

No Depth but Surface: 'Heart of Darkness' Reconsidered

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According to the discourses of certain medical disciplines from the last decades of the nineteenth century—most representatively, physiognomy and phrenology—the shape of the human face or the cranium revealed a person's psychological attributes. As Pawlikowska demonstrates, this pseudoscientific approach can be termed the 'surface-depth paradigm,' where invisible internal attributes were believed to reveal themselves at the surface and in visible forms, shapes, and symptoms. Given its strong hegemonic influence on contemporary literary language, it is highly interesting to argue that Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' (1899) is deconstructive of this 'surface-depth paradigm,' while often suggesting that there is no depth but surface. I would term this a 'surface-surface principle' and discuss the ways in which this textual logic intervenes in and even subverts a set of political ideologies based on this surface-depth paradigm in the late nineteenth century.

In this context, Hillis Miller's reading of this text is highly relevant. Miller attempts to reinterpret 'Heart of Darkness' as a parable, while stressing the realistic aspects of this narrative:

The distinctive feature of a parable, whether sacred or secular, is the use of a realistic story, a story in one way or another based firmly on what Marx calls man's "real condition of life, and his relations with his kind," to express another reality or truth not otherwise expressible.
(181)

This text may be regarded as reflective of the author's actual experiences

of his exploration and a criticism of the colonial exploitation of the Congo. Miller argues that Jesus uses parables in the Holy Bible, because '[t]hough seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand' (Matthew 13: 13). That is, in order to make himself understood, Jesus uses parables as restatements of true stories. Miller's point here is that Conrad attempts to make himself understood in an indirect way, similar to Jesus in the Holy Bible.

Furthermore, Miller also contends that 'Heart of Darkness' can be read as an 'apocalyptic' text, suggesting that there is a hidden truth or secret within its narrative: the word 'apocalypse' means an 'unveiling' or 'revelation' of something hidden in the depths, although at the same time, what an 'apocalyptic narrative' unveils is not the truth of the end of the world which it announces, but the act of unveiling itself (189). Miller's point is that an apocalyptic text does not function to disclose a final truth or secret, but rather serves as the medium to disclose it. He therefore maintains that in 'Heart of Darkness,' Marlow as the central narrator, the other characters, and readers cannot discover the ultimate truth or secret. What matters in this 'apocalyptic' novel is the effort involved in the quest, and not the result of the search itself. The implication is that their quest for the truth is a futile endeavour.

Miller's reference to Romans as a reverberation of Matthew is significant as it leads him to conclude that 'Heart of Darkness' is a parabolic and apocalyptic narrative:

Parable tends to express what Paul at the end of Romans, in echo of Matthew, calls "the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest" (Romans 16: 25–26). Parable, one can see, has at least this in common with apocalypse: it too is an act of unveiling. (181)

It can therefore be understood that Miller considers this novella as apocalyptic as well as parabolic in the sense that it serves as a historical and realistic story, where the ultimate truth or secret cannot be discovered directly (182). What we witness is the process of this kind of exploration of

nothing meaningful and final.

Miller pays careful attention to the first sequence of this narrative, wherein Marlow begins to narrate his experiences in the deep jungles of Africa. What interests Miller in this scene on the ship is that it grows darker and darker around the characters. As a matter of fact, the narrator remarks: 'It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he [Marlow], sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice' (130). Regarding this depiction of darkness, Miller remarks:

In the passage in which Marlow makes explicit his sense of the impossibility of his enterprise he says to his auditors on the *Nellie* first that he did not see Kurtz in his name any more than they do. The auditors of any story are forced to see everything of story "in its name," since a story is made of nothing but names and their adjacent words. There is nothing to see literally in any story except the words on the page, the movement of the lips of the teller. (187)

Miller connects this darkness with Marlow's inability to discover and reveal Kurtz's secret in 'Heart of Darkness.' This implies that Kurtz's name does not mean anything to Marlow and his listeners, and thus they know nothing about this mysterious character. In this way, even if there are several names in this novel, they signify nothing. As I will demonstrate, Kurtz's name should be taken as a signifier without the signified. To borrow Miller's expression, '[t]here is nothing literally' in this text (187).

As the title of this text strongly indicates, Conrad's language encourages us to assume that there is some final and definite truth at the depths of darkness. At the same time, this novella often appears to foreground the depths as represented by their surfaces. This is a textual reflection of what Kamila Pawlikowska terms the 'surface-depth paradigm' or the 'surface-depth principle' (8), one of the most dominant and hegemonic discourses in the last decades of the nineteenth century (as will be seen, physiognomy or phrenology are the most typical examples of this). In this discursive context, it naturally follows that the depths must have a truth, which should

be represented by their surfaces. As is well known, in 'Heart of Darkness,' Marlow attempts to enter into the depths of the African jungles, but he fails to reach their 'heart of darkness' where a truth may be revealed. In other words, as we will discuss, what he always encounters is a series of surfaces without their 'deep' truth. Evidently, this cannot be read as the 'surface-depth paradigm,' but may rather be termed a 'surface-surface paradigm.'

In this context, Pawlikowska attempts to contextualise this sort of surface-depth paradigm within a set of medical discourses from the late nineteenth century. More specifically, her focus is on physiognomy and phrenology:

Both physiognomics and phrenology attempt to 'order' the act of writing and reading the human face according to the surface-depth principle, that is, an assumption that the surface indicates the invisible 'depth'. (1)

An important example of this paradigm is phrenology, a dominant medical discourse from the late nineteenth century. According to this pseudoscience, the size or shape of the cranium is carefully observed to reveal the subject's character or psychological attributes. In other words, an analysis of the skull's surface could reveal the depth and truth of the person's character. As a matter of fact, in 'Heart of Darkness,' Conrad refers to this discourse at the very beginning:

He [the old doctor] was an unshaven little man in a threadbare coat like a gaberdine, with his feet in slippers, and I thought him a harmless fool. 'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. (112; emphasis added)

Before Marlow leaves for Africa, he travels to Brussels for a medical check-up. The old doctor he meets there is keen to pursue a phrenological method as an investigation into the human mind.

In this way, the skull or cranium plays an important role in illustrating the 'surface-depth' theme of this text. Interestingly, in this vein, a set of expressions related to 'bones' has much to do with this narrative interest. Crucial here is the manner in which Marlow gazes at his predecessor's dead

body still lying on the ground:

[W]hen an opportunity offered at last to meet my predecessor, the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones. They were all there. The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. (109; emphasis added)

What he actually sees are the ribs and bones just underneath the skin. Noteworthy here is the word ‘supernatural.’ In the context of contemporary spiritualist discourse, something ‘supernatural’ may be considered to designate the human soul. Given this fact, it must be stated that the soul—an abstract spiritual part of the body—is juxtaposed with the bones on the ground. In this manner, it is evident that the surface-depth paradigm is not applicable here; the implication is that nothing lies beneath what is visible on the surface, or rather, there is no ‘depth.’ Conrad’s language does not describe the soul as something located internally but as exposed to the surface just like the bones, ribs, or skull. Marlow’s first notable experience in Congo is his encounter with the bones. This also suggests that the narrative structure of this text does not follow the ‘surface-depth paradigm’ but the ‘surface-surface’ principle. We can thus argue that the text identifies the bones and the supernatural (the soul or spirits) as something exposed on the surface rather than inside the body.

Equally significant is Conrad’s rhetorical emphasis on the whiteness of bones. This figurative logic not only connects bones and the supernatural but also the supernatural with white people:

He [Kurtz] began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, ‘must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity,’ and so on, and so on. (155)

More importantly, this rhetorical stress on whiteness further associates bones, skulls, and white people with ivories, the ‘sublime object’ of Kurtz’s desire. Needless to say, he is a clear representation of white men’s imperialist passion for ivories. Interestingly enough, Kurtz himself is compared to an

'ivory ball' by Marlow:

And the lofty frontal bone of Mr Kurtz! They say the hair goes on growing sometimes, but this—ah—specimen, was impressively bald. The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered.
(153)

Considering the novel's reference to phrenology as well as Kurtz's skull being compared to an ivory ball, we may infer that the ivory or the skull represents Kurtz's spirit or soul. However, this is not the case. The ivory and his skull here do not signify anything other than themselves. That is, Kurtz the ivory seeker is identified with ivory itself in a tautological way: 'The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it' (125). The sound of the word 'ivory' being uttered, which echoes in the air, does not designate anything else. This enables us to contend that it is a signifier without the signified.

In addition, immediately before his death, Kurtz cries: 'Save me!—save the ivory, you mean. Don't tell me. Save *me!*' (169). This exhortation allows us to consider that he is a synecdoche for ivory. Put differently, the keyword—'ivory'—is reiterated merely tautologically without signifying Kurtz's personality or character. This kind of tautology is not suggestive of the surface-depth paradigm, but rather of the surface-surface paradigm. In any case, the truth of Kurtz's character remains unknown to Marlow.

In this way, the text reveals everything on the surface, with no underlying depth to the narrative. What characterises this narrative is its rhetorical structure. As has been discussed, 'Heart of Darkness' seemingly introduces a phrenological paradigm, while repeating rhetorical expressions symbolic of skulls or bones; however, a cranium as a trope merely functions as what may be termed a 'semantic surface.' There is no depth as signified, nothing that designates the depths of the human mind.

This kind of surface-surface principle—or a signifier without depth as the signified—is closely connected with the way in which white colonisers,

including Marlow, view the jungles of Africa. Therefore, we can read Marlow's following observation as self-referential in the sense that he criticises the Western colonizers' inability to observe something true in the depth: 'They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means' (131). Despite this sort of self-ironic criticism, he himself is deficient in such insight. As Melissa Free observes, African darkness 'gives Marlow no more information than the silence of the wilderness or the sounds of its inhabitants' (10).

Given his lack of insight into the depths, the following quotation should be interpreted as a self-referential expression of his frustration: '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' (137). Despite his wishes, the text is explicit about his failure to reach 'the heart of darkness.' All Marlow encounters are a series of surfaces such as bones, ribs, and ivories, where 'the reality fades,' as Marlow puts it.

Another noteworthy example of this surface-surface principle is a white fog that Marlow faces in the midst of the African jungles when the sun rises: 'When the sun rose there was a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night' (143). Of significance in this context is Peters' following argument:

The fog also blinds: those on the steamboat can see nothing beyond their immediate physical being, and the fact that the fog is "more blinding than the night" inverts the traditional western view of light and dark (an inversion that occurs throughout the story). Marlow's listeners expect white to be a positive image, but, in fact, it is not because the white fog paralyzes them in a precarious position. (39)

Owing to the visual obstruction caused by the white fog and its negative impact on their sense of direction, Marlow and his crew are unable to resume their voyage. As this white fog hinders Marlow's journey into the heart of darkness, it may be regarded as a superficial phenomenon as well. Once again, this brings us back to the surface-surface paradigm, where Marlow

repeatedly encounters a series of surfaces in this manner.

In addition, it is highly intriguing to state that 'bones' again play a crucial rhetorical part even after Marlow goes deep into the jungles. The thin and exhausted bodies of the black slaves are emphasised in such a manner as highlights the 'ribs' just underneath their black skins: 'I [Marlow] could see every rib' (116). Needless to say, the black colour, closely associated with 'the heart of darkness,' is strongly suggestive of the hidden truth in the depth of this narrative. Here, however, the slaves' blackness is limited to the surface of their bodies; moreover, their ribs are almost exposed on the surface. Worth recalling is that bones in this text are repeatedly represented as being located on the surface. This implies that what Marlow observes here—in the depth of the jungle—is a set of surfaces, black skin and ribs. In other words, Marlow in the jungles is obliged to encounter a series of surfaces in his desperate attempts to reach 'the heart of darkness.'

Interestingly, this can be detected in the novel's descriptions of the jungles. At the text's thematic level, Marlow appears to try to arrive in the depths of Congo; on its rhetorical level, in contrast, we always find him at the edges or on the fringes of the jungle. Even after exploring what this text describes as the heart of Africa, the landscapes remain the same. The following is what Marlow sees of the African continent from the offing:

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. (114)

It is interesting to compare this observation of Marlow with the following scene, where he goes down the river in the heart of the jungle after finally meeting Kurtz:

The long reaches that were like one and the same reach, monotonous bends that were exactly alike, slipped past the steamer with their multitude of secular trees looking patiently after this grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessings. (176-77; emphasis added)

Marlow thus feels that what he sees in this journey is '[t]he long reaches that were like one and the same reach, monotonous bends that were exactly alike.' As this comparison indicates, no matter how deeply he tries to enter the darkness, what he sees does not change: he encounters one surface after another.

Of great significance is that this novel is suggestive of the impossibility of arriving at the centre of the jungles from the beginning. Just after his narrative begins, it is implied that Marlow cannot enter the core of the continent:

But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be expected), 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 of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

(105; emphasis added)

Just as the meaning of what he narrates does not lie in its 'kernel,' it will turn out, his exploration into the African jungles fails to reach its core, 'the heart of darkness.' This is what the narrator predicts here. No less important is that Marlow's narrative is compared to a 'misty halos': something surrounding the 'kernel.' The suggestion here is the possibility that his journey as well as what he talks about will never go deep into the core of Africa; rather, they will only stay on the surface. This is reminiscent of Miller's remarks about the semantics of 'Heart of Darkness': '[t]he meaning now contains the tale' (183). He is indeed correct in suggesting that this novel does not have any hidden meaning within its core, although Marlow's narrative is repeatedly surrounded and covered by a series of ambiguous and unclear meanings just like the 'misty halos.'

Worth quoting in this context is Watt's observation that the narratives of 'Heart of Darkness' are constructed by a set of concentric structures.

In the first arrangement, that of the typical seaman's yarn, the direction given our minds is, to use a term from Newtonian physics,

“centripetal”: [...] Marlow’s tales, on the other hand, are typically “centrifugal” [...]. (180)

Watt is correct in suggesting that the seamen’s narrative in the novella is often structured as centripetal; in contrast, Marlow’s narrative is centrifugal. Significantly, readers are forcefully marginalised from the centre of the story in a ‘centrifugal’ way, while at the same time, strongly induced to look into it in a ‘centripetal’ manner. What most characterises Conradian language is this kind of narratological dilemma or dividedness.

Importantly, what we term the surface-surface principle is epitomized through the representation of the imperialist company in the European city, which requests Marlow to go into the heart of darkness. He describes the company in the following way:

Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. (111; emphasis added)

Thus, the door of this European company metaphorically works to ‘guard’ the darkness beyond the threshold. At the same time, it should be stressed that this depiction also serves as the surface of the heart of darkness. Once again, this is symbolised by a set of expressions related to bones. Of great importance in this context is Marlow’s reference to the European city: this western capital is associated with ‘a whited sepulchre’ and represented as ‘the sepulchral city’:

In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre. (110; emphasis added)

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. (179; emphasis added)

What matters is that this Belgian capital—the threshold of African

darkness—is figuratively associated with bones. The word ‘sepulchre’ refers to a stone-built space in which the bones of dead people are preserved. Given the rhetorical function of bones in this novel, this may suggest that this surface or the entrance into the darkness (Brussel) is suggestive of bones, another surface figure in this text. What we see here is again one surface after another, represented by the imagery of bones. Of course, the colour of a sepulchre is generally white, the significance of which does not need to be stressed.

Brady draws our attention to the way in which the images of ‘ivory’ and ‘the darkness’ contribute to what we term the surface-surface paradigm. The point is that ‘[t]hey [Marlow and the readers] will learn that the darkness and ivory are not two distinct and images or symbols but merely two components of the same entity’ (25). This is because both the darkness and ivory function as symbols of deceit which ‘may keep a man or a company or a nation from understanding and living the truth’ (25). It is thus possible to state that the darkness and the ivory—both superficial and without depth—prevent us from reaching the truth. In consequence, we find Marlow encounter one surface after another without discovering any truth.

In this way, Marlow cannot look into the heart of darkness or the truth of Kurtz’s lunatic obsession with ivories; therefore, all he can do is lie about them. As a matter of fact, when he meets Kurtz’s fiancée after he returns to the European city, he fails to reveal Kurtz’s final words when she asks; Marlow replied that ‘the last word he pronounced was—your name’ (186). As discussed earlier, Kurtz’s name is a signifier without the signified. Even in the final sequence of this narrative, Marlow the narrator thus cannot reach ‘the heart of darkness,’ only staying on the surface of its mystery.

Kurtz’s name—a signifier without the signified—leads us to consider that there is a void in the centre of the African jungles. In this regard, it is important to mention the significance of the map that Marlow was interested in as a child. The reason for his interest is the fact that ‘at that time there were many blank spaces on the earth’ (108), referring to the

regions of the world at that time as yet unexplored by Westerners. Even after its colonisation, Africa remained 'a place of darkness' for Kurtz (108). We can thus understand that Africa for Kurtz is 'a darkness' in a double sense: the Africa unknown to colonisers and the Africa already exploited by them. In this context, Graham Huggan's argument is worth quoting:

For Marlow, retracing the route already set out for him, the map reveals nothing: it registers a transference not from blank space to known (charted) space but from blank space to darkness. (30)

In this manner, we have to conclude that no matter how far he goes into the continent, all he encounters is one darkness/surface after another: it only serves as a signifier without the signified in exactly the same manner as Kurtz's name itself. In other words, the most crucial connotation of this narrative is that nothing exists beneath the surfaces. It is noteworthy that this 'nothingness' lends a unique sense of overpowering, traumatic, and dense presence. This may suggest that what really matters in Conrad's works is this kind of uncanny ontology of 'nothing.'

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