

## **Marlow's Journey in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: Criss-crossing the Boundaries of Imperialist Ideology and Epistemology**

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The starting point of my paper is the contention that epistemology—the way we perceive and know the world—is not universal and unchanging, but is informed, possibly even determined, by the dominant ideologies of a particular time, place and culture. Accounts of voyages lend themselves exceptionally well to the study of the interrelation between epistemology and ideology, because the way a traveller/narrator attempts to conceptualize and describe the experience of a foreign reality throws into relief the ideologies which constitute the boundaries of his/her perception and understanding. By identifying these ideologies, we can further draw conclusions as to whether, and to what extent, the traveller/narrator manages to overcome or subvert them.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, written at the turn of the last century, is an exemplary text for exploring questions of this kind. The novel is the account of Captain Marlow's journey to colonial Africa, and his confrontation with the excesses of imperialism. The political and historical context of Marlow's voyage is the so-called Scramble for Africa, in which the imperial powers of Europe—foremost among them Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Germany—divided up a whole continent into respective spheres of influence. These undertakings were accompanied by aggressive imperialist rhetoric, which sought to justify colonial exploitation on the grounds of the inferiority of the Africans, who were regarded as a separate, lower race. This kind of rhetoric conveyed an image of Africa as a place where savagery ruled supreme, and where the white European hero or super-man was called upon to implement the rudiments of civilization with the help of his omnipotence, which was based on superior weaponry. In their perception of Africa and the Africans, European travellers were inevitably

influenced by these images and their concomitant ideology. Indeed, as Edward Said points out, ‘in the closing years of the nineteenth century [imperialist ideology was] at the same time an aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable’.<sup>1</sup> It therefore determined what was—and what was not—thinkable, perceptible and describable.

In the following I would like to explore the question of whether Marlow, in the way he perceives and conceptualizes Africa and the Africans on his voyage, simply reproduces the stereotypes of imperialist ideology, or manages to critique, or even subvert, the latter by developing new ways of seeing. From the very start it is clear to Marlow that this will not be an ordinary journey: he feels ‘as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as the African coast glides past Marlow, he realizes that he is being confronted with a reality that will severely tax, and maybe even overthrow his habitual ways of decoding and making sense of the world:

Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out. This one was almost featureless, as if still in the making, with an aspect of monotonous grimness. The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist.<sup>3</sup>

Marlow compares his feelings of alienation to being ‘within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion’,<sup>4</sup> which is exacerbated by his first glimpses of imperialism in practice at the Company’s Outer and Central Stations. His observations directly contradict the basic tenets of imperialist ideology and rhetoric. One such tenet, for instance, was that the colonizers brought progress to backward areas which—on the most basic level—meant

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Robert Hampson (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 29. In the following abbreviated as HD.

<sup>3</sup> HD, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> HD, p. 30.

economic development. Instead of a flourishing trade station Marlow just discovers ‘inhabited devastation’.<sup>5</sup> Although the implements of progress are visible, they have been abandoned: ‘a boiler wallowing in the grass’, ‘an undersized railway truck lying [...] on its back with its wheels in the air’, scattered about are other ‘pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty nails’,<sup>6</sup> etc. As Marlow summarizes, ‘it was a wanton smash-up.’<sup>7</sup> Although there is some work going on, it seems not just inefficient but without any purpose, the exact opposite of how work was defined in imperialist rhetoric:

A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on.<sup>8</sup>

In Marlow’s description *work* and *building a railway* have become ironic expressions of contempt—nothing of the kind is happening. The white people in charge of the station are certainly no ‘superior beings’ or representatives of a ‘master race’ as suggested by imperialist propaganda. To Marlow they appear as ‘flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil[s] of a rapacious and pitiless folly’.<sup>9</sup> Instead of fulfilling their vaunted philanthropic mission to civilize and humanize the natives, they treat the Africans like slaves, brutally exploiting their labour power and inventing excuses to punish or torture them.<sup>10</sup> By noting the glaring contrast between imperialist rhetoric and the reality of colonialist practice, Marlow seems to develop an awareness of the way his construction of reality has been informed by imperialist ideology. Because he feels revolted by what he observes the Europeans to be doing in Africa, he distances himself from and maybe even dis-identifies himself with his own culture. Thus he manages to step outside imperialist ideology’s totalizing world-view, and frees his mind for new

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<sup>5</sup> HD, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> HD, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> HD, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> HD, pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> HD, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the description of the chain-gang (HD, p. 33) and the grove of death (HD, pp. 34-35).

ways of seeing. He turns with sympathy to those suffering the most from the Europeans' 'fantastic invasion',<sup>11</sup> the Africans. In his delineation of the atrocious treatment of the blacks at the Outer and Central Stations Marlow's emphasis is on the Africans' misery and humanity rather than on their alleged inferiority. In what he later calls 'the grove of death',<sup>12</sup> he describes the Africans as follows:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...]

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, - nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.<sup>13</sup>

By establishing a direct causal link between the dying Africans and the imperialist "work" going on in the background,<sup>14</sup> Marlow leaves no doubt as to whom he blames for what he calls an 'Inferno'.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective it is the Europeans who appear as 'brutes', and not the Africans. Marlow thus not only subverts, but reverses the binary opposition between the savage and the civilized as inscribed in imperialist ideology. In the grove of death, Marlow spontaneously offers 'one of my good Swede's ship's biscuits I had in my pocket'<sup>16</sup> to one of the dying Africans. This act of compassion, in which he sympathetically reaches out to the Other, is symbolic of the way Marlow engages with the Africans. Instead of adhering to the ideologically constructed gulf between the white imperialists and the 'degenerate savages', Marlow builds bridges simply by being curious and asking questions about the Africans and their culture. When, for instance, he observes a 'bit of white worsted'<sup>17</sup> tied round an African's neck, he wonders:

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<sup>11</sup> HD, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> HD, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> HD, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> 'The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.' (HD; p. 35)

<sup>15</sup> HD, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> HD, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> HD, p. 35.

‘Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it?’<sup>18</sup> Later on he will marvel at what prevents the apparently cannibalistic and starving crewmembers on board his steamer from going for the whites, whom they outnumber thirty to five:

Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear—or some kind of primitive honour? No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze.<sup>19</sup>

The crewmembers’ restraint is all the more remarkable as this is a quality which the Europeans— foremost among them Kurtz—lack: they are consumed by a voracious greed for ivory and use every opportunity to torture or kill the natives. Marlow also demonstrates his capacity for empathy when he occasionally attempts to imagine how he must look to an African. For instance, he explains the reactions of an African guard who hoists his weapon because he mistakes Marlow for a white official as ‘simple prudence, white men being so much alike at a distance that he could not tell who I might be’.<sup>20</sup> As Anthony Fothergill puts it, even though ‘there must still be something ethnocentric in what Marlow attributes to the guard’, he nevertheless possesses ‘a self-distancing capacity’, which enables him ‘to imagine what it must be like to look at a white if you’re not one’.<sup>21</sup> Marlow seems to regard the Africans as his equals: ‘I looked at them as you would *on any human being*, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, [...]’ (my italics).<sup>22</sup>

This maxim sometimes leads Marlow to anticipate a surprisingly modern position of cultural relativism. For instance, at one point Marlow

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<sup>18</sup> HD, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> HD, p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> HD, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Fothergill, *Heart of Darkness. Open Guides to Literature* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> HD, p. 71.

speculates about the similarities between African drumming and European church bells:

on some quiet night [I heard] the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country.<sup>23</sup>

Marlow here suggests that seemingly different manifestations of culture are in fact just variant expressions of the same tribal or societal needs, so that the terms *superior* and *inferior* cannot be applied. In another feat of cultural relativist thinking, he tries to bring home to his listeners why the African villages along the River Congo are deserted. He inverts the roles of colonizer and colonized, and asks his English audience to imagine what it would be like to be subjected to an imperialist invasion:

Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabout would get empty very soon.<sup>24</sup>

Given the above examples, it is not surprising that critics such as John Griffith, who have analysed *Heart of Darkness* from an ethnographic perspective, have detected in Marlow's 'desire for interpretive knowledge'<sup>25</sup> of African native culture the 'anthropological urge—to understand and interpret'.<sup>26</sup> James Clifford has referred to Marlow's manner of narrating his journey as 'a paradigm of ethnographic subjectivity',<sup>27</sup> which he defines as 'a coherent position of sympathy and hermeneutic engagement' expressed in an 'ironic stance of participant observation'.<sup>28</sup> Although to us in the twenty-

<sup>23</sup> HD, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> HD, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> John W. Griffith, *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: 'Bewildered Traveller'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Griffith, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 100.

<sup>28</sup> Clifford, p. 110.

first-century, Marlow's responses to Africa may still appear inadequate, Eurocentric and patronizing, in the context of his time and place they are certainly unusual, transcending imperialist ideology. There is no doubt that the other whites Marlow encounters in Africa, who often appear as if they were conscious automata, unthinking, brainwashed products of the empire machine, are utterly incapable of any sort of dialogue with the Other. As Anthony Fothergill puts it, they cannot 'even imagine "imagining the other"'.<sup>29</sup>

As shown above, Marlow's natural capacity of sympathetic imagination, his confrontation with a completely unknown African reality, and his shock at colonialist practice in the Congo allow him to transcend the epistemological limits set by imperialist ideology. A problem with this reading, however, is that Marlow does not display this enlightened, anti-racist and anti-imperialist response to Africa during the whole of his journey. Especially in the course of his trip up the Congo River towards Kurtz's Inner Station, Marlow reacts differently to his surroundings and seems to revert to a perspective of Africa determined by imperialist ideology. For instance, he imagines himself to be a 'wanderer [...] on a prehistoric earth', and regards the Africans on the shore as 'prehistoric man [...] cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us'.<sup>30</sup> He thereby invokes the pseudo-scientific idea that the Africans, from a European point of view, represent an earlier stage in evolutionary development. This idea of a hierarchy of races, with the Europeans on top and the Africans at the bottom, was a central part of imperialist ideology. It is consistent with Marlow's apparent return to an epistemology circumscribed by imperialist ideology, that in the pages dealing with his approach to Kurtz's station he describes Africans in what is—to the modern reader at least—a dehumanizing and racist manner. Marlow infamously compares his fireman to 'a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs',<sup>31</sup> and he refers to his 'fool-helmsman' as 'lifting his knees high, stamping his feet,

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<sup>29</sup> Fothergill, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> HD, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> HD, p. 64.

champing his mouth, like a reined-in horse',<sup>32</sup> It is passages such as these which prompted Chinua Achebe, in his controversial essay 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', to call Conrad—whom he does not distinguish from Marlow—'a thoroughgoing racist'.<sup>33</sup> Although my intention is not to white-wash Marlow, his decision to stop engaging sympathetically with the foreignness of his surroundings may become understandable if we regard it as a psychological reaction to the mental, and indeed physical, strains of his voyage, which increase the closer he gets to his destination, Kurtz's Inner Station.<sup>34</sup> His observations of the genocidal dimensions of white imperialism in Africa have led him to doubt the nature of European civilization, of which he is a product himself. Furthermore, the enigma of Africa has proved recalcitrant to his decoding endeavours, and has destabilized his habitual ways of making sense of the world. Finally, Marlow becomes increasingly obsessed with the figure of Kurtz, who seems to absorb all of his mental energies. To save himself from a breakdown, Marlow seeks refuge in the exigencies of the work ethic. That is, he flees from an engagement with the challenge of African reality by concentrating on the task at hand, navigating his steamer. As he says himself 'I don't like work—no man does—but I like what is in the work, -the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know.'<sup>35</sup> Marlow realizes that this is a mere defensive strategy, the use of what might be called 'the ostrich factor':<sup>36</sup> 'When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily.'<sup>37</sup> On an epistemological level this strategy expresses itself in a reversion to a perspective of Africa circumscribed by the stereotypes of imperialist

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<sup>32</sup> HD, pp. 75-76.

<sup>33</sup> Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Robert Kimbrough, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Norton, 1988), pp. 251-262 (p. 257).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. for instance Marlow's reaction to the death of the helmsman during the attack on the steamer, HD, pp. 77ff.

<sup>35</sup> HD, p. 52.

<sup>36</sup> Cedric Watts, *Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness': A Critical and Contextual Discussion* (Milan: Mursia International, 1977), p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> HD, p. 60.



ideology. This reversion, however, is by no means complete, and although it has become more difficult to detect, Marlow's 'anthropological urge' and capacity for sympathetic imagination are still extant. For instance, at the same time as Marlow posits an evolutionary gulf between advanced Europeans and 'prehistoric' Africans, he also attempts to comprehend the latter by discovering—albeit patronizingly—a 'remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar [on the shore]' and 'an appeal [to him] in this fiendish row', which he interprets as the expression of basic human emotions which all of humanity share: 'joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage'.<sup>38</sup> In other words, he perceives 'truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time'.<sup>39</sup> When Marlow first describes the cannibal crew on board his steamer, he notes that 'they were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them'.<sup>40</sup> This is a high compliment from someone who places such importance on the work ethic and the duty to a task. The Europeans on board are people Marlow certainly does not want to work with. Similarly, just before the steamer is attacked, Marlow talks to the headman of his African crew 'just for good fellowship's sake',<sup>41</sup> but is not interested in speaking to his fellow whites, who disgust him. Although he has painted a disparaging picture of his helmsman, he later asserts that

I missed my late helmsman awfully [...]. [...] Well, don't you see, he had done something, he had steered; for months I had him at my back—a help—an instrument. It was a kind of partnership. He steered for me—I had to look after him, I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created, of which I only became aware when it was suddenly broken.<sup>42</sup>

There is no sense here that Marlow regards the African as his inferior or as a hardly human 'living fossil', as contemporary anthropology had it. Marlow is also concerned with disposing of the body as quickly as possible by

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<sup>38</sup> HD, p. 63.

<sup>39</sup> HD, p. 63.

<sup>40</sup> HD, p. 61.

<sup>41</sup> HD, p. 69.

<sup>42</sup> HD, p. 84.

tipping it overboard, in order to save it from the cannibals. Finally, Marlow states retrospectively that he is ‘not prepared to affirm that [Kurtz] was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him’.<sup>43</sup> The reference is to the helmsman.

We can conclude that Marlow’s perspective of Africa and the Africans is ambiguous and contradictory, sometimes reaffirming imperialist and racist stereotypes, sometimes transcending and even subverting them. The way Marlow constantly criss-crosses the epistemological boundaries set by imperialist ideology has been recognized, albeit somewhat grudgingly, by recent critics. While Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, claims that Marlow’s Africa and his Africans come ‘from a huge library of *Africanism*, so to speak’,<sup>44</sup> he nevertheless avers that, because of Joseph Conrad’s own position as a cultural hybrid, he manages to endow Marlow with the self-consciousness of an outsider, which allows him to ‘comprehend how the [empire] machine works, given that [he] and it are fundamentally not in perfect synchrony or correspondence’.<sup>45</sup> In her influential study *Conrad and Imperialism*, Benita Parry, also starts out by noting how Marlow’s epistemology is determined by imperialist ideology. She notes that what Marlow observes on his journey ‘belongs not to history but to fantasy’, and is in fact a

mythological cosmos, an invention essential to imperialism’s rationale, which fascinates Marlow and as the lurid images from colonialism’s gallery take possession of his vision these, in the absence of a dissenting discourse, come to occupy the fiction’s space.<sup>46</sup>

Later on in her study, however, Parry comes to the conclusion that Marlow does respond to ‘the dislocating effects of a foreign mode on a mind formed by the western experience and devoted to its forms’,<sup>47</sup> thus recognizing

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<sup>43</sup> HD, p. 84.

<sup>44</sup> Said, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Said, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Parry, p. 31.

‘intimations of other [than imperialist] meanings manifest in a landscape he can only perceive metaphorically’.<sup>48</sup> Although Marlow is often on the very ‘threshold of new ways of seeing’ he ‘draws back from the dangers of too much reality to the boundaries of that restricted consciousness he had ventured to criticize’.<sup>49</sup> In this way, both Parry and Said appear to support my own argumentation that Marlow’s relationship to imperialist ideology is janiform. On the one hand, he manages to overcome its epistemological boundaries through his willingness to engage sympathetically with an unknown African reality, which is partly the result of his shock at colonialist practice in the Congo. On the other hand, he seeks the comforting shelter of an imperialist world-view when he is under psychological pressure and fears the dissolution of his identity. The way that Marlow neither manages to completely transcend the imperialist perspective nor wholly submits to it would confirm the theories of critics such as Raymond Williams or Edward Said, who underline the perniciousness and ubiquity of ideology but nevertheless admit possibilities for critique and subversion.

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<sup>48</sup> Parry, p. 33.

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