

The Limits of Language or Into the Heart of Darkness By Meike Ziervogel

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'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?' asks Marlow his listener. Marlow is the protagonist of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He is a sailor, travelling up river on a steamboat to the heart of the African continent in search of the infamous ivory trader Kurtz. 'I made the strange discovery that I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing,' Marlow continues his description of Kurtz a few pages later. 'The point was in his being a gifted creature...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.'

So how does language define and delude Kurtz? Can language do good as well as evil? And does Conrad deliver some linguistic conjuring tricks of his own during the course of *Heart of Darkness*?

Let's follow the course of Marlow's steam boat.

'We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms...We could not understand, because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign - and no memories.'

Words are symbols. We string them together to form language. And then we use language to chop up reality into digestible bite-size packages in order to be able to navigate our confusing world. If we don't have language - or don't understand the language around us - life appears like a hostile, impenetrable jungle.

Anyone who has ever lived in a foreign country with a different language knows that feeling.

I came to Britain as a 19-year old. My English was not very good. But like Marlow I was eager to set out on the steam boat that would take me up the river of the new language and into the heart of the unknown country and people. I learned fast. But after a few months something strange happened. The better my English became the more an eerie silence and dead stillness seemed to open up inside me. As cold and solid as the thick fog that Marlow

and his crew encounter along the river. 'And the white shutter came down... The rest of the world was nowhere, as far as our eyes and ears were concerned. Just nowhere. Gone, disappeared; swept off without leaving a whisper or a shadow behind.' The fog finally clears and Marlow looks upon the shores of the strange country.

When small children start to speak we witness their excitement at being able to make themselves understood. However, as we grow older and the longer we use language, we increasingly become aware of its limitations. Language makes very little clear. How often do we think we express ourselves, only to be misunderstood? How often do words attempt to bridge the gap between us and the other person – only to break down half-way?

I believe that when adults learn to operate in a new language, they undergo the same experience as children – the euphoria of being able to communicate followed by the painful realisation of language's limitation.

But we don't like this limitation. We hold onto the belief that language describes reality, reflects reality, has the power to lay bare the truth. Language fools us. Because: 'The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily,' as Marlow knows. Like an impenetrable darkness.

Reality is what we live. Words barely scratch the surface. Yet we use them to comprehend our world.

That's fine. As long as we are aware of the gap between reality and our symbolic systems, i.e languages. If we forget, we run the risk of believing that we can shape reality with our words – and turn into an omnipotent, mad Kurtz.

'Oh yes, I heard him. "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my-" Everything belonged to him,' Marlow tells us. 'His soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad.'

Ultimately, Marlow is not seeking the ivory trader. 'Mind, I am not trying to excuse or even explain – I am trying to account to myself for – for – Mr Kurtz-for the shade of Mr Kurtz.' He is looking for the part of himself that is dangerous, to himself and to others. It's the part that is capable – through language – to create an alternative reality, and then mistake it for actual reality.

But can language have the capacity to help us as well as hurt us? Kurtz dies in the wilderness and Marlow returns to England where he visits Kurtz fiancée to tell her the last word that the dying man uttered: her name. It's a lie – a mere trick of language. But, this time, Marlow knows that he is using language in service of a greater good.

'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,' he mentions at the beginning of the book before he sets out on his journey. However, now, after his encounter with Kurtz, and as he is sitting in the woman's drawing room, he only wonders for a moment if 'the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened.' And he concludes: 'The heavens do not fall for such trifle.' Marlow has now accepted language with all its limitations – but also with all its powers: to veil the truth in order to create communication and to enable human civilisation.

Moreover, human civilisation is built on accepting the existence of different layers of meaning. Conrad knows that. After all he is a conjuror of language. I like to elaborate on this argument – and will do so from another personal starting point. The protagonist of my first novel is called Magda. The protagonist of my second novel is named Michele. Both names start with 'M', both consist of 2 syllables. Like Meike. Although I wasn't conscious of this resemblance while writing I am sure that I was partly attracted to those names because they made access easier to parts of myself that I wanted to explore creatively with these stories.

Let's apply the theory to *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad. The name 'Marlow' comes from the old English *lake leavings* or *driftwood*. Marlow is a drifter. A drifter, like Conrad. A sailor. On the waters of the world, the unconsciousness, the inarticulate mass from where we originate.

And 'Kurtz' alludes to the German *kurz*, i.e. short. Moreover, phonetically it resembles the first syllable of Conrad's Polish family name, Korzeniowski. When Conrad became English, he shortened his name from Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski to Joseph Conrad.

Just as Korzeniowski falls into silence as Conrad embraces his new nationality – and language – so Kurtz has to die in the wilderness.

Heart of Darkness starts and ends with an unnamed first person narrator who sets the scene and then turns into a silent listener to Marlow's story. We can easily understand this narrator as Conrad himself, listening to the two sides of his linguistic persona – Marlow and Kurtz.

No English mother-tongue speaker could have written *Heart of Darkness*. It needed Conrad. English was his third language. He understood, better than most, how language creates new systems of meanings which help us to operate in the world while always pointing to a reality beyond the words. However, he was also acutely aware of the power of language to deceive, delude and drive us into a Heart of Darkness.