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MARLOW'S RHETORIC OF  
(SELF-) DECEPTION IN *HEART OF DARKNESS*



Barry Stampfl

A SPEAKER WHO DELIBERATELY SEEKS TO MISLEAD his addressees aptly might be said to employ a rhetoric of deception. The language of one who does not intend to mislead but who has allowed his understanding to be occluded, by contrast, might be described as a rhetoric of self-deception. Although not ironclad, the distinction does seem to imply considerable logical and moral polarization. Consider the contrast between Iago and Othello, for example. Both perform criminal acts, but the treacherous Iago knows what he is about while the blundering Othello in important ways does not. Iago's self-knowledge makes him a villain while Othello's impercipience marks him as a tragic dupe. My point is simply that common sense would find it difficult to split the difference between these positions. If one knows something, then one cannot also simultaneously not know it. Nonetheless, given a theory of a divided self such as that afforded historically by psychoanalysis, a third position combining elements of the first two is conceivable. A rhetoric of (self-) deception would be informed by half-knowledge; it is the speech of someone deluded and yet also deliberately deceiving, who both knows and does not know what he

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is about. In this formulation the effaced “self-” within the parenthesis appears as the site of conflict and of the suspension of contradictions. Partaking of that uncanniness that adheres to all evocations of the unconscious, the idea of a rhetoric of (self-) deception can be brought into play only by an uncanny text that demands the recognition of an epistemic condition midway between sight and blindness.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is such a text. I will rely on psychoanalytic theory to provide the conceptual framework for a desublimated investigation of Marlow’s narrative style.<sup>1</sup> The discussion’s point of departure and guiding rubric throughout is the Freudian formulation of negation (*verneinung*). But this analytical tool does not remain unchanged as it is applied to Conrad’s novella. As we shall see, the linkage within *Heart of Darkness* between negators (“no,” “not,” “none,” and so on) and belief qualifiers (“as if,” “as though,” “like,” and others) expands the field of negation’s explanatory force. Moreover, its application to Conrad’s story leads to an identification of the unconscious with processes of imperialist history: specifically a Conradian rather than a Freudian insight.<sup>2</sup> Negation in this essay instigates a polemic against idealism in the name of exegesis. The assumption that Marlow is in good faith when he attempts to convey the meaning of his experiences still deforms much *Heart of Darkness* criticism.<sup>3</sup> Studies of Marlow’s rhetoric

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<sup>1</sup>My approach interrogates the surface structure of language more insistently than is generally the case in psychoanalytic studies of fiction in an attempt to take advantage of fundamental homologies pertaining between Freud and Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* explores mysteries of the divided self; “Negation” supplies a syntactic test for the presence of the syndrome of intellectualization. The limited scope of this essay does not allow for discussion of the other stories that feature Marlow as a narrator.

<sup>2</sup>In his so-called “speculative writings,” Freud theorizes the psychological dimensions of social contract. See especially *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Nonetheless, there is nothing in Freud so incisive in its focus on the historical phenomenon of imperialism as is *Heart of Darkness*. More often than not, Freud’s clinical commitment and emphasis on family romance inhibit the application of depth psychology to political institutions and trajectories.

<sup>3</sup>Eloise Knapp Hay notes the gradual acceptance of her position (first published in 1963) that Marlow’s “ambiguous sympathy with ‘the civilizing work’ in Africa differs distinctly from Conrad’s view” (ix). Responses to Garrett Stewart’s “Lying is Dying in *Heart of Darkness*” (1980), a fairly recent reprise of Hay’s argument, indicate that the issue at least remains alive. See especially Juliet McLaughlan’s essay on “The ‘Value’ and ‘Significance’ of *Heart of Darkness*” (1983). My sense is that confidence in Marlow is still widespread, although no doubt most critics would insist on qualifications. Ian Watt’s treatment in *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (1979) seems representative. Although he recognizes Marlow’s uncertainties with strong language (209), he concludes that Marlow is “a persuasive fictional voice for that movement towards human solidarity which Conrad had affirmed as his essential authorial purpose” (214).

have tended to reproduce this assumption uncritically.<sup>4</sup> Identifying a linguistic mechanism of unconscious bad faith, negation comprises an appropriately subversive supplement to the taxonomy of Marlow's stylistic devices. Application of the model desublimates and politicizes our understanding of his epistemological crisis. Freud's succinct essay on the topic begins the argument by describing a mode of (self-) deception pertinent to some of Marlow's most characteristic lexical choices.

"Negation" (1925) describes a phase in the psychoanalytic surmounting of repression in terms of the surface structure of the analysands' language. Specifically, Freud investigates the Janus-faced role of negative particles, pronouns, and function words as they operate in psychic economies moving uncertainly toward self-knowledge. In a crucial respect, such "no's" are mechanisms of psychic liberation: "The content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is *negated*" (235, original emphasis). Freud draws attention to the therapeutic implications: "With the help of the [linguistic] symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression and enriches itself with material that is indispensable for its proper functioning" (236). At the same time, however, Freud sees that the locutions in question essentially are faithful retainers to the process of repression. They only undo one of its consequences—"the fact, namely, of the ideational content of what is repressed not reaching consciousness" (236)—and ultimately give rise only to "a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists" (236). In fact, the rendering of the repressed ideational content is predicated upon a separation of the intellectual function from the affective process. For psychoanalysis and for literature, nothing could be more fateful. As intellectualization continues the work of repression in a tenacious rear-guard action, words and particles of negation are implicated in a thematics of head/heart misalliance crucial not only to Conrad but also to Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James as well as many others.

Freud's highly condensed examples show how his analysands' precarious half-knowledge is expressed, stabilized, and maintained by the rhetorical pattern of negation. In one of these, a patient is reported as saying, "You ask who this person in the dream can be. It's *not* my mother." Freud emends this to: "So it *is* his mother" (235). By applying a simple transformational rule—delete the negating locution—Freud arrives swiftly at a useful association. Of course, the patient does not accept its pertinence—not at first. What may make the resistance especially

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<sup>4</sup>Donald C. Yelton, James L. Guetti, and Werner Senn are three acute scholars interested in the surface structure of language whose approaches seem bound by overly-rationalistic assumptions.

stubborn is not so much an assumption that the association is erroneous but rather a way of regarding the association and perhaps the work of therapy in general as speculation belonging purely to the domain of the intellectual judgment. The preconscious/conscious system is characterized by the fact that thing-presentations therein are bound to the corresponding word-presentations; psychoanalytic knowing (and healing) involves the recovery of affective memory.<sup>5</sup> But the deep feelings we presume to be attached to the name of “mother” undergo no reintegration when the patient speaks of his dream despite the fact that the trace of the mother is present. Still these feelings may not be recollected even if the patient is brought to acknowledge the figure in the dream as his mother. As Freud notes: [often in analysis] “we succeed in conquering the negation . . . and in bringing about a full intellectual acceptance of the repressed; but the repressive process itself is not yet removed by this” (236). “No” had marked the mother association as an invalid speculation. Later on, even if the patient no longer considers the association invalid, he/she still may think of it as mere speculation. The question of appropriate effect is circumvented by a stratagem initiated by the linguistic manœuvre of negation.<sup>6</sup>

As the corollary of a psychodynamic theory of the mind, negation gives the lie to the dream of a unified identity. The function of the negators Freud pinpoints is to negotiate an impasse between shards of self; their blending of revelation and concealment is in the service of a radically fragmented psyche. A closer look at Freud’s speculations concerning the psychogenesis of the intellectual judgment—an origin that Freud believes the phenomenon of negation lays bare—indicates subversive implications here for personal autonomy and the search for truth that might be easily lost in the prognostic optimism that informs “Negation” and others of Freud’s clinically-oriented papers. In short, the employment of “no” as a kind of magical purifier of tabooed associations is atavistic but not aberrational. Our earliest decisions are purely narcissistic. When a mature speaker returns to this earlier mode of sensibility, as in clinical negation, the irrational makes itself known as a living presence.

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<sup>5</sup>See especially Freud’s essays concerning “The Unconscious” and “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through.”

<sup>6</sup>Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis define negation as “a process by which the subject, although formulating one of his until now repressed desires, thoughts, feelings, continues to defend himself from it by denying that it belongs to him” (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 201). This definition elides the example of the patient who dreamt of his mother—where the truth value of the association is denied—but points reliably to the essential identification of negation with intellectualization.

Originating from the pleasure ego's desire "to introject into itself everything that is good and to eject from itself everything that is bad" (237), the incipient faculty of judgment is unconcerned with truth. It distinguishes the edible from the inedible with an eye to favorable self-definition. Freud remarks, "Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral—instinctual impulses, the judgment is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit this out', and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out' " (237). Later on the "definitive reality-ego" develops a more sophisticated query to replace the formulation "Do I want to eat this or not?" At this later stage of development:

It is now no longer a question of whether what has been perceived (a thing) shall be taken into the ego or not, but of whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be re-discovered in perception (reality) as well. It is, we see, once more a question of *external* and *internal*. What is unreal, merely a presentation and subjective, is only internal; what is real is also there *outside*. In this stage of development regard for the pleasure principle has been set aside. (237, Freud's emphasis)

The possibility of truth as correspondence between internal presentation and external reality comes into existence with the advent of this second determination of the intellectual judgment. The pleasure principle is set aside—but does not disappear, as the phenomenon of negation shows clearly. The "not" of the patient who dreamt of his mother expresses an ambiguous refusal to introject something distasteful irrespective of its truth-value—an act of reality tasting, not testing.

In order to appreciate the implications for *Heart of Darkness*, it is useful at this point to refer to Werner Senn's study of *Conrad's Narrative Voice* (1980), an admirable inventory of Conrad's stylistic devices. Senn's lucid exposition helps to orient our discussion in at least three ways: 1) he documents the ubiquity of negators in *Heart of Darkness* and describes their narrative functions; 2) he establishes thematic connections between negators and other stylistic features, notably verbs of mental action and "as if" locutions; and 3) he develops a canny interpretation of Marlow's epistemological crisis which excludes psychoanalytic readings of his syntactic structures. The convergence in Senn's work of precise linguistic analysis with that assumption of Marlow's integrity as a narrator which is the Covering Cherub of *Heart of Darkness* criticism makes him a valuable touchstone.

Senn's understanding of Conrad's negative vocabulary comes into focus most clearly perhaps apropos of his discussion of deverbal negative adjectives. Insofar as they derive from transitive verbs, lexical items of the type "impenetrable," "inconceivable," and "incredible" "denote the negation of the ability to perform a [mental] action" (27), that is /seeing, seeing through, understanding/. In Conradian context, these words "evoke

that sense of bafflement that stimulates active, imaginative inquiry and interpretation but also discourages all hope of ultimate and complete success" (35). The epistemological pessimism encoded within deverbally negative adjectives thus appears as an incentive for a search for truth. Discussing *Heart of Darkness*, Senn observes that the more an event baffles Marlow, "the more it also challenges his power to understand and to pronounce upon it" (60). To the reader, deverbally negative adjectives administer a bracing dose of "epistemic agnosticism" as part of a technique for reaching a glimpse of truth.<sup>7</sup> Other versions of "no" appearing in Conrad's story are folded into the same explanatory rubric.

That Senn's interpretation of Conrad's negative vocabulary is excessively idealistic becomes evident when we bring Freudian negation to bear. Upon arriving at the Central Station, for example, Marlow finds out that the steamer he is to command has been sunk. A brief passage gives an account of his reaction at the time and of his subsequent reflection. As Marlow reports: "I did not see the real significance of that wreck. I fancy I see it now, but I am not sure—not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid—when I think of it—to be altogether natural. Still . . . But at the moment it presented itself simply as a confounded nuisance" (72). Taking, with Freud, "the liberty of disregarding the negation and of picking out the subject-matter alone of the association" (235), we read the passage as a confession that Marlow knew and knows "the real significance of that wreck." Marlow's three "not's" most immediately resist the verb "see," the reiterated thematic hub of the two sentences. The effect is a sense of lingering uncertainty that answers to Marlow's needs as a well-intentioned individual integrated within a depraved social order. If Marlow does not know, he cannot tell. But his hint that the sinking may not have been natural is substantiated by strong circumstantial evidence suggesting the existence of a plot against Kurtz by the manager of the Central Station, most vacuous of hollow men.<sup>8</sup> Envious of Kurtz's success in sending back ivory, the manager has sought to delay rescue and thus give the deadly climate of central Africa time to remove his rival. If this inference is accepted, then Marlow's profession of impercipient proceeds from an equation of sight and sin. The manager conspires, but Marlow is merely im-

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<sup>7</sup>Senn emphasizes that in general the linguistic devices he studies are meant to produce effects of psychic and aesthetic distancing: "To make the reader both participate in an experience and at the same time see its significance, then, is the difficult feat that Conrad's narrative art continuously seeks to perform" (9). In the case of the deverbally negative adjective, Senn's treatment pointedly opposes the critique of Conrad's obscurantism historically made by E. M. Forster, F. R. Leavis, and Marvin Mudrick.

<sup>8</sup>See Cedric Watt.

plicated in a train of events that oddly resembles a criminal conspiracy. Marlow's negation ascribes to the wreck an undecidable quality in order to forestall (self-) accusations of collusion.

Another profession of bewilderment from *Heart of Darkness* proves amenable to much the same analysis. Just before entering the copse that comes to be called the grove of death, Marlow sees a big empty pit. Then he sees a narrow ravine filled with smashed equipment.<sup>9</sup> My concern here is with the larger of the two cavities. As Marlow relates:

I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. 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 something to do. I don't know. (65)

Marlow has seen "untamed" natives paddling on the surf; he has seen subjugated natives in chains; he is about to meet moribund natives too weak to be of further use to the Europeans. All of this suggests that the hole is a grave for spent workers, the final phase of a system of exploitation. Again a sinister inference is required by persuasive circumstantial evidence. A further speculation seems inescapable: the victims have been forced to dig their own burial hole before being left to die. This cruel refinement follows from the economics of forced labor. As workers predictably lapse into inefficiency, they are assigned a final chore of self-disposal. Marlow registers isolated images of atrocity with sensitivity but balks at the perception of deliberate planning that without exaggeration may be described as genocidal. If the hole is a grave, it is evident that Marlow's irony regarding "criminals" and the possible "philanthropic desire" of colonialists is seriously inadequate, hemmed in as it is by earnest protestations of ignorance as to the hole's purpose. Moreover, Marlow concludes these protestations in the present tense: "I don't know" rather than "I didn't know." Apparently, even as he tells his story, he still does not get it.

Freud's model readily elucidates Marlow's negatives as the unconsciously purposive mechanisms of a divided self. In defiance of common sense, Marlow seems both to understand and to not understand the incriminating import of his story at every phase of its relation. As an honorable man, he wants to tell the truth whatever the consequences; as a co-conspirator, he needs to perpetuate the lies that have always been

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<sup>9</sup>Frederick Crews is the only critic I know of to cite the description of the two holes ("Conrad's Uneasiness—and Ours"). Crews understands Marlow's description as a veiled reference to the primal scene: "To look at such a passage with comprehension of its plentiful symbolic detail is to have removed oneself from Marlow's literal difficulties; the text threatens to become no longer a story but a clinical document" (58).



used to justify imperialism. He really believes in some of these lies (that is, in the saving power of "efficiency"). The conflicting demands of multiple Marlows are economized by "no's" that permit the expression of the repressed ideational content but suppress the question of appropriate affect.<sup>10</sup> From these observations it appears that the dynamic of Marlow's epistemological crisis has been generally misunderstood. The truth is assaultive in *Heart of Darkness*, not evasive, and the difficulties that attend its reception stem from its too intense presence.<sup>11</sup> The truth is the return of the repressed as current political scandal. Language is not inadequate for its expression; the story is full of passages that powerfully conduce to its discovery. But resistance blocks understanding and communication. Marlow reflexively declines to introject associations injurious to his ideal self-image.

Besides negators, another class of locutions is crucial to this defensive effort. These are the belief qualifiers: words such as "as if," "evidently," "as though" and "like" which express some uncertainty about the truth value of the assertions they introduce.<sup>12</sup> Feud does not associate such phrases with the psycholinguistic maneuver of negation, but Senn points out that "as if" and variations thereof pervasively appear in collocation with negative locutions throughout *Heart of Darkness*. As "the analysis of isolated features soon leads to the discovery that everything hangs together" (9), Senn discovers that "no's" and "as ifs" are thematically intertwined. Quoting James Guetti, Senn summarizes their relation in this way:

[Marlow's position in *Heart of Darkness*] involves the recognition of ultimate defeat but also a dogged persistence and attempt to "make do." It involves, also, a kind of "as if" thinking, whereby one continually attempts to order experience

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<sup>10</sup>Henry Staten's essay on *Heart of Darkness* usefully lays stress on Marlow's affective deflections and distortions and amply acknowledges his unreliability as a narrator (725). Staten, however, in his discussion of "what it is that is evaded" (722) to some extent minimizes the novella's engagement with sociopolitical horrors, focusing instead on mourning and the pathos of death.

<sup>11</sup>Obviously, my remarks here especially challenge certain deconstructive readings. See for example J. Hillis Miller's "*Heart of Darkness* Revisited." But critics of many different types tend to speak of the story's truth as something elusive.

<sup>12</sup>Besides "belief qualifiers," items from this vocabulary of uncertainty variously are termed "figurative tags," "words of strangement" (Boris Uspensky 85) or "commitment indicators" (Roger Fowler 43). George Lakoff's work on hedges provides an interesting perspective from modern linguistics. Hedges are words such as "evidently," "technically" or "in a manner of speaking" that qualify the assertions to which they are attached. Whereas Lakoff does not treat "as if," "like," or other locutions classically associated with the simile under this rubric, they readily may be understood as hedges.

with the sense that no final commitment to any such attempt is possible, with the awareness that imaginative structure is “necessary fiction” (Senn 38)<sup>13</sup>

A deverbal negative adjective such as “impenetrable” signals the existence of a riddle that perhaps is not solvable; “as if” with dogged persistence tentatively attempts to decipher it anyway. The hesitancy encoded within the belief qualifier makes it clear that although the cognizing subject suspects that “the ‘real thing’ cannot be rendered directly,” he desires “to render it nevertheless, if merely by inference” (131). Thus, belief qualifiers generically are instruments of conjecture in a search for truth.<sup>14</sup>

In the tradition of Hans Vaihinger, whose *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* (1911) remains the topic’s most comprehensive treatment, Senn’s treatment of belief qualifiers is rationalistic in the sense that it assumes the existence of a stable, truth-seeking subject.<sup>15</sup> In terms of Freud’s two-part account of the intellectual judgment’s development, Senn sees belief qualifiers as emblematic of the second, reality-seeking determination. The question of “whether something which is in the ego as a presentation can be rediscovered in perception (reality) as well” (237) is encapsulated in the function of hedging locutions such as “as if” when they are conceptualized as conjectural. But even if we concede that the normative function of belief qualifiers is conjectural, surely it would be complacent to assume that all “as ifs” investigate “things-as-they-are” in good faith. Might not the hidden forces of the irrational exemplified in the phenomenon of negation spill over to the belief qualifier? Indeed, *Heart of Darkness* is the quintessential text to demonstrate the possibility of belief qualifiers we may term “anti-conjectural”—those that systematically evade or suppress the discovery of truth.<sup>16</sup> Such anti-conjectural “as ifs” evidently are closely related to the truth-demolishing “no’s” of clinical negation.

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<sup>13</sup>Guetti’s remarks originally appear in *The Limits of Metaphor* (129).

<sup>14</sup>Seymour Chatman calls “as if” an “instrument of conjecture” in the course of his analysis of *The Later Style of Henry James* (73).

<sup>15</sup>Hans Vaihinger’s brilliant treatise emphasizes the ubiquity of “as if” thinking as a problem-solving strategy that cuts across all boundaries of intellectual life. Adducing examples from biology, geometry, philosophy, and jurisprudence, he demonstrates the practical efficacy of the fiction as a mechanism for circumventing and overcoming conceptual difficulties that otherwise might halt the progress of thought. Vaihinger’s work is innocent of a Freudian conception of the unconscious.

<sup>16</sup>Helene Deutsch’s clinical category of “the as if personality” constitutes an important precedent for an anti-conjectural reading of belief qualifiers. According to Deutsch, the “as if” personality is one whose “emotional relationship to the outside world and to his own ego appears impoverished or absent” (262), resulting in shifting identifications, lack of affect (with simulated affect), and easy substitutions of one relationship for another. Because Deutsch considers the “as if” personality’s chronic mimicry to derive from “a real loss of object cathexis” (265), her work on this point remains stubbornly separate from Freudian

A look at several examples illustrates the anti-conjectural effect. When Marlow tells of his experiences in the aforementioned grove of death, his language is interspersed with belief qualifiers that do not interpret an enigmatic situation so much as they muffle the shock of a terrible revelation. In the grove, he finds Africans languishing with every appearance of having been worked to the point of extinction. Marlow reports:

One, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing, in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, *as if* overcome with a great weariness; and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, *as* in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. (67, my emphasis)

Not only dehumanized but denatured, the natives have been reduced to phantom-like things denoted in the individual case by the pronoun “it.” The adjectives “intolerable” and “appalling” register moral indignation; the references to “massacre,” “pestilence,” and “contorted collapse” amplify the horrific impression. So strongly does the passage convey the immediacy of human suffering that it is possible to overlook the operation of a counter-force resistant to the full disclosure of imperialist wrong-doing even here, where such wrong-doing seems to be called to judgment. In the belief qualifiers “as if” and “as,” however, we detect an attempt to pass off a political scandal as a kind of hermeneutical difficulty. The black man resting his forehead manifestly *is* overcome with a great weariness. Circumstantial evidence is so convincing as to require this minimal inference. The phrase “as if” treats a plain fact as if it remained to be proved, this subtle, ambiguously purposive maneuver allows Marlow to make legible the ideational content of the repressed. “As” in the passage above significantly transfers attention from a moral to an aesthetic plane: the sight of the phantoms reminds Marlow of “a picture” of massacre or pestilence. “What is” tacitly is changed into mere appearance or mere hypothesis when Marlow employs a vocabulary of uncertainty to evade painful affect.

Another example from Marlow’s description of being hired by a large trading company based in the Sepulchral City supports the view that Marlow’s belief qualifiers characteristically are devoted to mystification, not discovery. Marlow remarks: “I began to feel slightly uneasy. You know I am not used to such ceremonies, and there was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just *as though* I had been let into a conspiracy—I don’t know—something not quite right; and I was glad to get out” (56,

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negation, where, as we have seen, repression is the issue. From a rhetorical standpoint, however, her interpretation of “as if” as an emblem of bad faith connects readily with Freud’s reinscription of “no.”

my emphasis). The cause of Marlow's unease is rendered with great vagueness—"something ominous," "something not quite right"—and once again Marlow shifts to the present tense to insist, "I don't know." But all of this uncertainty and vagueness is contradicted by a clause embedded within the brief passage that does present an incisive interpretation of Marlow's experience: "I had been let into a conspiracy." The strange fact of the truth's presence within a discourse that noisily complains of the truth's inaccessibility contradicts a conjectural explanation of Marlow's language. Certainly a conspiracy to defraud and exploit the people of the "dark continent" is in place so far as the company is concerned, a plot involving misrepresentation at home and robbery, murder, and slavery abroad. Nor can it be denied that Marlow is joining up. "As though" is the interface between incriminating knowledge and saving ignorance, the syntactic mechanism that allows Marlow to reveal and obfuscate in a single stroke. Dictionary definitions exclude the idea of inadvertent conspiracy, but Marlow's "as though" is a key component in a rhetoric of (self-) deception. If one's participation in a criminal conspiracy is something that remains to be proven, one may deal with the possibility as a kind of intellectual problem rather than as a moral crisis.

A third example of the anti-conjectural function may be found in the fully transactive simile Marlow uses to describe the odd impulse that led him to seek employment in Africa in the first place. Noticing a map of that continent in a shop-window, Marlow remembers the maps he had perused as a child which had represented Africa as a blank space. As Marlow relates:

True, by this time it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness. But there was in it one river especially, mighty big river, that you could see on the map, *resembling* an immense snake uncoiled with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me *as* a snake would a bird—a silly little bird. Then I remembered there was a big concern, a Company for trade on that river. Dash it all! I thought to myself, they can't trade without using some kind of craft on that lot of fresh water—steamboats! Why shouldn't I try to get charge of one? I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me. (52-53, my emphases)

The simile charts Marlow's fragmented identity. On one hand, "he"; on the other, "it." The revelation of the river/snake's effective dominance strips the human narrator of that prestige traditionally accorded an author. "He" becomes merely a fascinated transmitter; real authority resides in the mysterious force which inserts itself into the story at this point in the shape of a serpent. The loss of personal autonomy recorded here

militates against a conjectural interpretation of the figurative tags “resembling” and “as.” Such an explanation is too rationalistic to do justice to Marlow’s experience of being possessed by a sinister “other.” “Resembling” is the portal through which the snake gains entry into the text to establish its mastery; “as” elaborates the master/slave relation so established. When the figurative tags subsequently are dropped—“the snake had charmed me”—the imagined eerily pervades the real. “Resembling” and “as” implicitly mark the images of snake and bird as mere tropes. By minimizing Marlow’s state of thralldom—passing it off as something imaginary—they unleash the irrational.

The pattern established by these examples generally holds true. Repeatedly Marlow attaches subtly debunking “as ifs” to strikingly suggestive statements. Simply listing some of these passages indicates the ubiquity of anti-conjectural belief qualifiers in *Heart of Darkness*.

The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt *as though* instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth. (60)

They [enslaved natives] were called criminals, and the outraged law, *like* the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (64)

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 king. (92-3)

I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, *as if* to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom [Kurtz] had been a dishonouring necessity. (133)

It was *as though* an animated image of death carved out of old ivory [Kurtz] had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide—it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, *as though* he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. (134)

What made this emotion so overpowering was—how shall I define it?—the moral shock I received, *as if* something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly. (141)

Their bearing [of Sepulchral City’s citizens], 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. (152)

I asked myself what I was doing there [visiting the Intended], with a sensation of panic in my heart *as though* I had blundered into a place of cruel and absurd mysteries not fit for a human being to behold. (my emphases, 157)

The passages assert or imply incisive interpretations of Marlow’s experiences. But belief qualifiers interrupt the development of synthetic understanding by treating each impression as provisional. The anti-

conjectural “as ifs” scattered as if haphazardly throughout are so many pockets of resistance with respect to the text’s unnerving tacit definition of western culture as a vast criminal conspiracy.

Just as words of negation make possible the expression of the repressed ideational content, so do anti-conjectural words of uncertainty. The same message of repudiation encoded within “no’s” and “as ifs”—“I will not eat this”—preserves the tenuous status quo of a divided self. If “as ifs” repudiation seems milder, a matter of possibilities rather than certainties, it is not the less trenchant for that. In fact, the examples from *Heart of Darkness* considered above suggest that Marlow’s case is more serious than that of Freud’s patients. Belief qualifiers are effective agents of intellectualization because they readily are understood as expressions of valid philosophical anxieties: that is, as making reference to the embarrassments of interpretation and the limitations of perception, language, or narrative. Insofar as it is sustained by a network of anti-conjectural “as ifs,” Marlow’s bad faith is more convincingly disguised than that of the man who dreamt of his mother.

Even as Conrad implicitly extends Freud’s analysis of the rhetoric of (self-) deception, he revises some of Freud’s global emphases. Fading from the Conradian vision are the family romance and the therapeutic telos. Lacking the chaperone of an analyst and confronting all the sorrows of imperialist history, Marlow may not ever overcome the process of repression. Repression is written large in the institutions that support the conquest of the world. Culture makes the forbidden wishes of decent citizens come true, as if by magic. With respect to this scandalous process—this curiously impersonal cultural imagination that perpetually transforms “what is” and which seems to be both everywhere and nowhere—language may be deceitful or illuminating, may indeed both cover up and reveal at the same moment. Marlow’s “no’s” and “as ifs” perform this delicate two-fold operation, encapsulating his dilemma as citizen of empire.

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