The Women Do Not Travel: Gender, Difference, and Incommensurability in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

It is a story of the Congo. There is no love interest in it and no woman — only incidentally.

—JOSEPH CONRAD, “To T. Fisher Unwin.”

Despite Joseph Conrad’s anxious confession to his publisher T. Fisher Unwin in 1896 that there would be “no love interest... and no woman” in Heart of Darkness, or at least “only incidentally,” the novella he produced two-and-a-half years later is radically preoccupied with women and the ways they influence his “story of the Congo” (199). Yet Conrad allows women scarcely any narratological or thematic attention in Heart of Darkness; instead, women appear to function primarily as ancillary details to Marlow’s narration about Kurtz and his adventure to the “heart” of Africa. However, despite women’s near invisibility — a half-presence that echoes the text’s preoccupation with shadows and darknesses — they are an always-palpable presence in the background of the text. They tropologically illuminate the relationships of difference and distance that Conrad establishes between Europe and the Congo, and they figurally represent the incommensurability between different ideologies and different genres of speaking and knowing that are so central to the text’s status as a framed oral narration.

The women in Heart of Darkness have, in fact, suffered from a double invisibility. First, Conrad invites his readers to participate in Marlow’s insistence that the women are “out of it” (p. 63) by figuring women as palimpsestic, ghost-like, half-presences. At the same time, the women of the text have remained nearly invisible because so few critics have chosen to examine their roles. Once we begin looking (and we do have to look to find them), no less than eight women are present in Heart of Darkness: the Belgian aunt who secures Marlow a job when

1Since its initial publication and early reviews, critics have found Heart of Darkness excessively atmospheric, as well as structurally and adjectively difficult, shadowy, and undecidable. Ross Murfin offers an excellent overview of some of these early- and mid-century critiques, pointing out that in 1903 John Masefield thought it consisted of “too much cobweb” (p. 139); in 1936 E. M. Forster considered it “a little too fuzzy” (p. 139); and in his highly influential work, The Great Tradition (1963), F. R. Leavis concurred with Forster, also stressing its “overwhelming sinister and fantastic ‘atmosphere’” (Leavis, 173).
metropole, while they are decidedly static and unable to wander between cultural, ideological, and national boundaries, as do Marlow and Kurtz. In terms of Marlow's understanding of his voyage, the women are neither here nor there; or rather, they are only ever here or there, since they are powerless to transgress the limit that such a boundary implies. Mostly the women are sedentary, stationary, and confined to their own territories, metonymically embodying the separate cultural, racial, and geographic identities at play in the novel. The aunt sits in her upper-middle-class domestic parlor in Belgium as she sends Marlow off to his adventure in Africa; the two knitting women sit in the outer room of the Company offices and glance at the men en route to the Congo; and, at the end of the text, Kurtz's Intended receives Marlow in a "lofty drawing-room" (p. 90) where they both "sat down" for their mournful exchange (p. 91). Even the movement Conrad grants to the African woman at the Inner Station only further emphasizes her essential immobility: she struts along the river bank as she waits at Kurtz's departure, but she, too, is confined to her own territory.

Placed as they are, Conrad's women reinforce a sense of extreme separation between the colony and the metropole, and as such they are crucial for guarding and preserving difference between Africa and Europe. Marlow's aunt embodies whiteness as well as the racist politics of the European colonizing mission, while she also represents the ignorance of the sedentary white Belgian masses who do not and cannot participate in Marlow's knowledge of the "dark" continent. Marlow's aunt is evidently very comfortable, encomended in privilege, and capable of serious influence with people such as "the wife of the high dignitary" of King Léopold's Belgian Congo. Before he leaves for Africa, Marlow finds her "triumphant" as she praises his work for the Company, and they drink tea during "a long quiet chat by the fireside" (p. 26). Marlow, however, only mocks her flattery, considering her as a carrier for the ethics of the colonizing mission. In one of the many moments in the text when Conrad reveals his famous attention to the power of the written word, Marlow declares that his aunt has been sufficiently influenced by the "rot let loose in print and talk just about that time" to gain the sort of limited, ideologically saturated and very public knowledge of colonialism the Company wishes the general populace to possess (p. 27). Suggesting both familial rootedness and European cultural supremacy, the aunt upholds the "decency," order, calm, and "triumph" of the metropole without moving beyond the domestic space of her own parlor.

Despite differences of race and place, yet with striking similarities in terms of her rootedness, the African woman at the Inner Station — the "wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman" who mirrors the "sorrowful land" (p. 76) — emulates and helps to inscribe the racist distinctions the text has already established between the colonial vision of native "savages" awaiting exploitation and the civilizing mission of the colonists, the white "emissary [es] of light" (p. 27). Marlow describes her in terms of her physical beauty, her warrior-like posture and clothing, and her indecipherable language. Distinct from the ugliness of the white women who knit in the Company’s offices — the "slim one" with a "dress as plain as an umbrella cover" (p. 24) and the "old one" with "a wart on one cheek" (p. 25) — the black native woman is granted a sexual and valuable body: she is "gorgeous," and laden with costly ornaments that "jingle and flash" as she moves in her slow procession. But while the beauty and confidence distinguish her, she too is restricted to her own territory, and Marlow describes her with a simile that links her to the land she represents, as though by contiguous extension:

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.

She came abreast of the steamer, stood still, and faced us. Her long shadow fell to the water's edge. Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and dumb pain mingled with the fear of some struggling, half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. (pp. 76–77)

Unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage" (xlix).

Ian Watt reads Marlow’s misogyny as specifically directed to “women of the well-to-do and leisure class to whom his aunt and the Intended, and presumably the womenfolk of his audience, belong.” Treating Conrad’s text in the context of Victorian ideology, Watt argues that “Marlow’s perspective, in fact, assumes the Victorian relegation of leisure-class women to a pedestal of philanthropic idealism high above the economic and sexual facts of life” (“Heart of Darkness and Nineteenth-Century Thought” 114).
natives ever control the land, nor does it grant them "dignity." Instead, the inscrutability of Africa's wilderness becomes another metaphor that repeatedly reinforces both the literal silence of its inhabitants and their imagined ignorance.

In an excellent article that does consider a range of female figures in *Heart of Darkness*, Bette London suggests that in Conrad's text we need to "consider gender and race as interlocking systems whose mutually authorizing relationships support the dominant cultural perspective" (235). The dominant cultural perspective is, of course, colonial imperialism, and Conrad uses race and gender together to enforce the distinct alterities between Belgium and the Congo and colonizer and colonized that a model of colonial subjugation demands for its successful operation. In similar terms, Jeremy Hawthorn proposes that "in *Heart of Darkness* issues of gender are inextricably intertwined with matters of race and culture" (183).

Even so, by placing women in these fixed yet liminal territories, Conrad goes further than merely accentuating the disparities and distances between Africa and Europe; he also emphasizes important incommensurabilities between different modes of knowing, speaking, and experiencing. That is, while Conrad's text explicitly marks out radical incompatibilities between Europe and Africa and between Europeans and those he calls "savages," these geographic, racial, and cultural differences are sustained and enforced by the incommensurabilities in knowing and speaking that he establishes along gender lines.

Part of what is at stake in Marlow's narration and his brief but recurring attention to women is a need to distinguish two entirely different communities of people predicated on modes of knowledge and experience. The male protagonists possess both empirical and abstract conceptual knowledge of the colonial enterprise in both Africa and Europe—while the five major women of the text (Marlow's aunt, Kurtz's Intended, the African woman, and the two knitting women in the Company offices) apparently possess only conceptual knowledge of either Africa or Europe. Because of his aunt's acceptance of the public ideologies in support of colonialism, Marlow claims that women in general are out of touch with truth. . . . They live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation, would start up and knock the whole thing over. (p. 27)
Instead of reading his aunt’s complicity with the Company project as metonymically representative of the ethics of the colonizing mission—which he does elsewhere—he reads her indoctrination as a specifically feminine ignorance. This “world” of women that Marlow imagines is distinguished by its non-relation to “truth” and its excessive concern with aesthetics over practicality. In contrast, the “men” Marlow refers to as “we” (effectively interpellating both his audience on the Nellie and Conrad’s early male readers) possess a sufficiently accurate version of the “facts” about the daily business of colonization to make theirs a world that does not “fall apart”—to use both Yeats’s and Achebe’s important phrase—at least not until well into the unimaginable twentieth century. The functional world that men have constructed abides by a utilitarian and empirically tested logic simply because it pursues its ends effectively. It recognizes such details as the “fact” that the Company is “run for profit” (p. 27). The world Marlow imagines for women, however, is distinct from that of the men who actually go to the “heart” of the “dark” continent to set up their version of a “world” insofar as it is fixed, static, and domestic: neither the women’s world nor the women themselves can migrate to different territories or do more than manage the incommensurable differences of colonial order that Marlow and Kurtz confront as they travel. That is, neither women nor Africans (regardless of gender) are capable of navigating between types of knowledge any more than they are capable of leaving the territory that defines them.

In a text that is on a very fundamental level about language and its limits, narrativization and narratability, and speech and speakability, some of the terms Jean-François Lyotard sets up in The Differend: Phrases in Dispute might help us diagnose how Conrad’s constructions of gender, genres of knowledge, and modes of speech mutually reinforce the distance and incommensurability between the male and female “worlds” of Heart of Darkness. Lyotard suggests that a differend marks the failure or impossibility of translating one rhetorical or speech genre into another. He writes: “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible” (13). I want to propose that the incommensurability between Marlow and the women of his narration reveals a differend that in turn elucidates the broader incompatibilities between modes of knowing and speaking in the text. As I will show, the women participate in and inhabit a different discursive genre from men since they are most often silent, uncomprehending, and indecipherable. Lyotard further proposes—in terms that echo Conrad’s articulation of the different “worlds” and “universe” of the sexes—that a differend describes “[i]ncommensurability, in the sense of the heterogeneity of phrase regimens and of the impossibility of subjecting them to a single law… For each of these regimens, there corresponds a mode of presenting a universe, and one mode is not translatable into another” (128). In Heart of Darkness, Marlow’s narrative mode of speech presents and reveals a “universe” in which women are untranslatable and quite literally unable to be told. Marlow is only capable of reading them as metaphorical and meets a limit precisely because he cannot translate them to the real.8

Later in the novella—after Marlow has claimed that his aunt and women in general are “out of touch with truth” (p. 27)—he pushes this exclusion further to insist, with an intratextual echo of his own words, that women should be “out of” his whole story. In the middle of his description about his steamer’s dangerous approach to the Inner Station he happens to mention “the girl,” but then catches himself:

“I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie,” he began suddenly. “Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—that completely. They—who women I mean—are out if it—that should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse. Oh, she had to be out of it. You should have heard the disinterested body of Mr. Kurtz saying ‘My Intended.’ You would have perceived directly then how completely she was out of it.” (pp. 63–64)

8In “Lying as Dying in Heart of Darkness,” Garrett Stewart takes this point even further to argue that “both” women of the text (in this case the Intended and Kurtz’s “mistress”) “cohere in the narrator’s mind’s eye, are emanations of Marlow as well as of Kurtz” (328), and he proposes that the Intended’s “black-draped mourning is Kurtz’s darkness visible” (331). It would be going too far to pursue this line of thought further and propose that the women are never more than Marlow’s symbolic projections, but Stewart is right to point out the consistent manner in which women function as a kind of tabula rasa on which Marlow’s preoccupations are staged. As we will see, the women also take on qualities from the settings that surround them.
Quite strikingly, his insistent repetition in this passage that women are “out of it” marks one of the few places in the text where Marlow interrupts his narrative with an aside to his auditors. Indeed, he stutters and falters in his narration most explicitly at the moments when he is unable to make women a part of his story. Here he “suddenly” stops the articulate flow of his yarn to revise his own terms and preoccupations by asserting that women are not simply of a different world, but ought to be “out of” the story “completely.” His tangent is so filled with hesitations and dramatic caesuras that his very language betrays how unsettling women are to Marlow’s order of things: as figures that cannot quite make their way into narration, or even into language, they resemble Lyotard’s differend because they present a problem — not simply of translation, but of an epistemological incommensurability with Marlow’s genre of telling and knowing.

His repeated insistence that women are “out of it” ought to alert us to the fact that they might be more important to his story than he allows. Marlow’s repetitive insistence on women being “out of it” actually seems to betray his own anxiety regarding women as guardians of difference and players in his own destiny, since they are, in fact, overly imbricated in his story. He confesses this predicament to his fellow sailors with embarrassment: “would you believe it? — I tried the women. I, Charlie Marlow, set the women to work — to get a job. Heavens!” (p. 23). Here he must not only repeat the personal pronoun, “I,” but he feels compelled to name himself to the others in order to stress his own alienation, to perform his alienation from ostensibly unusual behavior. Without his aunt’s intervention, Marlow would never have gained his appointment to the river steamer in Africa in the first place; his aunt is, quite significantly, partly responsible for originating his story.

Not only are women “out of touch with truth,” but Conrad also constructs the women of his story in terms of a different discursive genre from the men in *Heart of Darkness*. In contradistinction to Kurtz’s “folds of a gorgeous eloquence” (p. 89), and Marlow’s exquisite narration to his fellow sailors that takes places with scarcely a pause, the women’s narration and their very narratability are severely restricted. Not a single woman has a name, women scarcely speak, and when they do speak they are misunderstood, deliberately misled, or represented as profoundly lacking a comprehensive understanding of the events in which they participate. The only women of the text who are granted a decipherable language are Marlow’s aunt and Kurtz’s Intended, and they are the only two with whom Marlow converses. Johanna M. Smith argues that Marlow chooses not to “silence” the Intended and the aunt simply because he needs them for his speech. “By mocking the lack of worldly experience which their words convey, he can recuperate that experience as a manly encounter with truth. By having them feebly echo the case Kurtz has made for imperialism, he can reverse the powerlessness evinced in his response to Kurtz’s eloquence” (p. 196 in this volume). In contrast, the African woman is powerfully granted *sound* — a point I will return to later — though for Marlow the sound of her wailing is closer to the “howl” of the “bush” (pp. 60–61) that eerily takes his crew by surprise than it is to language.

In The Differend one of Lyotard’s principal concerns is to explore how parties within discursive encounters involving heterogeneous “phrase regimens” are divested of the possibility of communicating, and are therefore “reduced to silence” (10). While he is interested especially in the philosophy of language and its discursive systems, he also includes a deeply ethical and political dimension to the differend, claiming, “What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them. In the differend, something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away” (13). Without framing his argument in feminist, queer, or racial terms, Lyotard goes very far in describing how institutional and societal modes disallow certain forms of speech or genres of expression by not making space for the possibility of their idiom. That is, a differend occurs not simply when voices are not heard, but because those voices cannot be heard. The voices Lyotard writes of are as unintelligible to the more powerful discourses that frame and contain them (whether these are legal discourses, or whether they involve an exchange in which one of the parties — sometimes *a priori* — is refused the chance for self-articulation) as the women in *Heart of Darkness* are to Marlow’s narration.9

For the majority of the text we do not and cannot know why women partake so completely of a different epistemological framework than the men, and it seems that Marlow is quite happy to allow this difference (which generates a differend) to remain unchallenged. He has virtually no desire to explore the incommensurabilities between their systems of

9In her recent study, *Conrad and Women*, Susan Jones points to a fascinating letter George Gissing wrote to Joseph Conrad in 1908 in which Gissing claims there is a pressure of speech behind the actual silence of Conrad’s women: “Wonderful, I say, your mute or all but mute women. How, in Satan’s name, do you make their souls speak through their silence?” (qtd. in Jones, 21). His point is idealistic and misogynistic at the same time, though he does touch upon some of the *work* these silent, or nearly silent, women do in Conrad’s text.
knowledge and his own, establishing himself instead as an “Enlightened” reader, as Bette London points out, and “the voice of cultural authority” (241). That is, he is capable of distinguishing between epistemes while confidently remaining within his own. While his aunt is making him “quite uncomfortable” with her naïve praise of the Company’s project, for example, lauding their efforts to “wean those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,” Marlow ventures a “hint that the Company was run for profit” (p. 27). He stops short of a full explanation of his views, which he narrates to his male auditors, and he only weakly expresses his discomfort through the always-ambiguous gesture of a hint. Marlow thus not only allows his aunt to misread his own ambivalence about the Company’s capitalist ventures, but he seems to wish this misreading upon her. He considers her, as with the Intended at the end, incapable of any kind of complex logic or factual understanding...

At the very end of the text, Marlow’s wish to retain a fundamental disjunction between his epistemological framework and women’s in general is highlighted when he chooses to lie to Kurtz’s Intended. Marlow’s desire to visit her has been piqued by Kurtz’s “small sketch in oils” of the Intended — “a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch” (p. 40) — that Marlow first sees at the Central Station before he meets Kurtz. The portrait of a deliberately blindfolded woman who nevertheless functions as a carrier of light draws together Marlow’s general characterization of women as blind, ignorant, and yet oddly capable of illuminating the way into darkness, offering a parallel with his aunt’s procurement of his position and with the ways the women of the story illuminate the epistemological structures and concerns of Heart of Darkness.10 Always one step away from truth and knowledge, women can reflect their reasonable light, but not know where they walk. Importantly, the painting also operates as a symbolic point of currency for Marlow since together with Kurtz’s letters, the blindfolded figure of liberty provides a connecting bridge between Marlow and the Intended, and gives him a reason for visiting her. Marlow chooses to visit her on the pretence of returning what is rightfully hers — to “give her back her portrait and those letters myself” — while he simultaneously admits that his move is made equally out of “[c]uriosity,” and a desire “to surrender personally all that remained of [Kurtz] with me,” including “his memory” (p. 89).

When Marlow does visit the Intended, he is capable only of returning the portrait and her letters, not of giving her Kurtz’s final words; he can return things, but he cannot meet her with language. Their dialogue takes place in a chiaroscuro setting of half-lights and shadows, and as elsewhere in the novella Marlow describes the Intended in terms that suggest she is co-extensive with her physical environment. The room they sit in has a “tall marble fireplace [that] had a cold and monumental whiteness. A grand piano stood massively in a corner with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus” (p. 90), and the room grows increasingly “dark” as their conversation about Africa and Kurtz progresses. The Intended herself is still in mourning and dressed “all in black,” yet she is also aligned with whiteness; she possesses a “pale head,” “fair hair,” a “pale visage,” and she “seemed surrounded by an ashy halo” (p. 90).11

The Intended is predictably eager to hear all that Marlow has to tell about Kurtz’s last days. But even though Marlow has already pronounced that “as it turned out [he] was to have the care of [Kurtz’s] memory” (p. 66), he is unwilling to share either memory or truth with this woman. If Marlow is to insist on meeting Kurtz’s Intended only in the language of lies, it appears he must foreclose communication altogether. Rather than giving the Intended the dignity of a conversation, he mimics her phrasing in a bizarrely sadistic wrestling match that belittles her hopes to learn about her once future husband.12 In answer to her statement, “You knew him well,” he echoes her in profoundly homoerotic language, “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another” (p. 91). His echolalia effectively parodies her desire for knowledge about nothing less than knowledge itself by claiming a supreme (and possibly sexual) form of knowledge for himself. He has already conveyed a stuttering erotic homage to Kurtz that insists upon their eternal “intimacy,” claiming that in his first words to Kurtz Marlow

10 Earlier in the story, when Marlow is first describing the trip toward the Inner Station on the river steamer, he associates himself with someone who is “blindfolded.” Defending his navigational skills he claims he “didn’t do badly either since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip. It’s a wonder to me yet. Imagine a blindfolded man set to drive a van over a bad road. I sweated and shivered over that business considerably” (p. 49). When he later invokes the image of the “blindfolded” woman he again offers the possibility to his readers that he and the women of his story are more intertwined — even metaphorically — than he would like to admit.


12 Henry Staten reads this encounter as a sado-masochistic power conflict between Marlow and the Intended where Marlow possesses a “desire to inflict mourning on a woman and then to drink of her grief” (162).
said the “right thing,” just at the “very moment when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid — to endure — to endure — even to the end — even beyond” (p. 81).

As their exchange continues he finds her responses deeply troubling and finally bars communication with her altogether, recognizing in the “appealing fixity of her gaze” (p. 91) the same language of “glances” he so detests in other women. As Marlow is struggling to piece words together in the hesitating language of discomfort, claiming Kurtz “was a remarkable man. . . . It was impossible not to — ” the Intended interposes “Love him.” This statement works simultaneously as a command, as an assertion of her own love for Kurtz, and as an attempt to meet Marlow on his own discursive level by literally completing his sentence to join his genre of praise. By echoing him in the language of love and desire, however, the Intended pushes his remembrance of Kurtz to its passionate and epistemological limits: her conclusion is precisely the sort of thing Marlow does not want to hear from a woman; it is far too near to the “truth” about his attachment to Kurtz. Marlow experiences this interpolation as a terrifying shutting down of his voice, feeling that she was “silencing me into an appalled numbness” (p. 91). This is, of course, a distinctly feminine position in *Heart of Darkness*, and, along with the sudden revelation of her uncanny knowledge, produces a discomfort from which Marlow is unable to recover.

After a few more moments of an awkward, hesitating dialogue in which Marlow expresses a palpable jealousy about the Intended’s devotion to Kurtz and her assurance of their mutual love, Marlow tells her that he was with Kurtz “[t]o the very end. . . . I heard his very last words,” but then he suddenly “stopped in fright.” The Intended, of course, asks him, with childlike repetitiveness, “Repeat them. . . . I want — I want — something — something — to — to live with” (p. 93). Again she is asking to participate in his language, to know the words he carries as memory. Marlow, however, is incapable of speaking. Rather than tell her the truth of Kurtz’s astonishing last words, and thus uphold his promise to Kurtz to communicate his story to her on a decipherable level, Marlow reinforces their difference by refusing to meet her in the same discursive territory of “truth.” Instead of telling the Intended that Kurtz died muttering “The horror! The horror!” — a statement that Marlow interprets as a “supreme moment of complete knowledge” (p. 85) that “had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth” (p. 86) — he tells her that Kurtz died muttering her (unspecified) name. As such, Marlow ends his story on a differend by directing her away from knowledge to leave her believing in a false romantic vision of Kurtz’s final words. Instead of allowing for the positivity of difference and otherness, Marlow refuses to risk the sort of incommensurability that might flourish if he tried to convey “the horror” to the Intended. Clearly he believes it would be impossible for her to understand his community of errantry and experience, and he chooses to close off an anticipated differend rather than to allow its free play: in effect, he will guard the difference between male and female forms of knowledge as vigilantly as the two knitting women guard “the door of Darkness.”

His lie also binds him irrevocably and phantasmatically to Kurtz since it makes him the sole inheritor of Kurtz’s story. By choosing to lie to the Intended, Marlow meddles with authorship and authority (he is a storyteller, after all) to impose his own revisions on Kurtz’s final statement, thereby effectively authoring Kurtz’s story himself. His lie uncannily marks the moment at which he is closest to Kurtz, yet simultaneously this refusal to honor Kurtz’s contract for truth instantly disperses their community and their “Being in common.” His lie to the Intended — which Marlow has already prematurely confessed to his audience midway through his narration when it slips from his lips as a kind of premature ejaculation of the intention of the whole story — consequently marks the moment when Marlow has lost control over language, narration, or his search for “the truth of things.”

To mark the closure of his story, then, Marlow refuses the possibility of relation by purposefully remaining fixed in a differend as a means of resisting the frightful contact of knowledge between different modes of thought. In his mind we can hear him insisting that women do not travel, and they “live in a world of their own.” His refusal to relate to the Intended is tantamount to claiming a continually shifting epistemological status that no one but himself can discern. By lying to her, and in the split moment that informs his decision to do so, he apparently finds her name (and perhaps the name of “women”) translatable and commensurable with what otherwise seems to be the incommensurability of “the horror.” Within his own mind he might even believe that he is telling her a kind of truth, leaving her ignorant of the “facts” of what really happened, but affirming to himself the affinity between women and “The horror!”

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