2011 Graduate Research Prize Essay

Kurtz and Modernity: The Epistemological Crisis at the *Heart of Darkness*

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English

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the
condition of art should carry its justification in
every line. And art itself may be defined as a
single-minded attempt to render the highest
kind of justice to the visible universe, by
bringing to light the truth, manifold and one,
underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to
find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in
its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the
facts of life what of each is fundamental, what
is enduring and essential — their one
illuminating and convincing quality — the
very truth of their existence.
- Joseph Conrad, Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*

Joseph Conrad lends precious little light to *Heart of Darkness*. "The reader is warned that this book cannot be read understandingly," wrote *Athenaeum* months after its second publication in 1902 (Sherry 139). Nowhere is the novel's ambiguity more shadowed, more obscured than in the enigma lying at the end of Marlow's quest: the barbaric missing agent, Kurtz. What do we actually know about the man? What is true, what is myth? The reader's distance from Kurtz is vast, mediated by an unnamed narrator recounting Marlow's own recollection of Kurtz given nearly two full years after their encounter. Can the reader actually know anything about the "real" Kurtz? This epistemological crisis at the heart of Conrad's novel originates in the ambiguity and complex phenomena of language. The reader and Marlow are united in the vagueness surrounding the specter of Kurtz, a vagueness perpetuated by language, discourse, and the dislocation of meaning. Just as the reader must sift through the threefold mediation of the

narrator, Marlow, and time to decode or locate the "real" Kurtz, so too does Marlow himself face a similar impasse of language when his mythologized impression of Kurtz is fractured upon meeting the man in the flesh.

The great upheaval observed between Marlow's impression of Kurtz-as-discourse and Kurtz-embodied is born of the disparity between linguistic signifiers and their intended signified, as first detailed by Swiss founder of linguistics and semiology, Ferdinand de Saussure. This fundamental ambiguity of linguistics, of the near impossibility of expressing completely "what-really-is" in language, saturates each page of Conrad's novel and is consummated in the "atrocious phantom" (Conrad 59)[1] for whom Marlow searches. Marlow and the reader together become enraptured with the man behind the mythology, a mythology which, once lost as Kurtz's body withers away, is again restored to its original fascination and uncertainty in the dying man's indecipherable last cry, "The horror! The horror!" Through a close and thoughtful exploration of the text and of the linguistic phenomena that inform it, we can see how Conrad's novel serves as a unique and illuminating literary expression of the crisis of knowledge that so defined modernity at the turn of the twentieth century.

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To better understand the complicated linguistic theories operative in Conrad's work, a concise but thorough examination of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) is necessary. The *Cours*, published posthumously from notes taken by Saussure's students, Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, is the foundational text in linguistic and semiological theory, built upon and reconfigured by later thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Noam Chomsky, and Jacques Derrida. Saussure details dozens of theories in the *Cours*, the most important of which are his distinction between *langue* and *parole*, the lexical quality of individual signifiers, and the tremendous ambiguity of meaning which arises from the disparity between linguistic "signifier" and its intended "signified."

Of the discipline of linguistics, Saussure famously writes, "there is no other field in which so many absurd notions, prejudices, mirages, and fictions have sprung up" (Saussure 7). Saussure recognized, as his successors would continue to explore, that the deeper one excavates the qualities of language the more one recognizes its limits, its fundamental inability to communicate knowledge with any semblance of the clarity it was once assumed to achieve. For Saussure, the vagueness of language arises elementally from its most basic unit, the word or "linguistic sign." "The linguistic unit," Saussure writes, "is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms," which he calls the "signifier" and

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[1] All citations from the novel will henceforth be written as page numbers only; e.g. (59).

"signified" (Saussure 65). For Saussure, the communicational effect of language is not located in the units of language themselves — e g. the word, or "linguistic sign" — , but in the associative bond formed between the signifier and that concept to which it refers, the signified. Saussure continues, "In addition, the idea of value…shows that to consider a term as simply the union of a certain sound with a certain concept is grossly misleading" (Saussure 113). In other words, Saussure warns that to assume a given signifier communicates clearly the abstract concept which is intended to be relayed from one party to another appropriates to language a level of precision which it cannot and will never realize. The "associative bond" formed between signifier and signified is not essentially a strong one. An amount of abstract, "language-less" information is always lost in translation from speaker-concept, to chosen-signifier, to auditor-signified.

The disintegration of intended meaning along this linguistic trajectory is due in large part to what Saussure terms "a problem of semiology." "The language problem," he says, "is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that important fact" (Saussure 17). In layman's terms, Saussure recognizes that any given word — or *linguistic sign* — is not a uniform concept, but a multi-faceted complex of separate signifieds and meanings. As semiology shows us, a given word is not essentially semantic, but lexical; that a given word can indicate or connote a multitude of different signifieds demonstrates that a word is in essence a "lexeme," a lexicon of various qualities, and not a "seme" of uniform, irreducible meaning.[2] Saussure treats this concept over the course of several chapters, but summarizes the loss of meaning in semiology in *Writings on General Linguistics*:

> One cannot stress enough the fact that the *values* which basically make up a language system…a system of signals does not consist of either forms or meanings, of either signs or what they signify. They consist of the particular resolution of a certain general relationship between signs and meanings, based on the general difference of the signs *plus* the general difference of the meanings *plus* the previous attribution of certain meanings to certain signs and vice versa. (*Writings* 13)

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[2] For example, the word "boy" is a *lexeme* comprised of the *semes* "young," "male," and "person." This particular lexeme is not at all difficult to interpret. But when one considers highly abstract concepts such as "love," "eternity," or "evil," the multitude of heterogeneous semes which may comprise these lexemes is impossible to list or quantify. This impossibility is the semiological account for the ambiguity of language.

In short, meaning is not located in the word itself, but in the myriad values or significations which linguistic signs can signal, to be interpreted by the listener or reader.

This phenomenon, whereby intended meaning is obscured by the complexity and imprecision of linguistic signs, is significantly amplified in discourse, which Saussure separates into *langue*, or the language in which a given discourse participates, and *parole*, the execution of *langue* by the individual. Saussure explains that "language is not complete in any speaker; it exists only within a collectivity" (Saussure 14). Conversely, "execution is never carried out by the collectivity. Execution is always individual, and the individual is always its master: I shall call the executive side *parole*" (Saussure 13). Kurtz's dying words, "The Horror! The Horror," which will be treated at length later in this piece, provide a useful example of this crucial distinction. In interpreting "The Horror! The horror," we are examining the Saussurean *parole*; Kurtz's utterance is the individual execution (*parole*) of words or signifiers belonging to the English language (*langue*).

Saussure scholar David Thibault explains of the importance of *parole* in language, "…individuals are endowed with causal powers in so far as human actions are characterizable in terms of will, purpose, individual intelligence and intentionality…" (Thibault 24). These "causal powers" of "will and purpose," as Thibault describes them, are the source of ambiguity in discourse. As Saussure notes, individual execution of *parole* is never complete, as is the language system in which it participates. Therefore, as will soon be explored, the yarns spun by the sailors on Marlow's steamboat, Marlow's recitation of his journey to the anonymous narrator, and the novel's narration all serve, collectively, to highlight the incompleteness of Marlow's account of his encounter with Kurtz and the resultant dislocation of meaning.

Some may wonder why Saussure is preferred herein over more contemporary linguists or semiologists like Roland Barthes[3] or Christian Metz, or philosophers like Chomsky and Derrida who consider his work specious and outdated. Scholar Roy Harris summarizes Derrida's issue with Saussure writing, "Saussure is, for Derrida, one of the founders of modern linguistics and, as such, one of the culprits responsible for perpetuating in the name of 'science' an ancient, ethnocentric and flawed view of the relationship between speech and writing" (Harris 171). Right as Harris is, and as valuable as is Derrida's criticism of Saussure, Derrida bases much of his own theories on the signifier-signified-referent scheme Saussure first outlined and unapologetically borrows Saussure's

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[3] For a more detailed examination of Barthes's position on Saussure, see: Harris, Roy, "Barthes's Saussure," pp. 133-152 in *Saussure and His Interpreters* (2001).

own terms to explain them. The issue Derrida takes with Saussure is most essentially a conflict of politics, not methodology. For the purposes of understanding how *Heart of Darkness* expresses the epistemological crisis of meaning in modernist literature, Saussure's foundational work is preferable to the highly — some would say, overly — scientific study of linguistics of these and other later-century theorists.

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Explication of the linguistic theories informing this piece now behind us, the critical question still remains: how is the inherent ambiguity of language expressed by *Heart of Darkness*? Critic Edward Garnett of *Academy and Literature* seems to anticipate this inquiry, writing in 1902 that Conrad's novel is best described as "an impression, taken from life" (Garnett 132). Garnett's choice of term here is noteworthy. *Heart of Darkness* is from beginning to end an impression, a vague, unknowable, albeit impacting, impression of Marlow's storytelling, which itself never achieves the vividness of what he felt upon meeting Kurtz deep in the Congo.

The impressionistic quality of the novel, the epistemological impossibility of truly knowing Kurtz, begins with the vast distance Conrad establishes between him and the reader: a threefold mediation of Marlow, the primary narrator, and the passage of time.[4] The narrator himself feels this distance, lamenting "[the] idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact…seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (13). This distance is multiplied for the reader, whose own contact with Kurtz is filtered through Marlow and the narrator, who remarks of Marlow's storytelling, "The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical…to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze…" (5). The narrator's musings here signal to the reader that the value of Marlow's storytelling is valuable precisely because its "meaning" is complex, vague, and "brings out a haze."

For the reader, however, this haze condenses into a thick fog further occluding the meaning or truth of Marlow's journey to Kurtz. To wit, Vincent Pecora writes, "the words spoken by Marlow and Kurtz at the time are inevitably changed, are socially and morally transformed by Marlow's re-presentation of them to the community on board" (Pecora 998). These multiple mediations compound the interpretive bewilderment felt by the reader, who must constantly scrutinize

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[4] Marlow recounts his story "more than a year" after his journey concluded (73).

Marlow's recollections and the unnamed sailor's narration to decipher the truth about Kurtz, whose inscrutability intensifies with each new revelation in the unfolding of their cooperative discourse. This inscrutability, which haunts both Marlow and the reader throughout the novel, is no accident of authorship. As Cedric Watts aptly notes, "Conrad took greater pains than did most users of the oblique narrative convention to preserve the possibility of critical distance between the reader and the narrator" (Watts 55). Conrad employs this vast interpretive separation between Kurtz and the reader to lend mystery and menace to the phantom at the heart of darkness.

The haunting, ominous, even terrifying figure Kurtz strikes is achieved through the vagaries of the elaborate discourse which constructs him for both Marlow and the reader. Marlow is keenly aware of the profound affect language and discourse once had on his impression of Kurtz, which is transformed, even destroyed upon meeting him in the flesh. "For a time," Marlow recalls, "I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. Something would turn up to scare it away" (14). This "world of straightforward facts," Conrad shows us, was never straightforward and was never inhabited by many facts. This world of Marlow's was in truth constructed, vividly, but deceptively, by the power and ambiguity of discourse. His impression of Kurtz before meeting him in the Congo was just that, an impression, grounded not in reality, but in psychological projection and cognitive construction. The Kurtz Marlow "knew" before their meeting was mere discourse, an elaborate psychological edifice built block-by-block from hearsay, storytelling, and anecdote.

Marlow himself reflects deeply on the impression of Kurtz-as-discourse he possessed before facing Kurtz-embodied in the African wilderness. Speaking to the unnamed narrator aboard the steamboat, Marlow, exasperated, tries vainly to convey what he felt about "that Kurtz whom at the time [he] did not see":

> I became in an instance as much of a pretence as the rest of the bewitched pilgrims. This simply because I had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see—you understand. He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible…. (27)

Here, Marlow seems almost to act as a mouthpiece for Conrad speaking consciously to the reader. "Do you see him," Marlow asks. "Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" Though ostensibly we have Marlow speaking solely to our narrator, the use of the second-person here, particularly given the novel's attention to the dynamics of language, signals a gesture towards the reader herself. At this point in the text, the reader could not possibly "see" Kurtz; we have not met him, he is "just a word." Marlow's frustration with his inability to "convey the dream-sensation" and "bewilderment" of "being captured by the incredible" mirrors the reader's own anxieties about the formless, merely verbal recollection of Kurtz-as-discourse. Our fascinations are piqued first by the profound impact this "Kurtz" has on Marlow, and second by the very absence of specific or "real" details we have about his person.

In this way, the vagueness of Kurtz-as-discourse in fact breeds a more dramatic mind's-image of the man than does the immediacy of Kurtz-embodied later in the novel, as will soon be treated. The reader, like Marlow and the narrator, is more intensely invested in knowing something real about Kurtz exactly because we are given nothing verifiable, nothing "real" about him—only language, numerous signifiers without a signified. Though this discourse-constructed image of Kurtz may be more dramatic, it is by no means satisfying. Our hunger to know Kurtz is arrested at every effort by his absence amidst the aggregate of signifiers. Critic Perry Meisel cleverly summarizes this confusion, remarking, "Those readers who write about what they discover in Marlow's tracks pursue what Marlow himself says he is unable to disclose: the substance, the essence, the details of what it is that Kurtz has done, and what it is that he represents" (Meisel 20). This pursuit of the "substance" or "essence" of Kurtz, as Meisel notes, is impossible for the reader: how can we know that which our narrator(s) cannot or will not tell us?

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The Kurtz that Marlow and the reader "know" through hearsay, storytelling, and narration soon matures from the mysteries of discourse to the makings of a mythology. For linguistic theorists like Saussure and later Roland Barthes, the evolution of discourse into mythology is a natural and easily demonstrable extension of language phenomena. In his seminal work, *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes writes of language and its elevation to myth, "We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech…however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth. Myth sees in them only the same raw material; their unity is that they all come down to the status of a mere language" (Barthes 114). Barthes elaborates, first, that mythology is cultivated by language and language alone and, second, that the "raw material" of myth, as it is with Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, is "mere language" or discourse which, after consistent repetition over time, is imported as assumed truth.

When Marlow asks the company Manager "who is this Mr. Kurtz?" (25), the Manager replies, "He is a prodigy. He is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else. We want…for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose" (25). Through language alone, Kurtz here begins to reach near-mythic status, spoken of in godlike terms as a "higher intelligence" in possession of a "singleness of purpose." Marlow perceives this slow-but-steady growth of Kurtz into a mythic, godlike character as he recounts:

> I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz, but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what any one knew or ignored? […] One gets sometimes such a flash of insight. The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach and beyond my power of meddling. (38)

Marlow believes that his "speech" or "silence" would be worthless, impotent before the foreboding condescension of the mythic Kurtz. Still, Marlow is unable to access "the essentials" of his experience with Kurtz, which still "lay deep under the surface" of the tantalizing vagueness of language.

The transition from Kurtz-as-discourse to Kurtz-myth begins its final transformation when Kurtz's disciple, the nameless Russian trader professes to Marlow that "[Kurtz] came to [the natives] with thunder and lightning, you know — and they had never seen anything like it — and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man […] there was nothing on earth to prevent him killing whom he jolly well pleased" (56). Here, Kurtz is glorified to the point of apotheosis. Kurtz-as-discourse is now deified, transformed into the status of myth for Marlow and the reader alike. Earlier in the text, but chronologically after his conversation with the Russian trader, Marlow recalls that "[Kurtz's] nerves went wrong and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which — as far as I reluctantly gather from what I heard at various times — were offered up to him — do you understand — to Mr. Kurtz himself" (49-50). The Kurtz-myth is here fully realized as Marlow gives his account of the dark and horrible ceremonies which the African natives devoted to Kurtz.

Shortly thereafter, Marlow reads Kurtz's reports to the company, wherein Kurtz gives the bloody details of his brutal and tyrannical treatment of the natives (50). In so doing, the reader graduates from one level of interpretive mediation, from Marlow and the anonymous sailor's narration, to Kurtz's own writing. Still

far from an intimate experience of the "real" Kurtz, Conrad nevertheless brings Marlow and, to a lesser but still noteworthy extent, the reader closer to the object of our search. Conrad begins to further solidify, albeit minimally, our impression of Kurtz in the chilling image of the shrunken heads outside Kurtz's lodgings. Marlow recalls, "I returned deliberately to the first I had seen — and there it was black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids — a head that seemed to sleep at the top of that pole, and with the shrunken dry lips showing a narrow white line of the teeth, was smiling too, smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber" (57). The linguistic symbols and growing mythology behind our impression of Kurtz are here reified into a tangible symbol of the power, violence, and death which haunt us at the mere mention of Kurtz.

Marlow himself gives a careful symbolic analysis of what he believes the decapitated heads signify or reveal about Kurtz. "But I want you clearly to understand," he tells our narrator, "that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him…Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last — only at the very last" (57). Conrad here puts Marlow in the position of semiological commentator, interpreting critically the symbols he observes before him, speculating as to what they reveal about the man whose conversation he both seeks and fears.

Despite Marlow's impression here, the reified symbol of the shrunken heads is, in fact, "profitable" because it serves as a vague but poignant symbol of Kurtz's violence, exaggerating fear of him, which itself intensifies his mythic power. Further, it is extremely important to remember that the heads signal to Marlow a deficiency in Kurtz *in hindsight*. Marlow interprets, or rather *re*-interprets his impression of the shrunken heads, an interpretation which is now informed and defined by the cataclysmic change he observes when encountering Kurtz in the flesh. It is certain that as Marlow approached Kurtz's window, then knowing nothing of Kurtz's real nature or bodily weakness, he would have been uneasy, even intimidated not unlike the natives upon which Kurtz preys. Here again we see how language and discourse fundamentally manipulate knowledge and that the contradiction of that discourse through intimate experience can lead one to a profound epistemological crisis where meaning is dislocated and failed preconceptions leave the very possibility of true knowledge uncertain.

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For Marlow and the reader alike, this epistemological fracture occurs when the nebulous, mythologized impression of Kurtz is supplanted by the "reality" of encountering him in the flesh. Once embodied, Marlow sees Kurtz not as the towering, omnipotent figure constructed by discourse, but as a broken, hollow shell

of a man whose body and mind seem to decompose before him. Early in the novel, Marlow recalls this catastrophic change of impression, "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but by all the stars these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious pitiless folly" (16). In Marlow's mind, the Kurtz who was once a great and terrible "red-eyed devil" who "swayed and drove men" has denatured irrevocably into a "flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil" who now elicits a pathetic fascination where we once anticipated nearly transcendent awe.

Conrad takes great pains to give a detailed description of Kurtz's corporeality in order to strike a stark contrast between the real Kurtz and the abstract, mere-language Kurtz-myth Marlow and the narrator construct before the fateful encounter. Marlow remembers of his first glimpse of Kurtz, "I resented bitterly the absurd danger of our situation, as if to be at the mercy of that atrocious phantom had been a dishonouring necessity. I could not hear a sound, but through my glasses I saw the thin arm extended commandingly, the lower jaw moving, the eyes of that apparition shining darkly far in its bony head that nodded with grotesque jerks. Kurtz — Kurtz…" (59). The "universal genius" (28) who was once supposed to "come with thunder and lightning" (56) to all who crossed his path has been discovered to be an "atrocious phantom," an "apparition" with a "thin arm" and a "bony head" that moves in "grotesque jerks."

Conrad continues his depiction of Kurtz as Marlow tells us, "I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze" (59). The more microscopic Marlow's scrutiny of Kurtz's person becomes, the wider the gap grows between his internal narrative of Kurtz's mythic vitality and the grave, bewildering reality of his decay. Soon after their encounter, Marlow recalls that "[Kurtz] rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct like a vapour exhaled by the earth…when actually confronting him I seemed to come to my senses; I saw the danger in its right proportion" (65). Marlow can no longer sustain the narrative; the Kurtz he thought he "knew" is nothing like Kurtz actually is. "Like a vapour exhaled by the earth," the Kurtz mythology here begins to evanesce.

The reality of Kurtz's ever-weakening hold on life hits Marlow hard, disintegrating not only his dramatic but ephemeral impression of the man, but also his very trust in the ability to truly *know* anything in life with reasonable certainty. In perhaps the most revealing passage of the text, Marlow confesses the epistemological, even existential crisis brought on by his fateful meeting with Kurtz. Supposing Kurtz is dead following his gunshot wound, Marlow recounts:

There was a sense of extreme disappointment as though I had found out I had been striving after something altogether without a substance. I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr. Kurtz….[I] became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to — a talk with Kurtz. I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing…The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action. Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled, or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together. But that was not the point. The point was in his being a gifted creature and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (47)

Though Kurtz is not in fact dead, and Marlow has yet to discover the lowly station to which he has descended, this passage nevertheless speaks volumes to the desperate hold Marlow has on the mythology of the man who "presented himself as a voice" and the debilitating aporia which follows its collapse. Marlow is distraught at the mere thought that Kurtz may have died before he is able to speak with him. He makes "the strange discovery" in this moment that he "never imagined [Kurtz] as doing…but as discoursing," an indication of the tremendous influence language has had on his impression and a pointed foreshadowing on Conrad's behalf of the upheaval to come when Kurtz, that "gifted creature," becomes more than a "voice."

Continuing to pick apart this passage, it is absolutely critical to remember that this account of Kurtz is, again, given after the fact. With the gift of hindsight and careful meditation, Marlow narrates a re-interpretation of the short time in which he believed he would never meet Kurtz face-to-face. This re-interpretation is loaded with language pertaining to the importance of discourse and "voice," a clear and crucial indication of the effect language had on Marlow's entire experience. Marlow "had been striving after something altogether without a substance," searching for a man who "presented himself as a voice" and whose greatest gift "was his ability to talk, his words — the gift of expression" which "carried with it a sense of real presence." Marlow's recollection here achieves nothing short of nostalgia. Remembering fondly how he imagined Kurtz on his journey into the Congo, Marlow emphasizes that it was language, "discoursing," and "voice" that stoked his fascination with Kurtz. In so doing, Conrad further calls our attention to

the great gulf soon to be revealed between this fascination born of language and the impending disgust which follows visions of Kurtz embodied.

During his time on the steamboat with the dying Kurtz, Marlow considers the apparent change which has come over the dying man, a change which is defined in Marlow's mind by the difference between the mythology and the reality of Kurtz's character. Marlow tells our narrator, "The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth" (68). The specter of the once-mythic Kurtz looms heavy over Marlow's now disgusted impression of the man he once elegized. The misleading, ambiguous nature of language and discourse have formed for Marlow an equally misleading, ambiguous impression of Kurtz. As Kurtz dies, Marlow states,"It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror" (69). The "veil" of language, hearsay, and myth has been "rent" from Marlow and the reader at once. The man who was once supposed to breed insurmountable fear is now reduced to suffer the "craven terror" of death each must face alike.

Of the true nature of death, Marlow professes, "I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness with nothing underfoot, nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary" (70). Piece by piece, trope by trope, Marlow here de-mythologizes death by separating the language which elevates it from the true, ignominious reality of death as he has seen it personally in Kurtz.[5] Death does not come with "spectators," "glory," or "victory" as common discourse would have us believe. It comes with "an impalpable greyness" with "nothing underfoot, nothing around" and in "a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism." In Marlow's philosophizing on the grim, unceremonious reality of death, Conrad provides a microcosm of the larger, more totalizing epistemological crisis of language facing turn-of-the-century modernity.

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[5] In his article, "Lying as Dying in Heart of Darkness," scholar Garrett Stewart writes, "Kurtz's wasted person when finally encountered bears out this sense of him as language incarnate, for his flesh has withered to the bone, leaving only a speaking soul, a direct effluence from the heart of darkness," p. 321. As I interpret Marlow's encounter with Kurtz, the dying man is not at all "language incarnate": in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, Marlow's impressions of Kurtz pre- and post-encounter are nearly antithetical. The Kurtz-myth Marlow once believed in is herein destroyed by observing Kurtz in the flesh, as he truly exists in the real. Language has failed miserably to communicate a true knowledge of Kurtz. In this way, Kurtz is not "language incarnate," but "language disintegrated."

Nowhere in Heart of Darkness is the ambiguity and bewilderment of language in greater relief than in Kurtz's famously vague final words, "The horror! The horror!" (69). As Marlow builds to the climactic revelation of Kurtz's dying utterance, he says to the narrator, "I've been telling you what we said — repeating the phrases we pronounced — but what's the good. They were common everyday words — the familiar vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that?" (66). The text here signals that language collapses before achieving true meaning. Marlow laments the futility of relaying merely the language of the past, which, dramatic as it can be, can never fully embody or effectively communicate the meaning that past has for those who experienced it. This gulf between language and meaning, signifiers and signified, verbalized impressions and actualized knowledge, provides the philosophical subtext for Kurtz's notorious final words.

Marlow recites to our narrator, "He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (69). In the immediate aftermath of Kurtz's death, Marlow remains disgusted and disappointed by their fateful encounter. He remarks, "I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that the next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole" (69). Marlow remains indifferent to the real, embodied Kurtz, that voiceless "something" the pilgrims buried "in a muddy hole." The invincible difference between the "voice" of Kurtz which Marlow once believed in and the reality of the man buried in the soft earth plagues Marlow, leaving him unable to reconcile the "rent veil" of language he once thought would reveal true knowledge.

But Kurtz's dying words, by their very vagueness and indecipherability, soon restore for Marlow the mythologized narrative impression of Kurtz he once possessed. Kurtz cries out "at some image, at some vision" unknowable to either Marlow or the reader. Upon reflection, the very ambiguity of Kurtz's utterance restores the narrative and mythology which once defined Marlow's impression of the man. Kurtz's final words, "The horror! The horror," are vague signifiers with no signified, a hermeneutical goldmine and epistemological nightmare that allow Marlow to reconfigure and repossess the mythic impression of Kurtz he once relinquished to the impingement of reality. "He had summed up," Marlow sermonizes excitedly, "he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth — the strange commingling of desire and hate" (70). Marlow lends a complex, psychologically projected narration to Kurtz's last words, giving discourse to a mere sign, a complex matrix of meaning to a lone signifier which

Kurtz could have intended to signify an infinite number of different, perhaps contradictory meanings.

Marlow continues his re-interpreted narration of Kurtz's death, "It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory. That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more not his own voice but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal" (70). The vague yet dramatic impression of Kurtz which he lost upon observing the man's bodily weakness is restored by this "echo of his magnificent eloquence" that speaks to Marlow "translucently," clear as a "cliff of crystal." Marlow's impression is, of course, vivid solely because Kurtz's death-throe whisper is so unknowable. It is impossible for Kurtz, the narrator, or the reader to know to any degree of certainty what Kurtz intended to convey, if anything, when he cried "The horror! The horror!" But the very vagueness of this brief utterance affords Marlow the opportunity to reapply the mythic narrative of Kurtz he once subscribed to.

But the question remains: why? It is easy enough to see how the ambiguity of "The horror!" invites numerous interpretations. But what is so attractive about this ambiguity, and why would Marlow rejoice at the chance to reenter a psychological impression which has proven to be misleading, even untrue? The answer is that the final vague, ominous, unknowable utterance whispered from Kurtz's dying breath allows Marlow to occupy a psychological impression or narrative of Kurtz which is compatible with that impression which fundamentally and essentially defines his "knowledge" of the man. In other words, the ambiguity of Kurtz's final words reconciles for Marlow his pre-encounter impression of the Kurtz-myth with the post-encounter reality of Kurtz-embodied. Marlow thereby rationalizes-away an epistemological or existential crisis of meaning and knowledge which may still plague the reader whose impression of Kurtz remains as nebulous as it ever was. "He lived then before me," Marlow tells us, "he lived as much as he had ever lived — a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities, a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence" (73). Those happy shadows return for Marlow, allowing him to reconcile the "frightful realities" of the real Kurtz with the "gorgeous eloquence" of the narrative he has re-formed in his own mind.

A number of literary critics have commented on the restoration of Marlow's elegiac reverence for Kurtz, but have left the full import of this observation largely undiscovered. In her article "The Failure of Metaphysics," Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan writes, "Marlow sets out on a journey in search of that lost vitality, the essential wholeness man has lost in the course of his material progress…Marlow's quest is an attempt to reintegrate the 'symbolic' and the 'real,' the sacred and the

profane" (Erdinast-Vulcan 416). Erdinast-Vulcan is right to note the desperate tenor of Marlow's journey, that his mission is as much about achieving once more the wholeness of knowledge he has lost. But unlike Erdinast-Vulcan, I believe the real crisis in the novel is not due most essentially to a failure of metaphysics, but to the inherent limits of language.

The epistemological crisis facing Marlow and the reader alike is indeed metaphysical, but only incidentally; the metaphysical impasse here is symptomatic of the more causal disparity between language and knowledge. Just as Marlow is compelled to reconcile his language-cultivated impression of Kurtz with the harsh reality of his person, the reader, too, is forced to vainly search through the language of the text to find some, any interpretive solid ground upon which to construct some verifiable knowledge of Kurtz. As Perry Meisel writes, "the horror that assails Marlow has to do with the impossibility of disclosing a central core, an essence, even a ground to what Kurtz has done and what he is. There is no central thread in the weave of the evidences that constitute his character, much less no deep center to his existence as a surface of signs" (Meisel 25). The inability to achieve true knowledge or certainty about Kurtz is, for both Marlow and the reader, a fundamentally linguistic issue.

William W. Bonney gives a thorough treatment to this linguistic impasse in Conrad's fiction in his article, "Joseph Conrad and the Betrayal of Language" (1979). Bonney writes, "…by betraying the communicative function of language through subversion of clarity, Conrad reveals the potential within language for effecting its own betrayal of simple Selves which are uncritically founded upon its treacherous surfaces…" (Bonney 153). In effect, Bonney argues that the opaque and deceptive quality of Conrad's writing expresses language's "betrayal" of meaning. As valuable as Bonney's piece is, this interpretation is misleading, for language itself does not "betray" meaning — it communicates it as fully as is possible given its inherent limitations.

For the purposes of my own treatment of the text, it is important to note that Bonney's thesis misappropriates the causality of the bewilderment which arises from linguistic ambiguity. Language does not "betray" meaning any more than it embodies it. The "betrayal" Bonney observes is, more accurately, a social or intellectual ignorance of the inherent limitations of language, not a failure of language to fulfill its supposed promises. Linguistic signs are constructed and inculcated *en masse* as gestures toward that concept, thing, image, etc. which they are intended to evoke. The authenticity of a linguistic sign is not determined by the sign itself, but by the complex interrelationship between the intended meaning of the speaker—condensed in the chosen linguistic sign—and the interpretation of what that sign signifies by the auditor. The meaning or intention of a word or phrase can be distorted or lost at any of a multitude of points of translation from

speaker to auditor: speaker selects misleading signifier for *le mot juste*, auditor does not understand chosen signifier, auditor misinterprets the intended meaning of chosen signifier, and so on. Signifiers themselves are at the mercy of interpretation by both speaker and auditor. In effect, Bonney's argument is the linguistic equivalent of "killing the messenger."

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Killing the messenger is, in fact, the appropriate gesture when one considers the final pages of *Heart of Darkness* as Marlow curiously and unexplainably lies to "the Intended" about her fiancée's dying words. The motivation behind Marlow's lie has been examined by nearly every scholar who has written on the novel and will forever remain one of the most vexing of the work's many mysteries. Conrad establishes the important place lying will take in Marlow's tale early in the novel as Marlow professes, "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appals me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies — which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world — what I want to forget" (27). Why, then, if he hates and detests lies so vehemently does Marlow lie to the Intended?

The most persuasive answer to this question is again rooted in the phenomena of language and the epistemological crisis which arises from its limits. When one carefully considers just how impacted the Intended is by Marlow's simple, arguably compassionate lie, one comes to recognize how profoundly the substitution of one linguistic signifier for another effects not only the meaning of a given utterance, but how deeply and adversely it can come to affect our ability to achieve knowledge itself. Waiting in desperation to hear that her fiancée loved her until the end, the Intended cries to Marlow, "Something must remain. His words at least have not died" (76). The Intended desires Kurtz's words, words which she believes hold the entirety of his affection for her.

In lieu of the truth, Marlow tells her, "The last word he pronounced was— your name" (77). This revelation, which the Intended takes as gospel, transforms her reality instantaneously. Marlow recalls:

> I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain. 'I knew it — I was sure!'…She was sure. I heard her weeping; she had hidden her face in her hands. It seemed to be that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. (77)

The Intended cries passionately, in what Marlow perceives as a mixture of "inconceivable triumph" and "unspeakable pain." The poor woman is "sure" that this was true, that her beloved Kurtz had indeed spoken her name with his dying breath, confirming forever his love for her. But of course Marlow and the reader both know that this is not true, that the Intended as been deceived, and that her reality has been forever altered not because of what *is*, but because of what was *communicated*.

The linguistic significance of lying is massive, as Conrad demonstrates in *Heart of Darkness*.[6] A simple change in signifier, from "The horror!" into the Intended's name, demonstrates the unique capacity of language to alter one's very reality, as it does with the Intended, solely through the substitution of a false signifier for the "true" one. Of course Marlow's lie does not change the fact that Kurtz did not utter the Intended's name, but the lie does, in every sense of the term, alter the Intended's own particular reality by simple virtue of her accepting language as containing a truth in and of itself.

As *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote in 1902, "The concluding scene of the 'Heart of Darkness'…a woman's ecstatic belief in a villain's heroism—is reached by an indulgence in the picturesque horror of the villain…" (Sherry 136). This "indulgence" in a fabricated portrait of Kurtz is rooted in the phenomena of language. The moniker "the Intended" itself contains a double-meaning signaling its linguistic significance. Kurtz never reaches his Intended and Marlow, at the very moment when some true message or meaning may have been imparted, lies to the Intended. In a sense, no truth or knowledge ever fully reaches the "Intended," neither the woman nor the figurative meaning Kurtz "intended" to convey on his deathbed. Just as Kurtz never returns to the Intended, so too are the intended significance of language and its particular expression forever separated, obscuring truth and meaning. The Intended lies at the very end of the novel, but is never united with Kurtz, or with language that expresses it honestly.

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To conclude my examination of *Heart of Darkness* and the epistemological crisis which its treatment of language expresses, it seems fitting to turn again to Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* which opens this piece. In his preface, Conrad writes, "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make

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[6] Thomas Dilworth gives an interesting interpretation of lying in the novel in his 1987 article, "Listeners and Lies in 'Heart of Darkness.'" Dilworth writes, "In the Intended, Conrad gives us a palimpsest or literary double exposure, in which the human reality is faintly visible beneath the idealized convention" (Dilworth 519).

you *see*" (281). Upon first reading the novel, it does not appear Conrad achieves his task in *Heart of Darkness*, a text whose content, form, and meaning together are obscured by the vagueness and drama of language. But perhaps this is what Conrad, "by the power of the written word" wishes us to "see": that the essence of meaning and knowledge cannot be conveyed in language.

"No it is impossible," says Marlow, "it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning — its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream — alone" (27). The true value of *Heart of Darkness* is that it communicates, paradoxically, just how impossible is the quest to obtain certainty or real knowledge within the confines of language. In the character of Kurtz, Conrad personifies the epistemological anxieties which lay at the heart of modernity. "Indeed, it would appear," Vincent Pecora summarizes, "that the problem of voice — both literary and human — is absolutely central to the whole phenomenon commonly called modernism in Western literature" (Pecora 993). Few figures in the canon of modernism express this epistemological crisis better than Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*.

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