# "Do you see the story?" Consciousness, Cognition and Crisis of Narration in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Avishek Parui

*Abstract*

The aim of this article is to examine the ways Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes an existential crisis that is psychologically as well as politically underpinned. It explores how the novel is reflective of the ideological complexities of its day while also corresponding to current ideas in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind which examine the entanglements of embodied feelings, subjective sentience and the ability to narrativize experientiality in shared language. In investigating how the crisis of narration in *Heart of Darkness* is reflective of the psychological and existential alienation experienced by the protagonist in the novel, the article draws on debates on the role of the literary narrative as a vehicle to communicate the phenomenal quality of consciousness.

--

As a pre-Modernist who is essentially unclassifiable and "floating uncertainly somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Stevenson" (Jameson 206), Conrad's writing epitomizes the epistemologies and uncertainties in fin de siècle cultural imaginary.  Consequently, his fiction offers not so much the pleasure of masculinist adventure tales along the lines of Henry Rider Haggard's stories but rather showcases the tensions and indeterminacies essentially and stylistically incompatible with high-Victorian imperial ethos. While the political knowledge in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as an articulation of the ethical ambivalence around European imperialism, the narrative praxis in Conrad's novel is symptomatic of later Modernism's tendency to foreground psychological interiority over external materiality, the process of consciousness over the perceived object.[1] Thus unsurprisingly, Conrad's narratives are characterized by a cognitive mode that emerges with a self-reflective process aware of its own incompletion. There is a deliberate deconstruction of the typical imperialist romance in Conrad's

narrative where the resolutions of the conventional adventure fiction are deliberately problematized by narrative complexities which incorporate entanglements of shifting time, memory and crises in storytelling (Lodge 75). *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes such crises as an unsettling of the narrative agency which informs the embodied self.  Such unsettling emerges as a psychological as well as existential alienation in Conrad's novel represented in a deliberately defamiliarized language.

In a letter to H. G. Wells on 30 November 1903, Conrad commented on his view of writing thus: "[F]or me, writing—*the only possible writing*—is just simply the conversion of nervous forces into phrases" (Conrad, *Collected Letters* 3:45).[2] Pervasive throughout Conrad's narratives – especially in *Heart of Darkness* – is the manner in which nervous experiences and embodied feelings are translated into language. *Heart of Darkness* may be considered as an attempt in fiction to communicate existentially disoriented states of being that self-reflectively flag up crisis in storytelling (Ambrosini 84). With its economy of incomplete apperceptions and delayed decoding, the novel is reflective of Conrad's own discourses on the nature of writing, most abundantly explicated in his Preface to *The "Nigger" of the Narcissus* — a passage that underlines Conrad's approach and aspiration apropos creative expression (Watt, *Conrad's Preface* 103) — where he states that the appeal of art to be effective

> [. . .] must be an impression conveyed through the senses [. . .] All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, if its highest desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music, which is the art of arts. (Garnett 51)

Conrad's fiction frequently foregrounds emotional states where existential motivation emerges disconnected to experientiality (Stanzel 93) and this disconnect is most often focalized through a crisis in narrativity. The cognitive quality in Marlow's narration in *Heart of Darkness* – a "parabolic text" (Miller, *Heart of Darkness Revisited* 31) that incorporates a process of unveiling – is further heightened by the self-reflexivity of the narrative and the way the same emerges entangled with shifts in consciousness and processes of thought (Fludernik 20).

In one of his autobiographical asides, Conrad himself had thus spelt out the location of the sentient self that oversees the creative process at work:

> In truth every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image; it is fated to remain individual and a little mysterious, and yet it must resemble something already familiar to the experience, the thoughts and the sensations of his readers. (Conrad, *Notes* 7)

The entanglements between epistemological reflexivity and ontological materiality, between private perception and shared communication run across the entirety of Conrad's fiction. In *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, narration often emerges as a backwards process whereby objects are objectified post-perception. Marlow's knowledge of an existential experience of loss and the eventual impossibility of communicating the same in shared language highlight the unreliability inherent in his narrative process. The narrative impossibility and unreliability of Marlow, which he acknowledges right at the heart of his tale, correspond complexly with current thesis in cognitive psychology that only a self-reflective autobiographical narrative by the feeling subject can be a valid measure for understanding subjective experience of horror, shock or loss (Libet 97). The failure of narrativity in Conrad's novel and the consequent crisis of agency are also in close correspondence to the thesis in modern cognitive neuroscience that the ability to construct a narrative and give shape and meaning to one's life is underpinned by abilities in abstractions, metaphors and complex symbols in language. Together those inform the self-awareness and agency which make us uniquely and mimetically human (Ramachandran 291).  Such views find resonance in the claims of modern cognitive narratology which state that storytelling can emerge as a means of "distributing intelligence—disseminating knowledge about or ways of engaging with the world—across space and time" (Herman 227). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* may be read as a story about the crisis in storytelling and the resultant loss in the self's existential situatedness in an experientially shared world.

Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as an unreliable and nervous narrator who, with "the stammerings of his conscience and [. . .] the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work" (Garnett 53) points to the inadequacies of the classic-realist narrative and normal cognitive processes. The sensory quality of Conrad's writing, one that underlines the self's embodied and experiential struggle to situate its relation to the physical world is thus described by Michael Levenson:

> The fragility of identity, the barriers to knowledge, the groundlessness of value—these great Conradian (and modern) motifs appear most often in terms of sensory derangement that casts the individual into unarticulated space, a space with no markers and no boundaries, with nothing behind, nothing above, nothing below. (Levenson 6)

More significantly, as that "evasive centre that is everywhere and nowhere" (Miller, *Fiction* 39), the contingent storytelling voice that characterises the narrative economy in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is remarkably dialogic with current theses in philosophy of mind that examine epistemological differences between purely subjective points of view and objective orders of meaning.[3] Marlow's narrative unreliability, with its sudden shifts in consciousness that compulsively defy the norms of standardized realist narrative, may be read as an authorial strategy of mixing psychological and narrative confusion in a story which signals "the coordinates of an otherworldly map" (Williams 154).

The intense and explicit self-reflexivity of Marlow's story (he flags up and pathetically justifies his own nervousness, reprimands his audience for not being attentive enough, and mocks their sense of complacent civilized security which flies in the face of the horror of his Congo experience) may be read as a substantiation of the phenomenological view that inner awareness is most often an integral component of human consciousness, before it becomes "an appropriate pattern of neural activity" (Smith 95). Marlow's narrative predicament is underlined by his crisis in conveying his inner awareness in a shared discourse. In substituting empirical and "imperial coordinates" (Williams 156) with psychological allegory, Marlow's tale in *Heart of Darkness* unfolds as an inconclusive enquiry into existential interiority.

The complex cognitive quality of Marlow's narrative is highlighted early on in *Heart of Darkness* by the unnamed narrator thus:

> But Marlow was not typical [. . .] and 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, in the likeness of one those misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (Conrad, *HD* 9)

The uniqueness of Marlow's narrative thus lies in its scooped-out quality, its "radiating significance" (Said 96) which self-reflectively extends

its interiority over and above its formal frame. This entails a form of decentering pervasive throughout Marlow's tale whereby characters appear more as apparitions than as palpable presence, and where the journey to the centre can only end with an embodied experience of centrelessness (Todorov 152).[4] The centreless quality of Marlow's tale is frequently made evident in its descriptions. Thus Kurtz is "hollow at the core" (*HD* 58), the Manager tells Marlow that men who arrive in the Congo "should have no entrails" (*HD* 25) and the brick-maker appears to Marlow as  a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" composed of "a little loose dirt" (*HD* 29) on the inside. What emerges as fundamental in Marlow's story of the horror of hollowness is Conrad's "seemingly endless pursuit of the quality of solidity in things" (Meyer 32). The existential anxiety of such pursuit is evinced thus in Marlow's exclamation:

> 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 which is the very essence of dreams [. . .] It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone . . . (*HD* 30)

Marlow's attempt in *Heart of Darkness* to make the reader *see* the story emerges as an extension of Conrad's aim as a writer, famously described in the Preface to *The "Nigger" of the Narcissus* where he asserts his objective as an artist was "by the power of the written word to make you [the reader] hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, is to make you *see*" (Garnett 52). The failure of narration in *Heart of Darkness* is thus coplanar with the crisis of cognition and both inform the existential unsettling characterising the speaking subject. Conrad's novel with its narrative difficulties and cognitive crises is very much a text of its times, especially in relation to the emergence of new theories of the mind at the turn of the twentieth century.[5] It also anticipates current works in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind which investigate the interfaces between the embodied self and its existential subjectivity.

In their work on brain and the inner world of the self, Mark Solms and Oliver Turnbull go on to analyse how units of consciousness (*qualia*)[6] proceed by forging links between the feeling subject and felt objects. Referring to the work of Antonio Damasio on the cognitive role of emotions, Solms and Turnbull argue that "consciousness consists of awareness of what is happening around us, grounded in a background medium of self-awareness"

(Solms 93). It is interesting to establish an analogy between the difficulty faced by Conrad's narrators with the psychological notion of *extended consciousness* and the phenomenological awareness of one's cognitive self. In their work on the extended mind, Andy Clark and David Chambers define *active externalism* as being "based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes" (Clark 643).[7] Extended cognition in Clark and Chamber's view – underpinned by factors such as external environment, shared signs and learnt language – is a crucial component of the core cognitive process rather than an accessory. Such a view is also harboured by cognitive psychologists who believe that "information is a relational feature of the environment" (Chemero 108). *Heart of Darkness* offers an excellent example of the cognitive disjointedness of the otherwise healthy feeling subject apropos of the immediate environment, and how such state ultimately underpins an existential crisis. This is evident thus in Marlow's description of the journey up the Congo:

> We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings, we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of the first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. [. . .] The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. (*HD* 37-38)

The existential isolation experienced by Marlow (ironically exacerbated by the use of collective pronoun "we") is thus a function of extended otherness and cognitive unsettling. The reference to the "mind of man" at the end of the passage further highlights the translucent quality of human consciousness whose interiority is informed by its relationality with external signifiers. More importantly, Marlow's disjointedness from his immediate environment and the existential and psychological alienation consequently experienced point also to the crisis in generating a feeling self which can cognitively correspond to mental images (Damasio 17).[8]

A further instance of Marlow's cognitive unsettling features in *Heart of Darkness* thus:

> You lost your way on that river as you would in a desert and butted all day long against shoals trying to find the channel till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had

> known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence
> perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one,
> as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to
> yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream
> remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of
> this strange world of plants and water and silence. (*HD* 36)

What is depicted here is an existential disjointedness underpinned by a
nervous and cognitive crisis extending into the crises of narration and
recollection which otherwise inform the embodied and feeling subject. It
may be argued that the epistemology of narration in Conrad is synchronic
with the slippage between the narrative self and its incomplete awareness
of its own subjectivity which struggles to grapple with the lived reality
around.  The disconnect described above in *Heart of Darkness* depicts how
learnt and internalized patterns of meaning which give a sense of the self
are violently defamiliarized along with the language which accompanies
the subject. Such defamiliarization takes place with a series of cognitive
and epistemic unmappings which compromise not just Marlow's
subjectivity but also his narrative agency. It may indeed be argued that
Marlow's struggle to sustain and fully inhabit his story augments the thesis
in modern cognitive narratology that "storytelling acts are grounded in the
perceptual-conceptual abilities of embodied human minds" (Herman 169).
Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes the disruptions in those otherwise
taken-for-granted abilities and thus highlights "the connection between
epistemology and narrative technique" (Pettersson 95).

As the narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is evidently aware of the
inconclusive quality of his narration that borders on the absurd, and,
appropriately enough, juxtaposes his nervousness and his narration in an
attempt to account for his imperfect and frustrated articulation:

> "Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst trying to tell. . . . Here
> you all are each moored with two addresses like a hulk with two
> anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another,
> excellent appetites, and temperatures normal—hear you—normal
> from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be—
> exploded! Absurd! My dear boys, what can you expect from a man
> who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of
> new shoes? (*HD* 48)

The passage foregrounds the anxiety of losing the attention of the audience,
an anxiety that accentuates the haunted order of loss[9] that Marlow is forced

to embody through his narrative. As Robert Ambrosini suggests, Marlow's narrative indeterminacy and loss of control "undermine the white man's language – and consequently, many of the ideological presuppositions which ground his audience's response" (93). The "excellent appetites" and "temperature normal" that characterize his listeners are in sharp contrast to the narrator's "lean appeared face [that] appeared worn, hollow, with withdrawn folds and drooped eyelids with an aspect of concentrated attention" (*HD* 48) that emerge as obvious pointers to the nervous awareness of the horror that he cannot completely communicate. In effect, Marlow's failure of narration in *Heart of Darkness* – a text that may be read as a "melancholic response to crisis" (Ash 196) – enacts an epistemological enquiry into representation of the lost subject. The horror that Marlow cannot communicate in his narrative is as much mimetic as emotional and constitutes "a psychological confusion between self and other(s) which, in turn, deprives subjects of their full rational presence to selfhood" (Lawtoo 240).[10] Conrad's novel is a graphic account of such failure of selfhood and its representation, one that underpins an existential crisis in a politically charged setting.

In its dramatization of interiority and embodied experientiality, Conrad's writing emerges as a "narrative self-consciousness" (Roberts 7)[11] reflective of phenomenological perceptions of the changing existential self and its locations in language. First used by Ian Watt and described as the "forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning" (Watt, *Conrad in Nineteenth Century* 175), Conrad's delayed decoding attracts attention from literary critics who view it as a strategy of narrative apprehension, of a deliberate frustration of linear temporality and processes of apperception. As Bruce Johnson contends, Conrad's delayed decoding "resembles the attempt of Hemingway and before him of Mark Twain to recognize that there is no such thing as an isolated and meaningful fact or event or object. Meaning [. . .] is a function of connectedness" (Johnson 60). Delayed decoding in Conrad dramatizes the disintegration in the act of perception while also mapping the same onto the act of narration. As the "gap between impression and understanding" (Watt, *Conrad in Nineteenth Century* 176-77), delayed decoding in Conrad corresponds to what modern cognitive psychologists classify as the distinction between *simple awareness* and *reflexive awareness* whereby the reflexivity associated with the immediate cognitive function of language is unsettled by the experience of cognition itself. The delayed temporality characterising Marlow's subjective awareness in *Heart of Darkness* supports the idea that increasingly interests researchers in cognitive psychology as well as

phenomenology, one that states that "time comes into being as a function of our embodied interaction with the world" (Gibbs 17). As a cognitive condition that is unreliably reported in the retrospective narrative, delayed decoding in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* takes the reader "directly into the observer's consciousness at the very moment of perception, before it has been translated into its cause" (Watt, *Conrad in Nineteenth Century* 175).

Psychologists have come to classify the cognitive process involved in recollection as constituting an *explicit memory system*, one that encodes information and later integrates the same into memory, an *imagery system*, a *language system* and a *narrative reasoning system*, one that is instrumental to the production of narrative from events in memory (Rubin 54-55). Thus the cognitive psychologist William Brewer defines narrative discourse as a system that "attempts to embody in linguistic form a series of events that occur in time" (223). What is emphasized in Brewer's analysis is the link between language, storytelling and cognitive ability and how narrative reasoning informs the epistemological process of self-making. Likewise Jerome Bruner asserts the importance of narrative as a mode of thought in itself, one that attempts to "locate the [cognitive] experience in time and space" (13). Such attempts at narrativization emerges as an internalization as well as an extension of the self's awareness of its sentient processes.  As David Lodge argues:

> In a world where nothing is certain, in which transcendental belief has been undermined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness. (Lodge 87)

The loss of the cognitive self that Marlow experiences as happening simultaneously with the loss of the narrative self bears interesting resonance with what Mikhail Bakhtin classifies as "lateral transgradience", that corresponds to the necessity to retain the authored self as well as the authorized self. Analysing the dialectics of Dostoevsky's poetics, Bakhtin contends thus:

> The most important acts, constitutive of self-consciousness, are determined by their relation to another consciousness (a 'thou'). Cutting oneself off, isolating oneself, closing oneself off, those are the basic reasons for the loss of self [. . .] To be means to communicate [ . . .] Man has no internal sovereign territory; he is all and always on the boundary; looking within himself he looks

in the eyes of the other or through the other. (Bakhtin 311-12)

Bakhtin's analysis describes the epistemology of the *narrative self* in relation to the *cognitive self* that situates itself through the fictionalized and subjectivized 'Other'. The cognitive disconnect Marlow suffers in *Heart of Darkness* emerges as a failure to fictionalize as well as to subjectivize, in a world of epistemic uncertainties. Instead, in *Heart of Darkness*, the human subject and its narrative voice are left only with an "epistemological solipsism" (Vulcan 95) that is increasingly detached from the frames of familiar cognition. Conrad's narratives, in showcasing "the workings of the human mind attempting to come to terms with the flux of experience" (Pettersson 93), reveal the fractures in time and space in a consciousness that attempts to inscribe its own incompletion. Marlow's journey across the landscape of otherness in *Heart of Darkness* is beset with cognitive unsettling and incomplete apprehension of embodied experience. The failure of Marlow to convey the same in shared language highlights Conrad's private belief that "realism in art will never approach reality" (Jean-Aubry 1:302-03).

The delayed decoding so characteristic of Conrad's fiction is perhaps most famously exemplified in *Heart of Darkness* in Marlow's travel up in Congo where the forests around appear as effects even before their *meaningful materiality* is cognized by the perceiving mind. This is spectacularly demonstrated as Marlow travels through Congo between various telegraphic stations and sees the effect of the shower of arrows on his senses before decoding their symbolic signification. The passage described thus illustrates an unsettled process of apperception:

> Then I had to look at the river mighty quick because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about, thick; they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods were very quiet—perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at! (*HD* 45-46)

The cognitive process in operation here moves from the effect to the cause, from the impression of the object to the materiality of the same. It thus depicts a manner of decoding that is a reversal of the normative process of cognition where the object appears before the effect it creates in the mind of the perceiving subject. This takes place through an economy of affect

and shock, with the "juxtaposition between a *story* of 'what happened' to Marlow and a *tale* of the effect that those events had on him" (Ambrosini 85).

Delayed decoding also appears in Conrad's *The Shadow Line* (1916) in the scene where the narrator describes the rain first by its effects on his senses and then by its material and real presence. The passage from the novel (where the word 'delayed' itself emerges with its palpable effect on the embodied self) thus depicts the enigmatic epistemology of cognition:

> I became bothered by curious, irregular sounds of faint tapping on the deck. They could be heard single, in pairs, in groups. While I wondered at this mysterious devilry, I received a slight blow under the left eye and felt an enormous tear run down my cheek. Raindrops. Enormous. Forerunners of something. Tap. Tap. Tap. . . . . [. . . ] Suddenly—how am I to convey it? Well, suddenly the darkness turned into water. This is the only suitable figure. (Conrad, *The Shadow Line* 113)

The passage problematizes the normative process of cognition in which conscious experience is integrated in the brain through the process of decoding done by the nervous system which also works as "an information network [. . .] [that] generates and transmits information in accordance with definite natural codes" (Bunge 49-50). Instead, the difficulty of communication becomes the core content of the passage as the tap sounds turn into rain and the darkness turns into water. Crucially, the moment of cognition is mapped onto the moment of embodiment, whereby the raindrops are recognized only when those touch the subject's body and meaningful experientiality is generated through an integration of information and embodied awareness (Gallagher 7). Marlow's struggle in *Heart of Darkness* to negotiate his narrative between the objective and the subjective, the real and the perceived orders is analogous to the "complex boundary crossing" whereby "emotions in response to imagined events collide with emotions in response to the real-world narratives that report those imagined events" (Currie 4). Conrad's novel is characterized by a vocabulary of violence that is operative not just at the immediate physical and political level at the heart of European imperialism but also at a cognitive and narrative level whereby the report from the heart of darkness can only end in its own failure to convey its crisis and loss.

*Heart of Darkness* showcases its crises at several levels which respond complexly to psychological studies in trauma. Marlow's continuous

reference to "hearing" the voice of Kurtz appears in resonance to Freud's notion of traumatic repetitions in dreams and "the difficulty of reporting the thoughts behind them" (Freud 149).[12] The spectral quality with which Kurtz appears in Marlow's mind, one which furthers the novel's narrative indeterminacy, is underlined by his description thus:

> A voice. He was very little than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean without any kind of sense. (*HD* 48-49)

Marlow's voice-hearing in *Heart of Darkness* is characteristic of what Conrad himself had classified as a condition where the subject loses "all sense of reality in a kind of nightmare effect produced by existence" (Conrad, *Cunninghame Graham* 114). The voice of Kurtz and his dying words that come back and keep consuming Marlow with their haunted presence – he hears the whispered cry "The horror! The horror!" as he stands to wait for Kurtz's Intended by a mahogany door – is symptomatic of the séance "wherein figures of imperialist fantasy and guilt are plied with technological dreams and terrors, scientific discoveries and speculations" (Warner 277). The metonymic construct of Kurtz — he had been "educated partly in England [. . .] His mother was half-English, his father was half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (*HD* 50) — if characteristic of the product perfected and manufactured by the industries and ideologies of European civilization, is also in itself a pointer to the impalpability that Marlow experiences while attempting to find a narrative rationale that would describe Kurtz's presence. The contingency that characterized the construct of Kurtz appears more explicitly at the end when Marlow receives varying reports on Kurtz's political and personal attributes from his various acquaintances and relatives. Marlow's confusion about Kurtz who remains more a voice, a spectral presence and a symptom of hollowness out of excess rather than a palpable individual is made evident thus:

> [. . .] to this day I am unable to say what was Kurtz's profession, whether he ever had any—which was the greatest of his talents. I had taken him for a painter who wrote for papers, or else a journalist who could paint—but even the cousin (who took snuff during the interview) could not tell me what he had been—exactly. (*HD* 71)

In his permanent incompletion and contingency, Kurtz remains for Marlow what Derrida had classified as an *inaccessible articulation* that characterizes the play between the spirit and the revenant. In his spectral quality that frustrates rational understanding and narrative reasoning, Kurtz is also a dis-appearing apparition that paradoxically perpetuates presence. For Derrida, analysing the *apparition of the inapparent*,

> For there to be a ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. The spectrogenic process corresponds therefore to a paradoxical *incorporation*. Once ideas or thoughts (*Gedanke*) are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by giving them a body. [. . .] a more acute specificity belongs to what could be called the "second" ghost, as incorporation of autonomized spirit, as objectivizing expulsion of interior idea or thought. (Derrida 126)

With his entanglement of the *apparition of the body* (appearing more as a voice than a living body that is always described through abstractions) and the *body of the apparition* (the posthumous voice that constructs its unique body against time), Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* appears to embody Derrida's "second ghost" that is impossible to exorcise or expostulate away but must be mourned forever in a manner that approximates the process of fetish-formation. It is interesting to analyse how such process operates at a level of cognition in *Heart of Darkness*.  Thus Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* embodies what Marlow at the beginning of the novel had classified as an "idea", "something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to" (*HD* 10), that desperate clinging onto a strategy of abstraction in an attempt to redeem the vulgar materiality of imperialism and its exploitative machinery. Kurtz's over-identification with the imperial order (Žižek 27) – he moves from being a "universal genius" (*HD* 71) to a degenerate, from being a painter-musician to an anarchic ruler presiding over savage ceremonies – emerges as a further pointer to the complex cognitive mappings in *Heart of Darkness* whereby affect precedes the object. The complexity of Conrad's novel is also borne by the manner in which Kurtz's centrelessness and spectrality are conveyed at three different yet connected orders of reception: Marlow's, his immediate audience's and the readers'. The horror that Kurtz articulates in the end, one that appears in Marlow's mind as an "expression of some sort of belief [. . .] the appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (*HD* 69), stems from the self's cognition of its own hollowness, in "that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible" (*HD* 69).

The knowledge that Marlow gains from his journey into the heart of darkness, one that he cannot completely convey or disclose like the trade secret of the unnamed Belgian company he had worked for in the Congo, comes to consume him with its hysteric formations. Haunted by the hollowness and horror articulated by Kurtz as well as increasingly tormented by the memory of Kurtz's death[13], Marlow is increasingly characterised by an order of guilt which is intentional as well as existential, inasmuch as it is directed toward something specific as well as being indescribable.[14] Back in the sepulchral city of Brussels that sees little men run with their little businesses, Marlow confesses his impotent rage at the spectacle of triviality thus:

> They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it was unable to comprehend. (*HD* 70)

The privilege that Marlow ascribes to himself emerges also as loss, one that comes with the nihilistic knowledge of the inadequacy of the shared civilizational security that runs across the European metropolis and its mental life. As he "tottered about the streets" (*HD* 70) the scene of urban life appears to Marlow as essentially one of ignorance and inanity and the loss that he experiences and embodies paradoxically bypasses "extreme grief" in its emptiness and "takes the form of apathy" (*HD* 44).

Appearing as he does as a survivor of a crisis that had consumed the best of Europe, Marlow emerges as essentially incompatible with the smooth seamlessness of the metropolis and its mental life. Embodying an unsettled nervous condition, Marlow at this point is characterised by a rupture in the "reciprocity between self and others" (Ramachandran 289) through which the being interacts with the social world while also maintaining the desirable degree of privacy. He is subjected to an existential change which entails "an all-enveloping shift of one's sense of 'belonging to a shared world' [. . .] that all of one's thoughts, experiences and activities more usually take for granted" (Ratcliffe 15-16). Unsurprisingly, Marlow describes himself at this phase as "not very well" (*HD* 70), "grinning bitterly at perfectly respectable persons" (*HD* 70) with a temperature that "was seldom normal in these days" (*HD* 70). In his neurotic temperament and existential disconnectedness following an experience of horror and loss,

Marlow may be read as a figure embodying the state of the Turgenevian Superfluous Man who embodies an "egoistic (albeit intelligent) sensibility, rather decadent or neurotic in its oscillations of mood; a cynical or ironic quality; and, above all, that sense of being superfluous, without role or function; isolated from society" (Watts, *Preface* 66).[15] Ending as he does "in the pose of a meditating Buddha" (*HD* 76) Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* emerges less as a signifier of spiritual wisdom than a hollowed-out seer who can pose like a prophet but is unable to articulate his knowledge of loss as "that would have been too dark—too dark altogether. . ." (*HD* 76)

*Heart of Darkness* is a complex narrative that situates the self and its existential inwardness in moments of epistemic violence and cognitive crises, with the backdrop of a real imperial setting with all its horrors and hubris. Its uniqueness – despite the rhetoric of its times which it retains in its descriptions of non-Europeans and African atavism – stems from its "tensions of a split heritage, divided between the demands of the adventure and the 'literary' novel" (Boehmer 44). In its self-reflexive epistemology of unlearning and uncertainty, Conrad's novel maps a feeling and changing mind onto an imperial order that historically perpetuated its ideologies through an "entanglement of falsehood and self-contradiction" (Joravsky 294).[16] In its articulation of failure and its failure of articulation, *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes a complex political, psychological and existential ambivalence that shows what it means to be fully and painfully human in a world of ideological overdeterminism. It reveals the ability of a literary text and a work of fiction to describe the complexities of human consciousness and embodied experience, mapping the same onto a crisis of knowledge and narration.

## References

Ambrosini, Richard. *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Ash, Beth, S. "The horror of trauma: Mourning or Melancholia in Heart of Darkness?" *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought: Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*. Ed. Nidesh Lawtoo. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. 181-200.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Bock, Martin. *Joseph Conrad and Psychological Medicine*. Texas: Tech University Press, 2002.

Brewer, W. F. "Literary Theory, rhetoric, stylistics: Implications for Psychology." *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension: Perspectives from Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, Artificial Intelligence, and Education*. Ed R. J. Spiro, B. C. Bruce and W. F. Brewer. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1980. 221-240.

Bruner, Jerome. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Bunge, Mario. *The Mind Body Problem: A Psychobiological Approach*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980.

Chemero, Anthony. *Radical Cognitive Science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

Clark, Andy and David Chambers. "The Extended Mind." *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Ed. David J. Chambers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 643-52.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Ed. L. Davies and F. R. Karl. 9 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

---. *Heart of Darkness*. 1899. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton, 2002.

---. *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunnighame Graham*. Ed. C. T. Watts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

---. *Notes on Life and Letters*. Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2008.

---. *The Shadow Line: A Confession*. 1916. Ed. Jeremy Hawthorn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Currie, Gregorie and Ian Ravenscrof. *Recreative Minds: Imaginations in Philosophy and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Damasio, Antonio. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*. New York: Vintage Books, 2012.

Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York & London: Routledge, 1994.

Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. Norton: New York, 1995.

Gallagher, Shaun. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Garnett, David, ed. *Conrad's Prefaces to his Works*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1937.

Gibbs, Raymond W. *Embodiment and Cognitive Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Greenslade, William. *Degeneration Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Griffith, John W. *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

Herman, David. *Storytelling and Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Hunter, Allan. *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism: The Challenges of Science*. London: Routledge, 1983.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Methuen, 1981.

Jean-Aubry, G., ed. *Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters*. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, Page,

1927.

Johnson, Bruce. "Conrad's Impressionism and Watt's Delayed Decoding." *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*. Ed. Ross C. Murfin. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1985. 51-70.

Joravsky, David. "Between Science and Act: Freud versus Schnitzler, Kafka, and Musil." *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940*. Ed. Mark S. Micale. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004. 277-97.

Lawtoo, Nidesh. "A Frame for 'The Horror of the West'". *Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Contemporary Thought: Revisiting the Horror with Lacoue-Labarthe*. 89-110.

Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality: Character and Novelists from Conrad to Woolf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Libet, Benjamin. "Neural Processes in the production of conscious experience." *The Science of Consciousness: Psychological, Neuropsychological and Clinical Reviews*. Ed. Max Velmans. London & New York: Routledge, 1996. 96-117.

Lodge, David. *Consciousness and the Novel: Connected Essays*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2002.

Meisel, Perry. "Decentering *Heart of Darkness*." *Modern Language Studies* 8.3 (Autumn 1978): 20-28.

Meyer, Bernard C. *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.

Miller, J. Hillis. "*Heart of Darkness* Revisited." *Conrad Revisited: Essays for the Eighties*. 31-50.

---. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.

O'Hanlon, Redmond. *Joseph Conrad and Charles Darwin: The Influence of Scientific thought on Conrad's fiction*. Edinburgh: The Salamander Press, 1984.

Pettersson, Torsten. *Consciousness and Time: A Study in the Philosophy and Narrative Technique of Joseph Conrad*. Abo: Abo Akademi, 1982.

Ramachandran, V. S. *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes us Human*. New York: Norton, 2011.

Ratcliffe, Matthew. *Experiences of Depression: A Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Roberts, Andrew Michael. *Conrad and Masculinity*. London: Macmillan Press, 2000.

Ross, Dorothy. "Modernism Reconsidered." *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences 1870-1930*. Ed. Dorothy Ross. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994. 1-25.

Rubin, David C. and Daniel L. Greenberg, "The Role of Narrative in Recollection: A View from Cognitive Psychology and Neuropsychology", *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain*. Ed. Gary D. Fireman, Ted E. McVay and Owen J. Flanagan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 53-85.

Ryan, Judith. The *Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Schneider, Lisa. *Conrad's Narratives of Difference: Not Exactly Tales for Boys*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Smith, David Woodruff. "Consciousness with Reflexive Content." *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*. Ed. David Woodruff Smith and Amie L. Thomasson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 93-114.

Solms, Mark and Oliver Turnbull. *The Brain and the Inner World: An Introduction to the Neuroscience of Subjective Experience*. London: Carnac, 2002.

Stanzel, Franz K. *A Theory of Narrative*. Trans. Charlotte Goedsche. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "Connaissance du Vide." *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 11 (Spring 1975): 145-54.

Vulcan, Daphna Erdinast. *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Warner, Marina. *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors and Media into the Twenty-first Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Watt, Ian. "Conrad's Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7.2 (Winter 1974): 101-115.

---. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1980.

Watts, C. T. *A Preface to Conrad*. London: Longman, 1982.

---. *Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Critical and Contextual Discussion*. Milano: Mursia International, 1977.

Williams, Jeffrey. *Theory and the Novel: Narrative Reflexivity in the British Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso, 2002.

## Notes

1 The Modernist worldview as it appears in its most representative works of fiction, emerges as an indeterminacy about "the subjectivity of perception and cognition, a subjectivity that calls into question the unity of the observing subject as well as its relationship with the outside world" (Ross 6).

2 As Martin Bock suggests in his research, Conrad was known, by his friends, to write hysterical persona letters (Bock 77).

3  See Nagel, 20-27. It is interesting, at this point, to establish an analogy between Nagel's analysis of the subjectivity and objectivity and Conrad's treatment of the subjective experience and its unreliable narration. The view from nowhere that Nagel studies seeks to "combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included" (3) and bears structural similar-

ity with the narrative model Conrad espouses in *Heart of Darkness*, where the subjective view of Marlow who retrospectively narrates his experience in Congo is contained within the more objective frame of the unnamed narrator in a complex economy of storytelling. 4 See also Meisel, 20-28.

5 As Judith Ryan argues, consciousness in the twentieth century novel – as depicted in the works of Proust, Musil, Joyce and Woolf – was deeply influenced by the scientific and psychological discourses contemporaneous to it. William James's and Ernst Mach's philosophical underpinnings of psychology gave rise to the discourse of empiricism that "rejected the dualism of the subject and the object [arguing instead that] everything that was, subsisted in consciousness itself" (Ryan 2).

6 The term *qualia* may be used to refer to the distinctive and phenomenal quality of sensory experience "such as the pain of a toothache, the taste of chocolate, the sound of violin, or the redness of a ripe Bing cherry" (Gibbs 40). In his work on the storytelling propensities of the human mind, the neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran describes qualia as "the ineffable subjective quality of conscious experience" (Ramachandran 115).

7 In their essay, Clark and Chambers describe the distinction between *epistemic action* and *pragmatic action*. While the former corresponds to cognitive processes such as recognition and search, the latter relates to forms of physicality which are desirable for their own sake (the example offered is that of applying cement in a hole in a dam). Language, in the study of Clark and Chambers, emerges as the central means by which cognitive processes are extended into the external world. Thus disjointedness in cognitive processes would have its immediate impact on the production of language and shared signifiers of communication. The cognitive and narrative crisis in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* appears to underline such a state.

8 In this enquiry which explores the relation between self and the cognitive mechanism related to the appreciation of images, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes how "if no self is generated, the images still are, although no one, inside or outside the organism, knows of their existence. Subjectivity is not required for mental states to exist, only for them to be privately known" (Damasio 17). Marlow's cognitive crisis in the passage quoted and studied above may thus be read as a crisis of subjectivity, whereby the images exist without the subjective interpretation of the same. Such situation may also be compared with what the philosopher Thomas Nagel describes as the "view from nowhere" whereby subjective awareness and understanding is almost completely effaced in the face of a "bleached-out physical conception of objectivity". In elucidating the significance of subjectivity in mental understanding, Nagel affirms "how things appear to us depends on the interaction of our bodies with the rest of the world" (Nagel 15).

9 It is interesting to draw parallels with the Derridean sense of *hauntology* here, in order to signify a play between presence and non-presence that informs the revenant that Kurtz comes to embody in Marlow's hysteric imagination. Referring explicitly to Hamlet (a figure who in his nervous knowledge of the uncertainty of epistemology can be connected to a number of fictional figures in Modernism, most immediately to Eliot's Prufrock), Der-

rida states that the hauntology of Marx's Europe has immediate parallels with the ghost in Shakespeare's play who does not answer. Hauntology is thus to be as well as not to be and thus constitutes the end as well as the return of the ghost. It is interesting to extend this idea into Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in seeing Kurtz as the dead order that appears again in its affirmation of a knowledge that Marlow, like Hamlet is unable to articulate or enact except in its incompletion. As a spectralized substance, hauntology entails an irreducible category of knowledge that determines the dangerous "phenomenality of the political" (Derrida 51).

10 Lawtoo goes on to suggest that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is marked by an "outbreak of mimetic phenomena" including somnambulism, hypnosis and depersonalization that "haunt the Conradian conception of the subject" (240). Such analysis supports the claim made here that *Heart of Darkness* is a narrative where language, nerves and feelings enmesh to enact the crisis of being in nothingness.

11 Roberts goes on to suggest how this self-consciousness in Conrad's writing "is associated with scepticism about the possibility of truth and understanding" (7) and generates an epistemological doubt which makes his narratives "attend closely to processes of communication and exchange" (8).

12 Marlow's narration about Kurtz also appears to be synchronous to Freud's description of the rupture between repetition and remembering which characterizes the neurotic. Thus the neurotic, according to Freud, "is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (Freud 602).

13 Marlow and Kurtz may be interpreted as agents of the same imperialist war and Kurtz's death, as reported formally by Marlow to Kurtz's Intended, is couched in the typically romantic rhetoric characterizing military honour. The existential crisis of Marlow may thus be interpreted as a form of survivor's guilt and is further exacerbated by the lie he is forced to voice while attempting to retain Kurtz as a romantic hero who gloriously gave his life for a noble cause.

14 For a phenomenological study of these different orders of guilt, see Ratcliffe, 138-40.

15 In his analysis of the Turgenevian Superfluous Man and the figures in which such attributes are replicated, Watts includes Eliot's Prufrock, Sartre's Roquentin, Camus's Clamence and Beckett's tramps. Watts' choice of figures is interesting inasmuch as they share a cynical irreverence towards the normative social and cultural systems, an irreverence that borders on the comic by the time one gets to Beckett. In their knowledge of the hollowness of the social and cultural rituals around them, the superfluous men in the literature of the twentieth century flag up their uselessness in such systems of signification, often using metaphors of bodily and performative crises that are mapped onto their economy of epiphanies and insights.

16 Joravsky interestingly contrasts Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Kipling's "The White Man's Burden", published in the same year, as suggests how Conrad's depiction of uncertainty and alienation – as opposed to Kipling's arrogance of assertion – has "won generations of readers beyond the author's life"(294).