurtz a "choice of nightmares," and it is a choice that all the insiders must make. While Marlow calls it a choice, he also says it is forced (p. 69). Marlow chooses to follow Kurtz because he is conditioned to by the very nature of his own being. Unlike the outsiders, the insiders have a superior quality of imagination that allows them to experience the darkness when they hear the language of the narrative. They seem to have a penchant for introspection, a willingness to penetrate surface reality, and a desire for self-knowledge. They are idealistic, yet willing to face the truth, and not content to live with absurdities.²² And, although it is primarily hidden beneath the surface of the text, the very maleness of the insiders in Heart of Darkness is significant in their receptivity to the narrative. While Marlow mistrusts, idealizes, partronizes, and misconceives women, he--as well as Kurtz--feels their power and is attracted to their sexuality and fertility.²³ There is even the suggestion that the soul of the wilderness is female,²⁴ and that that female-

ness is the attraction for these "by Jove" and "jolly old chaps" male figures. Because of these, and other qualities, the hearers who also "see" are prepared to receive the story they hear, and, in a sense, have no choice. They are, as Kermode says, "those who already know the mysteries" and thus can "discover what the [story] really mean[s]." Yet each of the insiders does at some point make a conscious decision to follow the nightmare of his choice: "I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time . . . the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home--perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness" (p. 32). Marlow makes his own choice early in the story: "I went to work the next day, turning, so to speak, my back on that station" (p. 23).²⁵ Even the frame narrator consciously chooses to share this particular nightmare: "The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened, on the watch . . ." (p. 28). It should be emphasized, however, that in Heart of Darkness the choice is a choice of nightmares. The horror that Kurtz learns from the wilderness is in himself, and each hearer who learns that horror is infected and can no longer remain the same. In some ways, the insiders are in a more dangerous position than those outsiders who do not know they are "being assaulted." Aaron Fogel, in his 1983 article on "overhearing" in Conrad's works, says that Marlow and other Conrad characters "overhear the world involuntarily, amplifying, hearing onesidedly, so that moments in which they are 'made to hear' define them and obligate them against their will: an overhearing is one of the determining and catastrophic events in their lives" (p. 129). When a hearer succumbs to this tale, the protective restraints of society--the "policeman around the corner" and the "warning voice of the kind neighbor" (p. 50)--lose their power to protect and preserve. Marlow knows the dangers and feels his duty to preserve these protections so strongly that he is even willing to lie.²⁶ Yet it is also nightmarish not to "see." Few pictures in literature are as horrifying as the description of the "flabby devil" at the Outer Station, with the waste and carnage caused by greed and exploitation. Even the company accountant, who preserves surface formalities at all costs in the face of horror, in his way contributes to the devilishness as he reduces humans to numbers and figures.²⁷ It is indeed a "choice of nightmares forced upon [one] in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms" (p. 69), and the choice one makes, forcibly, consciously, or from ignorance, marks one as either an insider or an outsider.

The major distinguishing factor, however, between insiders and outsiders is that once the insiders have chosen their nightmare, they are compelled to pass it on: ". . . you see," say Marlow, "I can't choose. He won't be forgotten" (p. 51,

my emphasis). Marlow must tell Kurtz's story, must keep Kurtz's memory alive. Gerald Prince is quite mistaken when he says that "In Heart of Darkness, it's not necessary for Marlow to have his comrades on the Nellie as narratees. He would be able to recount his story to any other group; perhaps he would be able to refrain from telling it at all."²⁸ It is absolutely necessary for Marlow to recount his story, and I think the particular group he chooses to address is also crucial. They are both old friends and former seamen, people Marlow has a great deal in common with--the one group, in fact, in which he is most likely to find at least one sympathetic and responsive listener. Any less congenial group would not serve; Marlow could not--and has not been able to--tell the truth to any one else.²⁹ But what is it about this story that compels him, as well as the other insiders, to speak? Why cannot the voice from the darkness be silenced?

When Marlow lets the manager know that he has chosen Kurtz's nightmare, his "hour of favour," he says, "was over." He finds himself classed by the other white men with the dying Kurtz; when Kurtz dies, Marlow is left alone as a "partisan of unsound methods" (p. 69). Thus Marlow shoulders the double burden of Kurtz's unspeakable secrets and the loneliness of isolation. He feels isolated when he returns to Europe, and even, in a sense, up to the time he begins his narration on the Nellie. It is the desire to share his burden of knowledge, to relieve his terrible aloneness, and to come to terms with his experience that drives Marlow to end his silence and turn teller.³⁰ It is certainly true that Kurtz's isolation was a causative factor in his "taking counsel with the wilderness," and it is arguable that he, too, tries to unburden himself through the act of narration when he finally encounters a sympathetic listener in Marlow. Even the frame narrator feels a sense of isolation when he cannot tell if his companions are still awake in the darkness. Relieving this sense of isolation, of loneliness and separation, thus becomes a strong motivation for retelling the story for each of these hearer/tellers.

Another reason to turn narrator in Heart of Darkness, however, is that by attempting to put the experience into words, the teller hopes to be able to come to terms with the experience, to understand it. Despite the extreme difficulty of conveying the "life-sensation," Marlow makes the attempt to impose the order of language on his past. Indeed, Schwarz says that "Marlow's decision to narrate his experience is predicated upon at least a tentative faith that language is the vehicle of order, reason, and symbolic light which would serve as his intellectual guide to explore the mystery and darkness of the human soul" (p. 173). Marlow begins his tale in a hesitating voice (p. 7) as he tries to sort out

his experience by retelling it, testing his reactions against the reactions of his friends. "I fancy I see it now," says Marlow, "but I am not sure--not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid--when I think of it--to be altogether natural. Still . . ." (p. 21). "Mind," he explains to his listeners, "I am not trying to excuse or even explain--I am trying to account to myself for--for--Mr. Kurtz--for the shade of Mr. Kurtz" (p. 50). By putting the experience into language, by making it into a seaman's yarn, Marlow tries to create for himself enough distance from the experience to enable him to understand as well as feel it. The nightmare is so powerful, however, that it threatens to reimmerse the teller as he tries to tell it. Marlow's first attempt to share his burden--his visit to Kurtz's Intended--is a fiasco. The experience in the Congo is called up so strongly that he sees Kurtz as if he were alive. The "recurring nightmare" prevents him from attaining the distance he seeks. Even in this second telling on the Nellie, the powerful nature of the raw experience thwarts Marlow in his attempt at distance, at understanding, but he is at least able to articulate and communicate it. "Marlow's final reality," says James L. Guetti, "is a state of suspension between the disciplined world of mind and language and the world of essences at the center of experience."³¹ It is the distance he is able to hold between himself and the experience that makes this double awareness possible. Kurtz, on the other hand, is so close to the essence, so immersed in the darkness, that he cannot achieve the distance necessary for understanding. He continues to discourse about his ivory, his career, his Intended, very aware of the dark secrets of the wilderness, yet seemingly still unaware of the hypocrisy and emptiness of his language. Until his final "The horror! the horror!" Kurtz is unable to judge, to interpret his experience because he is too close to it. The possibility of creating distance from experience through expressing it in language--like a child telling his nightmare to his mother--in order to be able to examine, judge, interpret, and account for it, is also what each narrator seeks in retelling the story.

Besides the need to share the burden and relieve loneliness, and the hope of coming to terms with the experience, there is still another reason that each of the chosen hearers in Heart of Darkness is compelled to become in turn a teller. Like Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" and the narrator of Camus' The Fall, each of the narrators in Heart of Darkness seems to feel a need to implicate, to infect, his hearers. Very early in his narrative, as Marlow is describing his situation immediately before his journey to the Congo, he says in jest to his companions, it was ". . . just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilize you" (pp. 7-8). When he again meets his friends, years later now aboard the Nellie, it is as if he now has a devilish mission to uncivilize them. The

devil who sends him, of course, is the "savage devil of the land" and the message of that devil is the darkness of the unrestrained human heart, the antithesis of civilization. On his first encounter with Kurtz, Marlow describes him as having "a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (p. 61). Having become one of the devils of the land, Kurtz wants to swallow, to implicate, all humanity. Marlow is surely implicated by his contact with Kurtz: "But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and by Heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad. I had--for my sins, I suppose, to go through the ordeal of looking into myself" (p. 68). Marlow in turn implicates his European listeners when he assures them that all Europe--including England--contributed to the making of Kurtz (p. 50). He tries to implicate them directly in his experience with the wilderness when he says, "I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes . . ." (p. 34).³² Some of his listeners refuse to be implicated: "Try to be civil, Marlow," someone growls. But the frame narrator feels himself implicated. Seymour describes the experience of this anonymous voice: "Although we are told nothing directly about him, the manner in which Conrad has him describe things serves to reveal the delusion of moral innocence, a delusion which Marlow's tale is to shatter in precisely the same way as the reality of Kurtz's degradation shattered Marlow's own 'mournful and senseless delusion'" (p. 183). Even the language of the narrator is infected by Marlow's style in the closing paragraph of Heart of Darkness. Like Marlow's, the frame narrator's innocence is shattered, and he is implicated in the "degradation" of Kurtz through his receptive hearing of the tale. An insider, then, not only hears and understands, but is himself implicated in the narrative he hears and then tells--and he is driven to implicate others as well.

Examining this series of interlocking narrative situations in Heart of Darkness, where ear becomes voice to the narrative "shaped without human lips," yields a number of interesting insights concerning the compelling nature of narrative, the paradoxical power and powerlessness of language to transmit and order experience, and the dangerous effects of being an insider. The story becomes even more interesting, however, when we extend the chain beyond what is explicitly in the text to include the effaced narratees of the frame narrator--and on to the implied and actual readers. Since a parallel narrative situation occurs at each level of the chain--a voice from the darkness speaks to both insiders and outsiders--the text implies both insiders and outsiders among the frame narrator's narratees. The implied reader--the ideal, sympathetic reader the implied author envisions--is an

insider; he corresponds to the frame narrator and is drawn in, implicated, as that narrator is. But, of course, not all actual readers correspond to this implied reader. The actual reader, too, has his "choice of nightmares." He may, like the pilgrims, not even hear. Like the Russian, he may hear but not understand. Or, he may choose (freely or forcibly, by his nature) to be the implied reader, the insider who "sees"--who both hears and understands.³³ He hears because he is an insider, because he feels the pull of the wilderness and can experience it vicariously, despite the difficulty of language to transmit it; he understands because, at his level in the narrative chain, he has the necessary distance which Kurtz, Marlow, and even the frame narrator lack.³⁴ Because of this distance (which Marlow, though he tries, is unable to achieve), the implied reader can observe, judge, and interpret--in short, understand. Of course, no actual reader becomes exactly this implied reader; but all readers who approach that combination of both experience and understanding could be called insiders, like the other insiders in the text.

Thus Heart of Darkness becomes a metafictional statement: it dramatizes the differing responses of its own readers. It clearly delineates the desired reader's stance (the implied reader) and, unlike most other narratives, differentiates a "good" reading from a "bad" one.

In describing Proust's Recherche, Gerard Genette claims that "Every one of them [the actual readers] knows himself to be the implied--and anxiously awaited--narratee of this swirling narrative. . . ." ³⁵ In Heart of Darkness, only some of the readers feel themselves to be this "anxiously awaited narratee." Susan Lanser, in The Narrative Act, describes a "psychological affinity between the narrator, the narratee, and the protagonist" which is carefully developed in many narratives to gradually bring the reader into sympathy with the point of view of the discourse.³⁶ In Heart of Darkness, some narratees and readers feel the affinity. Because of the interlocking narrative situations, Heart of Darkness accounts for and anticipates not only those readers who will be drawn in, but also those who will not. Thus in Heart of Darkness, Conrad not only makes a strong statement about the truth of human nature; he also creates a telling distinction between those who "have ears to hear" and those who do not. The real enigma that still remains, however, is whether "the word" brings salvation for either group in Conrad's troubling masterpiece.

NOTES

¹Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness, a Norton Critical Edition, Robert Kimbrough, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton,

1971), p. 13. Subsequent quotations are noted parenthetically.

2The term ordinarily used in modern narrative theory for the hearer/reader is "narratee." It applies to a hearer or reader who is addressed in the text either explicitly (as in Heart of Darkness) or implicitly. The term "implied reader" refers to the imagined or ideal reader--"the audience presupposed by the narrative itself," as Seymour Chatman explains in Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978, p. 150). Both these "readers" are, of course, distinguished from the actual reader. To avoid confusion, I will generally avoid these more technical terms in preference to the more self-evident "hearer," "reader," or "hearer/reader," but I will have some occasion to make the distinction between the narratees actually addressed in the text and those only implied as readers.

3(Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), p. 3.

4Although early in the story Marlow says that this self-knowledge comes from work (p. 29), later on he says that "The most you can hope from it [life] is some knowledge of yourself--that comes too late--a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (p. 71). In this case, he is not speaking of work, but of his relationship with Kurtz, his destiny, and his struggle with death.

5According to Kimbrough, in Conrad's manuscript version of Heart of Darkness the word "voice" is used to refer to the wilderness, but the voice is unable to speak to the despicable manager and his uncle: "But there was nothing, there could be nothing. The thick voice was swallowed up, the confident gesture lost in the high stillness that fronted these two mean and atrocious figures. . ." (p. 33).

6This cry actually occurs in the daytime, but the mists obscure all vision just as darkness does. Aaron Fogel calls the mist "a white darkness." See "The Mood of Overhearing in Conrad's Fiction," Conradiana, 15:2 (1983), 134.

7"The long shadows of the forest had slipped downhill while we talked, had gone far beyond the symbolic row of stakes. All this was in the gloom, while we down there were yet in the sunshine. . ." (p. 60).

8But the light is not entirely extinguished either. After all, Kurtz "stepped over the edge" (p. 72) because "there was something wanting in him--some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (p. 58). Marlow, however, even though he felt the pull of the wilderness, was "permitted to draw

back his hesitating foot" (p. 72) because of his "inborn strength" (p. 37). It is not, we sense, the innate hollowness of the ideas, for Marlow still clings to them, but of Kurtz himself, that made them false.

⁹See Edward W. Said, Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 95, 171.

¹⁰Quoted in Ian Watt, "Marlow, Henry James, and 'Heart of Darkness,'" Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 33 (1978), 165.

¹¹The Russian is an unusual case in Heart of Darkness. As Marlow says, "His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem" (p. 55). He clearly listens to Kurtz and in turn becomes a narrator. Though he, unlike the pilgrims, really hears Kurtz, he still does not "see." Marlow makes this significant statement about the Russian's lack of real understanding of Kurtz's experience: "I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far" (p. 56).

¹²Marlow's conversation with the manager is in the afternoon (p. 22). The overheard discussion between the manager and his uncle occurs in the evening, but the sun is still up (p. 33). The Russian speaks in the sunshine (p. 60). Only the brickmaker narrates at night, but even he has a contraband candle and does not want to speak in darkness (p. 24).

¹³The manager is described as "a chattering idiot" (p. 23). The brickmaker "run[s] on" (p. 26) and "jabber[s] about himself" (p. 27). The Russian "rattled away" (p. 54).

¹⁴A number of critics have discussed specific qualities of the group on the Nellie. See especially L. J. Morrissey, "The Tellers in Heart of Darkness: Conrad's Chinese Boxes," Conradiana, 13:2 (1981), 141-42; Robert O. Evans, "Conrad's Underworld," in The Art of Joseph Conrad, R. W. Stallman, ed. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1960), p. 174; William Bysshe Stein, "The Lotus Posture and the 'Heart of Darkness,'" in Stallman, p. 179-80; Seymour Gross, "A Further Note on the Function of the Frame in 'Heart of Darkness,'" in Stallman, p. 182; and Watt, p. 173.

¹⁵According to Gross, for the Director and the other two listeners who do not respond at the end of the story, "Marlow's tale (as Kurtz himself had been to the others in

the story) is at worst ridiculous, at best an adventure story to listen to and forget" (p. 182.).

16Although the frame narrator uses these images of light to describe the river that reaches to the sea, he does see a heavy gloom over London. This suggests that he shares with Marlow a distrust of "civilization" and the world of commerce even though he is evidently involved in commerce of some sort himself.

17Language and Being: Joseph Conrad and the Literature of Personality (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), p. 248. Also see Morrissey, p. 143.

18Several critics have also noted parallels between the frame narrator and Marlow. See Jeremy Hawthorn, Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 16; George W. Williams, "The Turn of the Tide in Heart of Darkness," Modern Fiction Studies, 9:2 (1963), 171; Richard P. Sugg, "The Triadic Structure of Heart of Darkness," Conradiana, 7:2 (1975), 181-82; and Gross, p. 182.

19This description of meaning in narrative is reminiscent of Kermode's "uninterpretable radiance": "The outsider remains outside, dismayed and frustrated. To perceive the radiance of the shrine is not to gain access to it; the Law, or the Kingdom, may, to those within, be powerful and beautiful, but to those outside they are merely terrible; absolutely inexplicable, they torment the inquirer with legalisms" (p. 28).

20Conrad: Almayer's Folly to Under Western Eyes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 72.

21Quoted by Robert F. Haugh, "Heart of Darkness: Problem for Critics" in Kimbrough, p. 164.

22One of the most amazing absurdities Marlow describes is the scene of the fire at the Central Station, where one of the pilgrims assured him that "everybody was 'behaving splendidly, splendidly,'" and then "dipped about a quart of water and tore back again. I noticed there was a hole in the bottom of the pail" (p. 24).

23See especially p. 8 (patronizes), p. 10 (mistrusts), p. 12 (idealizes and misconceives), and pp. 74-79 (all of the above). For the attraction of female sexuality and fertility see pp. 61-62 and 69 (the savage woman) and pp. 74-79 (the Intended). Of his proposed visit to the Intended, Marlow says: "I concluded I would go and give her back her portrait and her letters myself. Curiosity? Yes; and also some other

feeling perhaps" (p. 74). While this feeling is not specified, and may in fact refer to several possibilities, one of them is surely a partly sexually-motivated desire to meet the woman who was the Intended of the remarkable Mr. Kurtz.

24One particularly striking instance of this is in Marlow's description of the savage woman: "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" (p. 62).

25Although Marlow often uses work to evade or repress the nightmare of the wilderness, he clearly turns his back on the flabby devil at this point. Also, the very work he is engaged in to repair the steamer is leading only to Kurtz. So by choosing work, he chooses the path that leads to Kurtz.

26Marlow says that women "live in a world of their own" which is "too beautiful altogether" (p. 12). "We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (p. 49), he says to explain his lie to Kurtz's Intended. For Marlow, women--and especially that woman--represent the ultimate in civilization and the farthest remove from Kurtz' horrifying knowledge (although this becomes paradoxical when his imagination juxtaposes the Intended and the savage woman). So Marlow justifies his lie by claiming to protect the Intended, the highest representative of civilization, from the "too dark" darkness of the tale.

27Hawthorne makes an interesting statement regarding this point: "The Chief Accountant in Heart of Darkness remarks that, 'when one has to make correct entries, one comes to hate those savages--hate them to the death.' Accountancy is a classic case of a profession thrown up by a society dominated by signs, by indirect human relationships mediated through marks on paper rather than direct contact. The comment recalls the early description of the Accountant who is listening to Marlow's story, who 'had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones.' The difference between 'making correct entries' and 'toying with bones' is not so great: in both cases things are being manipulated without regard to their living implications" (p. 24).

28"Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," in Reader-Response Criticism, Jane P. Tompkins, ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), p. 19.

29The particular makeup of the listening group is important for the other narrators as well. Kurtz, for example,

has tried to tell his truth to the Russian, but only when Marlow, "one of the gang of virtue," comes along does he feel he has someone he can trust. His comment to the manager on the others with whom he has associated is "I had rather be alone than have the kind of men you can dispose of with me" (p. 32). The group the frame narrator addresses is precisely the group that might pick up and read Heart of Darkness: the very fact of having selected such a book makes it more likely that a sympathetic listener will be found.

30Conrad, says Schwarz, "usually . . . believed in the act of telling as a means of sharing one's subjectivity with a responsive soul. Marlow's quest for a responsive mind--whether it be for Kurtz . . . in the original experience of the present effort to communicate with an audience--is usually motivated either by a feeling of excruciating loneliness or a need to share the burden of consciousness" (p. 53).

31"The Failure of the Imagination," in Heart of Darkness, Nostromo, and Under Western Eyes: A Casebook, C. B. Cox, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 76.

32Lawrence Graver makes the comment that Marlow "tries to get his listeners to recognize their own complicity with all the forces of destruction described in the story" (Conrad's Short Fiction [Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1969], p. 78). This suggests, quite rightly, that Marlow's auditors, whether they recognize it or not, participate in the sins generated by both devils--the "flabby devil" and the "savage devil of the land." This is certainly also true for Kurtz, who discourses all the way down the river about his career and his ivory--who even expects kings to await him with honor (p. 69). He is drunk with power from both devils. Even Marlow is not above profiting from the exploitation of Africa (p. 12). This is another evidence of the enigmatic nature of Conrad's story. Although the two devils oppose each other, in another sense, they become one. Marlow tries to implicate his listeners, who are both seamen and men of commerce, in "all the forces of destruction described in the story."

33Hawthorn comments on the distinction between experience and knowledge in Heart of Darkness: "This distinction between experience and knowledge is one that Conrad makes in different ways very frequently in his work. His habit of burying narrative within narrative in his novels--and Heart of Darkness is a good example of this--is a way of enacting this objectification of experience. The narrator does not experience, he or she recounts and comments on an experience. Indeed there is internal evidence in Heart of Darkness that Conrad saw meaning to be separate from experience" [quotes the "kernel-haze speech"] (p. 28). To me, however, it seems

clear that the implied reader, as well as each of the other insiders, does experience, even if vicariously. Marlow recounts an experience, but in doing so re-experiences it. Paradoxically, the insider must have both experience and the knowledge that comes from objectifying experience.

³⁴Hawthorn argues that "just as Marlow tells his listeners that they could 'see more' than he could, so too the readers of the novel, looking at Marlow through the eyes of the primary narrator of the text, far from being cut off from the events described, are in a better position fully to understand them precisely because the narrative is displaced from them" (p. 29).

³⁵Narrative Discourse (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 260.

³⁶(Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), p. 252.