space of civilization’s dissolution or foreclosure,” Brown writes: “Marlow encounters Kurtz in a space beyond signification and is left without recourse to the distinguishing codes of civilization, with their controlling influence and authority. The reality structured through these codes has slipped, fallen away to reveal, in Lacanian terms, the monstrous grimace of the real” (p. 365).

WORKS CITED


TONY C. BROWN

Cultural Psychosis on the Frontier: The Work of the Darkness in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

Therein consists the most elementary formal definition of psychosis: the massive presence of some real that fills out and blocks the perspective openness which is constitutive of “reality.”

-SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, “Grimaces of the Real”

Heart of Darkness has pervasively proved a central document in postcolonial discourse. As Homi K. Bhabha puts it, “the long shadow of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness falls on so many texts of the postcolonial pedagogy.” Notably, Bhabha cites Edward W. Said’s Culture and Imperialism as an exemplary example of such a text:

1Slavoj Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears,” October 58 (Fall 1991): 52.

Heart of Darkness is the novel that invites the most comment and interpretation. It serves as a resource for many of the central arguments in the book. In Said’s early discussions of the complex address and consolidation of the imperial idea as ideology, Heart of Darkness features prominently. In the later, postcolonial perspectives that deal with resistance and opposition, Said demonstrates the “anxiety of influence” generated by the novel on the anti-colonialist fictions of Ngugi wa Thiongo, The River Between, and Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North.3 When we turn to Said’s book, Bhabha’s comments are clearly borne out as Conrad’s novel takes on a privileged and at times pervasive role. Importantly, however, there is a particular tension running throughout Said’s discussion and use of Heart of Darkness to which Bhabha does not immediately direct our attention. This tension emerges from Said’s recognition of an ambivalent status afforded colonialism in Conrad’s novel, as it at once offers critics a perspective from which can be gained critical leverage on the discourse of colonialism and yet is itself one of the most concentrated and influential documents of modern colonial discourse.4 In terms of the former, Heart of Darkness has commonly been seen to present a subversive perspective through Marlow’s perversion of the West’s image of itself as the place of light and civilization. After his up-river journey into the heart of darkness, the Western metropolis is revealed to Marlow cloaked in the folds of darkness he encountered at the ends of the earth: the white woman, the Intended, resembles Kurtz’s African woman; the tall houses lining the city streets appear in the profile of the posts with human heads on them outside Kurtz’s Inner Station; and the pounding of his heart echoes the beat of primitive drums heard in the depths of the jungle. As Bhabha himself observes, in Marlow’s revelation of the darkness at home in the very heart of Europe through such a “discourse of daemonic doubling,” he “holds the everyday reality of the Western metropolis through the veil of the colonial fantasms.”5 In doing so Marlow performs a perversion of the West’s ideal-image of itself as the true seat of civilization and light—a perversion which offers a certain critical leverage for disrupting the perpetuation of this self-image.

3Ibid., 272, n. 1.
5Bhabha, “How Newness Enters the World,” 213.
In line with the latter pole of the ambivalent status of colonialism recognized by Said, the “long shadow” of Conrad's novel has also been seen in far less positive terms. Most famously, Chinua Achebe has argued Heart of Darkness constitutes a document of high European racism to be rejected and purged of all cultural currency. In these terms the “long shadow” of its influence is felt more as a dark mantle to be cast off than a critically enlightening experience. For Achebe, Africa functions in the novel as a “foil” for Europe, constituting a negative, blank space onto which is projected all that Europe does not want to see in itself, everything that is abhorrent and abject. The difference between this position and the former, which locates a subversive potential in the text, has largely to do with the respective degree of attention paid to the place of Africa in Heart of Darkness. It is with the place of Africa in Heart of Darkness that the place of Africa in Conrad's novel is notably most concerned, focusing on the way this place is marked by racial abjection. But in the invocation of a subversive potential in the novel’s “discourse of demonic doubling,” the place of Africa is largely ignored — a situation resulting from a failure to adequately take into account the continued repetition of Africa as a zone of abhorrence and abjection. What occurs in Marlow’s viewing of the Western metropolis through the “veil of the colonial fantasim” is what might be called a “metonymy of the veil,” as one fantasy (Western metropolis as civilized place of light) is displaced by another (Western metropolis as horrific place of darkness). While this might correctly recognize the perversion of the West’s ideal self-image, it ignores what must remain the constant repetition of Africa as the primal seat of darkness: in Marlow’s perverse or ironic presentation of Europe qua the darkness, he must still uphold, as it were, the first term (i.e., Africa as darkness). So while Marlow effectively questions the West’s self-image, he maintains, at every point, the West’s image of Africa as a negative space of darkness.

A consequence of ignoring the repetition of Africa as primal darkness is a failure in critical terms to ascertain what kind of place “the darkness” actually occupies. Much, of course, has been said of the horror of the darkness in Conrad’s novel; little, however, has been done to trace its precise conceptualization. Critics (postcolonial or not) have by and large simply seen the darkness as horrible, stopping short of asking how it operates to generate “the horror” in the conceptual organization of Heart of Darkness. J. Hillis Miller’s work on Conrad might be cited as an exception, as Miller, more than anyone else, has sought to trace the peculiar conceptualization of the darkness in Conrad’s writings. However, what largely remains missing from Miller’s account of the darkness is a specific consideration of how the darkness works to produce the horror in Heart of Darkness. I want to ask in what way does the darkness thus work, and what is it that is produced through the work it does. An examination of the darkness not simply as horrible but as the horror’s cause will, I suggest, show how it works to effect for Conrad what can be called “cultural psychosis.” I will specifically examine this psychosis as a frontier phenomenon in Heart of Darkness — a phenomenon which is later recognized by Marlow at home in Europe as a latent threat of a larger cultural psychosis. As we shall see, through the interruption of Europe’s civil codes on the frontier the darkness — to bend Slavoj Zizek’s words to my purposes — “fills out and blocks the perspective” of civilization and its constitutive codes.

In order to approach the operation of the darkness, it is worthwhile, first of all, to take into account the historical situation which gave rise to the text of Heart of Darkness and Marlow’s journey up-river presented in it — a journey which has been readily recognized as set in the Congo Free State since the novel’s first publication. Between his earlier phenomenological reading of Conrad’s darkness and later deconstructive approach, Miller presents a sustained engagement with the role darkness plays for Conrad. What I have referred to as Miller’s earlier reading of Conrad’s darkness can be found in Poetics of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), 13–39. Here Miller argues that Conrad’s darkness is not only “the origin from which things come, and the end toward which they go. It is a metaphysical entity” the darkness is present at every moment and in every thing and person, underlying them as their secret substance” (28). In his later reading, J. Hillis Miller, “Heart of Darkness Revisited,” in Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essay on Twentieth-Century Literature (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 181–94, Miller shifts attention from the content of the darkness to its textual inscription, examining the figuration of darkness in the text. According to this reading the “darkness” is that which can ever be revealed in itself, only referred to indirectly — that is, the darkness is strictly unrepresentable literally or figuratively (see 186).

Though as Christopher L. Miller has observed, the Congo Free State or even Africa is nowhere mentioned in Conrad’s novel as the location of Marlow’s up-river journey: “The referent of Heart of Darkness is so commonly understood to be Africa, and specifically the Congo Free State at the time of King Leopold II’s reign of terror and profit at the end of the nineteenth century, that it may come as a surprise to learn that ‘Africa’ is never specifically named as its referent.” But as he goes on to point out, Africa returns in the phrase “heart of darkness”: “in a text where every detail points to Africa, ‘Africa’ alone is missing, encoded in a new phrase, ‘heart of darkness.’” Christopher L. Miller, Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), 170.

Europe, accounts of grotesque atrocities occurring in Léopold II’s Congo Free State were appearing in an ever increasing quantity. A notable effect of this was the recurrence of an image of the Congo as an abject zone of horrors. The degree to which this image became embedded in the European social imagination is indicated by a headline from a 1909 edition of the London-based magazine *Truth*. “The Devil’s Paradise: A British owned Congo” introduced a series of articles detailing the brutality of representatives of the Arana Brothers’ Anglo-Peruvian rubber company in their treatment of the native populations of the Putumayo area in south-western Colombia. The “Congo” of this headline is specifically Léopold’s Congo Free State, and it functions as a kind of shorthand for a frontier-zone of brutality and terror—a condition, it should be realized, that is perceived to have been brought about by the abhorrent actions in the area of European colonialists. The use of the name “Congo” in this way clearly suggests that by 1909 the Congo Free State had come to be a readily recognizable and repeatable signifier of an horrific and corrupt colonial violence: the Congo Free State always returned, so to speak, to the same place in the topography of the European social imagination, constantly occupying that special place so often marked in European conceptions of overseas colonial domains: Hell on earth.

There is, however, in the context of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses of colonialism, a distinctive feature of the Congo Free State’s recurring image that must be observed. In the production of the Congo Free State’s image as a Hell on earth, it is noticeable that the cause of the horror has an ambivalent status. It was not the case that reports of atrocities in the Congo Free State shocked their European audiences simply because they reported hideous events; rather, what was so abhorrent about these events was that they occurred as part of what was supposed to be the actions of a civilizing mission. The explicit and quite dominant role played by colonial forces in the production of the horror of the Congo disturbed a commonplace conception of the colonial zone as itself inherently barbaric. In the discourse of colonialism—particularly in a late-nineteenth-century context where the noble savage had all but disappeared—when it was a space of terror being spoken of, it was so typically the “daemonic” environments of the far-off colonies which were perceived as the terror’s source. It was, of course, such an abhorrent condition which the civilizing force of European colonization was supposed to set right. In the case of Léopold’s Congo Free State, though, *la mission civisatrice* appeared to perform the hideous barbarism it was supposed to eradicate, effecting a degree of confusion as to the cause of those horrors reported as occurring in the colony.

It is this historical context that *Heart of Darkness* both emerges from and extends. Indeed, the ambivalent status of what I have called the horror’s “cause” in the Congo is perhaps nowhere more famously brought out than in *Heart of Darkness*. In Marlow’s account of his journey up-river there can be observed an obscure vacillation between the horror as an effect of colonial intervention and the location of the horror’s cause as the environment itself. It could be argued there is a sense in which these two dimensions of the horror’s cause double what has already been seen as the simultaneous perversion and repetition of the novel. Firstly, to show the horror of the situation as generated by European intervention suggests the colonial mission is not so much a project of bringing light to benighted savages as it is itself a process of darkening, thus perverting the West’s image of itself as bearer of light and civilization. Then, secondly, locating the cause of the horror in the African wilderness would appear a fairly clear repetition of Africa as the hideous primal darkness. The first notably offers evidence for the presence of a critical view of colonialism in Conrad’s novel, and is at first sight a more obvious source of “critical leverage” on the discourse of colonialism than the perversion of the West’s self-image I began by discussing. However, in the oscillation between the cause *qua* colonial intervention and the arguably more dominant cause *qua* wilderness, the former loses its possible critical edge by remaining an account merely of atrocious things happening in the colonies. This contrasts to the perversion of the West’s self-image which intimates the eruption of the darkness *at home in Europe*, representing not so much a perversion, as a repetition of the image of the colonial frontier as a place of barbarity—a barbarity, in fact, marked most notably in the distorted bodies of African men.

The cause *qua* colonial intervention is most clearly presented when Marlow first arrives in the colonial zone and surveys the desolation of the Company Station. The hideous panorama confronting Marlow as he makes his way unguided through the Company Station appears the direct result of the colonialists’ actions in the area. What Marlow calls “the grove of death,” for instance, is a product of “The work!” as he sardonically puts it, directly recalling the grandiose rhetoric of the civilizing...
mission used earlier in the novel by his aunt. The natives he finds in the grove had been “helpers” in the building of a railroad, that great self-monument of nineteenth-century imperial expansion. But they were made to work under such poor conditions they inevitably got fatally sick, and were left to crawl away and wait for death in various poses of geometric distortion, embodying for Marlow the barbarity of the colonial forces:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. . . These motubund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of the eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reeked at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. . . Near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up. 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. (pp. 31–32)

The further up the river Marlow goes, though, the more the cause of the hideous situation resides in the dark wilderness, which becomes the heart of darkness itself. If the darkness overtakes the colonialist, as in the privileged case of Kurtz, it is as a quality otherwise latent, lodged deep within him, but which往往 due to intimate contact with the lawless wilderness. When the “civilized” person resides in Europe, where Conrad believes behavior is effectively structured and censored by the policing mechanisms of civilization, the subterranean darkness is held at bay (and it should be recalled at this point that the great perversion of Heart of Darkness is, of course, the revelation that the darkness does exist in Europe, albeit in a restrained form). This condition is, for Conrad, a positive restraining or foreclosure of something truly abhorrent. But he also believes that once the civilized soul is displaced onto the colonial frontier of the Congo, these structuring and screening mechanisms too are displaced and ultimately distorted into mere shadows of their original form as the policing practices and institutions necessary to uphold them are markedly absent. The wilderness becomes then, in opposition to the state of instituted civilization in Europe, a lawless, thoroughly uncivilized place: it manifests as an unrestrained savagery which by its very nature threatens as a massive presence that will “block” the imposition of civilized order. Indeed, Heart of Darkness can be seen to suggest that the wilderness will destroy those foolish enough to attempt such an imposition.

Of course, European civilization can stumble at home, so to speak. It certainly does not need to go beyond itself to the colonial frontier in the far-off places of the world (as one stands in Europe) to become displaced from itself through the loss of an ordering consistency. However, the perception of the frontier as a place where this readily happens persists as a common perception, and Heart of Darkness in particular stands out as one of the most influential representations of such a frontier. In other words, Conrad’s novel presents a singularly sustained and influential account of what I have called “the loss of an ordering consistency” upon the displacement of the codes and conventions of civilization onto the colonial frontier. As will become clear, the colonial frontier manifests as a stumbling block for civilization in Heart of Darkness in the form of, or rather in the formless presence of, a void which forecloses upon European culture. And it is as such a formless presence that the darkness operates as the horror’s cause in the novel. The terms with which to begin to think through this foreclosing of civilization come from the life of Conrad as it emerges in certain written sources.

One of the most significant accounts of the effect Conrad’s Congo encounter had on him comes from his close friend and editor, Edward Garnett. Recalling conversations he had with Conrad, Garnett suggests “Conrad’s Congo experiences were the turning-point of his mental life and . . . [their] effects on him determined his transformation from a sailor to a writer.”12 Conrad himself had said to Garnett that he thought his time in the Congo responsible for a personal transformation, though not from sailor to writer. Rather, Conrad believed he had undergone a metamorphosis from “a perfect animal” without a thought in his head, “to a thinking, reflecting being who could mobilize the mechanisms of a critical reason.”13 From such comments, Garnett received the

11See Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness” and Other Tales, ed. Cedric Watts (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 160, 156, and 149. All further references are cited parenthetically in the text.


13Ibid.
had declared he would go those many years before: the center of the
African continent, deep in the Congo Free State. Despite this achieve-
ment, however, Conrad did not feel satisfied or triumphant. Instead,
he felt a great melancholy descend upon him, and was confronted
with the brutal “end to the idealised realities of a boy's daydreams.”

What Garnett and Conrad both articulate to greater or lesser
degres is the collapse of Conrad's experiential organization. They each
speak of this collapse in terms of the destruction of certain fantasies—
Garnett referring to Conrad's youthful “illusions,” and Conrad to
the “idealised realities” of his boyhood “daydreams.” But importantly
they recognize that these fantasies framed and therefore structured
Conrad's reality: it was in terms of these fantasy-frames that Conrad
experienced experience, so to speak; he had taken them with him to the Congo;
expectantly, as frames organizing his perception. Traumatically for him,
he was thrown away when they proved inadequate. In other words,
upon his encountering something which — in Žižek's phrase— “fills
out and blocks the perspective ... constitutive of 'reality',” Conrad
lost the fantasy-frames structuring his experience of and in the world. As
we have seen, according to Garnett this traumatic event “left him gazing
into the heart of an immense darkness”— that is, into a blank space
beyond any possible imaginary identification.

The terms of Conrad's traumatic encounter point us in the direc-
tion of the Lacanian tuéché, or “the encounter with the real.” 'Put most
simply, to encounter the real is to reach a point at which “reality”—
including its structuration in relation to the fantasy-frame — loses its
consistency, collapsing and dissolving. Of course, for Lacan, the encoun-
ter with the real is always and necessarily missed in the case of the “nor-
mal” person, who most typically is lured towards the encounter with
the real at that fleeting, transitory moment in-between dreaming and
waking, but manages to awake and escape into “reality.” In the every-
day run of things, then, the real is passed-over. The specific character-
istic to be noted of Conrad's “encounter,” however — and as we shall

11 Ibid., 195–96. Notably, Garnett does not isolate the cause of Con-
ad's loss of “the generous illusions of his youth”; the “sinister voice of the Congo” could refer to either
the forces of colonial intervention or the wilderness, or indeed to both. On the impact of
the terms of the drams of colonialism on Conrad, see
an’ voice of colonialism, see

10 Conrad, Geography and Some Explorers, in Last Essays, ed. Richard
Curle (London: Dent, 1926), 24. This scene with the map was a deeply significant experi-
ence for Conrad and he returned to it several times in his writings. Most notably, Marlow's
appearance for Conrad and he returned to it several times in his writings. Most notably, Marlow’s

15 Ibid., 195–96. Notably, Garnett does not isolate the cause of Con-
ad's loss of “the generous illusions of his youth”; the “sinister voice of the Congo” could refer to either
the forces of colonial intervention or the wilderness, or indeed to both. On the impact of
the terms of the drams of colonialism on Conrad, see
an’ voice of colonialism, see

see later, Marlow’s too — is the failure to pass over “the real”: rather, it “fills out” the frame, foreclosing on the ideal order and orderings of civilization. Or, to put it another way, Conrad’s “gazing into the heart of an immense darkness” upon losing the structuring “illusions” of “reality” corresponds to the sense of a traumatic event as an encounter with the real that is not missed but confronted in all its unbearable terror.

When we consider the enormously important role of language and other cultural structures of understanding in Conrad’s conception of subjectivity, the traumatic significance of the event which effectively evacuates them becomes acutely apparent. With great insight James Clifford has suggested that Conrad presents with Heart of Darkness one of the first and one of the most powerful articulations of a subjectivity anchored in the constitutional codes of culture and language. For Clifford, Conrad “built into his work a vision of the constructed nature of culture and language” and of the “arbitrariness of conventions,” which included a belief in the individual as an entity that is fashioned by such conventions and constructions. Accordingly, an irritation which forces an emptying out of culture’s conventions and constructions would also force an emptying out of the fashioned self. The loss of language and its aligned structures of understanding is effectively, then, a loss of the self which has been fashioned in the co-ordinates of culture. In Heart of Darkness such an experience of dissolution is caught, in its most extreme form, in the horror of Kurtz’s fall, and in Kurtz’s case death was the result of this experience. By contrast, the experiences of Conrad and Marlow, though involving a confrontation with the threat of dissolution, were not as extreme as Kurtz’s, and they both survive to tell their tales — though undergoing, as we have seen with Conrad, a significant transformation of self.

There is a notable paradox — or at least seeming paradox — in Conrad’s and Marlow’s repetition of the event through narration in that, to do so, they must call upon the conventions and constructions of a culture whose limits this event had painfully exposed to them. Indeed, the event in question threatened the very collapse of these cultural codes constituting both themselves as individuals and the reality in which they move. In Lord Jim, Marlow articulates an analogous situ-

21 Ibid., 95–96.

ation using the ship as metaphor for a properly ordered culture: “When your ship fails you, your whole world seems to fail you; the world that made you, restrained you, took care of you.” But in representing the event which threatened, so to speak, the destruction of the “ship” in Heart of Darkness, Conrad and Marlow are seeking to re-institute the authority of culture’s codes, and thereby foreclose the threat of dissolution. There is a famous dream of Freud’s which best enables us to think through this situation: the dream of Irma’s injection. In the first part of the dream, Freud encounters, in Lacanian terms, “the real” — an encounter which disturbs, in this case, the specular dual-relationship held between Freud and Irma up until that point. The “encounter” occurs when a curious Freud, propelled by his desire, peers down the throat of his party guest Irma:

There’s a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, of the secretary glands par excellence, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety. Spectre of anxiety, identification of anxiety, the final revelation of you are this — You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness.

The encounter with the real, it will be recalled, is an encounter which threatens an acute dissolution. In this case the cause of that threat appears as the night of the absolute origin, where no distinctions can be made and no conventions determine behavior. Supporting the use of Freud’s dream in reading Heart of Darkness, it can be said that in Marlow’s journey up river in Heart of Darkness he traveled down an analogue of this throat, witnessing the very “foundation of things”: “[g]oing up that river,” he says at one point, “was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (p. 48).

In the second part of Freud’s dream there is an abrupt switch as he finds himself in a space populated by his doctor friends. As Joan Copjec notes, in the passage from the first to the second part of his dream
Freud "flee[s] from the real . . . into the symbolic community of his fellow doctors." In doing so, he guards against the terrifying real by escaping to a determined place from where he can discuss "the real" with other figures of qualified authority. In short, Freud's dream suggests that by discussing the real, and giving it signification within an authoritative context, a defense against it can be erected.

In the place of Freud's fellow doctors, it can be said that Conrad had his readers and Marlow his four ship-deck listeners (the Lawyer, the Accountant, the Director of Companies, and the anonymous framing narrator). And though Conrad once described the interior experience of the creative artist in precisely the same terms he used to describe the lawless solitude of the wilderness in Heart of Darkness, it is, as he was aware, in the distinctly public and structured domain of civilized intercourse that the text's signification is given, and which I have in mind when I refer to the possibility of giving signification to the event of Conrad's experience. It is in the public domain that an "artistic product" such as Heart of Darkness circulates — and it is also in this domain, albeit a small and fictionalized one, that Marlow tells his story: in an "objective" relationship established as such by the presence of his listeners. In the exchange between Conrad and his readers, or between Marlow and his listeners, there occurs the "giving" of signification to the event as they each call upon the conventions and constructions of language and culture in an attempt to enable some kind of management and control of the trauma.

Sown into the conceptual economy of Heart of Darkness, however, there is a sharp problematization of the ability to successfully manage and control the "content" of a trauma through its signification — a problematization rendered in the pervading problematic of representation. At a heightened, climactic point in the novel there is revealed the absolute and terrifying failure of signification and its attendant authority in the midst of the dark wilderness; an examination of this heightened moment will make explicit what I earlier referred to as the foreclosure of European culture and reveal to us the operation of the darkness.

As Marlow tells the part of his story where he searched for Kurtz in the jungle at night after Kurtz had escaped from the steamer to return to the wilderness, moving "towards the gleam of fires, the throb of drums, the drone of weird incantations" (p. 82), he asks his listeners to see the terror of the situation not in the threat of being knocked on the head but in the confronting of a man to whom no appeal could be made through the received civil codes of Europe. In the immense solitude of the jungle, Kurtz's soul has lost contact with the governing order of civilization as it exists in Europe: "don't you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head — though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too — but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low."

The phrase "in the name of" is crucial here, and possesses a double significance. Firstly, Marlow's use of the phrase bears witness to the deferral necessary in asserting the authority of civilization's codes when displaced to the fundamentally different location beyond civilization's margins. Civilization does not move out to the frontier zone and repeat itself in its full presence, as if achieving the sublation of the other in the dialectical advance of the selfsame. "In the name of" reveals that the source of authority lies elsewhere, not present on the colonial frontier, but to be deferred to from this place of difference. It was precisely because the authority of civilized codes lay elsewhere that Kurtz, in his isolation, was "found out" by the wilderness; the hollow core left by the absence of civil law left him open to the wiles of the wilds. Of course, the discursive repetition of the colonial sphere as different is a major strategy of colonial power: marked by the trace of its difference-as-inferiority in relation to Europe, the frontier zones need to be subject to the redeeming forces of colonialist imposition. The philanthropic rhetoric of Léopold II, for instance, made sense in Europe not because the frontier zone of the Congo was the repeatable signifier of identity or superiority, but because it was constituted in colonial discourse as an abhorrent, inferior difference to be eliminated.

24 Joan Copjec, "Vampires, Breast-Feeding, and Anxiety," October 58 (Fall 1991): 27.
25 Ibid., 28.
26 In A Personal Record (1912), Conrad writes: "And least of all can you condemn an artist pursuing, however humbly and imperfectly, a creative aim. In that interior world where his thought and his emotions go seeking for the experience of imagined adventures, there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstance or dread of opinion to keep him in bounds." Cited in Michiel Heyns, "'Like People in a Book': Imaginative Appropriation in Lord Jim," in Fincham and Hooper, eds., Under Postcolonial Eyes, 78.

27 See Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in The Location of Culture, 111.
Secondly, "in the name of" calls for a recognition of the arbitrary aspect of language so important to Conrad generally, but acutely revealed here in the peculiar displacement of European language away from Europe in the depths of the night-time jungle. Notably the act of naming itself appears throughout Marlow’s narrative as the most obvious of language’s arbitrary practices, as various nouns are used in a way that, Marlow implies, constitutes a series of mis-namings. Furthermore, these mis-namings appear an imposition — an often brutal, physical imposition by imperial forces. Thus, what Marlow sees as the expressly arbitrary naming of natives as “enemies,” “criminals,” and “rebels” is shown to legitimate, and even incite, their murder or their enforcement into “chain gangs.” But in Marlow’s night-time jungle confrontation with Kurtz, in not being able to “appeal in the name of anything high or low,” the relational and qualitative terms of sense-making — high and low — have become indistinguishable, without anchorage in any stable system of language: words appear emptied of meaning, doomed only to float detached in the overwhelming confusion of the scene. In short, they have lost the power to point beyond themselves.

Leading up to his night-time encounter with Kurtz, Marlow’s general sense of indistinguishability had become increasingly prominent the further up-river he traveled. Most explicitly it had been figured in spatial terms when the steamer was stranded mid-stream amidst a heavy fog. The disorientation of the fog contrasts though with the confusion in confronting Kurtz in the wilderness in an important respect. The former presents the disorientation of a blinding whiteness, while the latter is an encounter with an impenetrable darkness; the differing effects of these two states have to do primarily — though by no means exclusively — with epistemology and signification respectively. The indistinguishability of the fog is an expressly epistemological disorientation in the sense that due to its blinding aspect it cuts Marlow off from enlightenment. That is, it is the difficulty of knowing in the midst of the fog that is of concern for Marlow. In the tradition of metaphysics beginning with Aristotle and arguably running through Conrad at this point, the situation of blindness and deafness engendered by the fog is a situation rendering knowledge impossible. Cut off visually and aurally from everything beyond the blurred edges of the steamer, the rest of the world “was nowhere,” without “a whisper or a shadow”:

What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her — and that was all. The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind. (p. 55)

In short, Marlow is faced here with an epistemological problem generated by the redundancy of the senses necessary for generating knowledge, and as a result “the world [is] nowhere.”

In the case of Marlow’s night-time confrontation with Kurtz, though, the failure to distinguish is more specifically a confusion produced by a failure of signification and its corresponding identifying practices. Marlow becomes acutely aware that the arbitrary identifying practices of civilization fall short at this point: they lack the authority and power to impose themselves in this frontier colonial situation. Kurtz, in the darkness, occupies the space of civilization’s dissolution or foreclosure, being, in his “alignment” with the wilderness, out of joint with civilization. “I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (p. 82): Marlow encounters Kurtz in a space beyond signification and is left without recourse to the distinguishing codes of civilization, with their controlling influence and authority. The reality structured through these codes has slipped, fallen away to reveal, in Lacanian terms, the monstrous grimace of the real. In the confusion of the colonial situation’s extremity, then, the authority of the “symbolic community” of civilization is rendered problematic through the inability of words to properly take hold, as it were, in the resistance of the situation to signification.

It has to be emphasized, though, that the scene of the night-time encounter is a climactic, heightened moment in the narrative. It depicts a privileged moment among a series of strange happenings — happenings

so strange, in fact, Marlow repeatedly doubts their occurrence. It is the heightened aspect of the scene that explains how Kurtz could manifest, at this point, the dissolution of civilization and its language, and yet have been virtually defined, the further up-river Marlow went, by his supremely seductive eloquence. Of all of Kurtz’s “gifts,” Marlow says, “the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words” (p. 62). But in leaving the steamer to return to the jungle, Kurtz becomes “utterly lost” as the darkness of the wilderness overtakes him, sucking him into a void beyond recognition and beyond any code. This is the horror as foreclosure, the horror of a void resulting from the voiding of civilization; and this is Africa as the first term in Marlow’s ironic “perversion”: the primal site of the void.

Africa as this “first term” has to be repeated as such for the “metonymy of the veil” — that is, the displacement of Europe’s ideal self-image as the place of pure light and civilization — to take place. Without the organizational and conceptual force of Africa as a nodal point, the perversion of Europe’s ideal self-image makes no sense. Thus, importantly, it does not allow a reconsideration or reconfiguration of Europe’s image of Africa as its primal other, but only the repetition and reinvestment of this image. In short, the perversion of Heart of Darkness is limited to the revelation that Europe already contains this “otherness” which it vigorously tries — through its philanthropic discourse, for example — to put beyond the frame of its own proper reality. We might say in conclusion, then, that Marlow’s perversion is, perhaps as perversion always is, ambivalent: as much an undoing as a repetition.

Glossary of Critical and Theoretical Terms

Most terms have been glossed parenthetically where they first appear in the text. Mainly, the glossary lists terms that are too complex to define in a phrase or sentence or two. A few of the terms listed are discussed at greater length elsewhere (feminist criticism, for instance); these terms are defined succinctly and a page reference to the longer discussion is provided.

AFFECTIVE FALLACY First used by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley to refer to what they regarded as the erroneous practice of interpreting texts according to the psychological responses of readers. “The Affective Fallacy,” they wrote in a 1946 essay later republished in The Verbal Icon (1954), “is a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does). . . . It begins by trying to derive the standards of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism.” The affective fallacy, like the intentional fallacy (confusing the meaning of a work with the author’s expressly intended meaning), was one of the main tenets of the New Criticism, or formalism. The affective fallacy has been contested by reader-response critics, who have deliberately dedicated their efforts to describing the way individual readers and “interpretive communities” go about “making sense” of texts.

See also: Authorial Intention, Formalism, Reader-Response Criticism.

AUTHORIAL INTENTION Defined narrowly, an author’s intention in writing a work, as expressed in letters, diaries, interviews, and conversations. Defined more broadly, “intentionality” involves unexpressed motivations, designs, and purposes, some of which may have remained unconscious.

The debate over whether critics should try to discern an author’s intentions (conscious or otherwise) is an old one. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C.