By the seventh canto of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, our hero Red Crosse Knight has been separated from Una, dallied with the treacherous Duessa, and been conquered by the Giant Orgoglio. Spenser is quite explicit about Orgoglio's origins and nature:

> The greatest Earth his vncouth mother was,
> And blustring *AEolus* his boasted sire,
> Who with his breath, which through the world doth pas,
> Her hollow womb did secretly inspire,
> And fild her hidden caues with stormie yre,
> That she conceiu'd; and trebling the dew time,
> In which the wombes of women do expire,
> Brought forth this monstrous masse of earthly slime,
> Puft vp with emptie wind, and fild with sinfull crime.
> (*The Faerie Queene*, I.vii.9)

Spenser's account of Orgoglio's origins ties Red Crosse Knight's vanquisher firmly to the earth: so much so that critics at various times have suggested the giant "is" everything from (in macro) earthquake to (in micro) man's most earthy part, the erected penis. Whatever role either of those *figurae* may play in the total depiction of Orgoglio, what Orgoglio "is" in Spenser's narrative is what Orgoglio does: he defeats Red Crosse Knight, imprisons him, replaces him as Duessa's lover and champion. He "is" Red Crosse Knight's opposite number, his alternative, his Other. Spenser describes Orgoglio's birth as a parody, a travesty, of Genesis's account of the creation of man. Orgoglio amounts to no more than earth and air, physical inspiration and expiration, "earthly slime,/ Puft vp with emptie wind." Red Crosse Knight, though neither he nor the reader knows it at this point, is similarly, literally, earth-born. A Faerie stole him as a child "And in an heaped furrow did [him] hide" (I.x.66), where a ploughman found him and raised him. His real identity, therefore, is George: *Ge-orgos*, the cultivator of the earth, the fruit of the earth – though the "org-" root suggests an even closer link to Orgoglio, suggests strongly the operation of a bilingual pun that makes both Red Crosse Knight and Orgoglio, appropriately, the embodiments of "pride in a handful of dust."

To this point in the narrative Spenser's hero has encountered and made errors. He has even, in some senses, called Error into being but they have been *his* errors, projections of himself and his singularity, icons embodying ideas progressively less and less general and more and more specific to Red Crosse Knight. To this point in the narrative Red Crosse Knight has been slowly and unwittingly leaving the space controlled by his singularity – thus his separation from Una –

and entering a space (a phase space, where chaos rules[1]) dominated by duplicity, duality, duplication, a space presided over by his opponent, the prototypical opponent, Archimago, and mediated by Duessa. The Knight copulates with Duessa and thereby, in the logic that governs this allegory, creates alterity, calls into being his Other, his kin, Orgoglio. He duplicates himself in The Other that is specific to himself, inspiration reinterpreted and debased as inflation.

Alterity

The solid ground on which any positive evaluation of any allegory must build is the shifting sand of The Other: The Other conceived in all its open-ended and fundamentally redundant alterity, all that is not us, not ours, not exactly what we mean, not what we said or meant to say, not what we intended, not what we wanted, not what we ever imagined, not what it says there on the page, not what the words signify, not true, not the thing itself, not real, not this: something else. The Other is the primeval nightmare, the multiplex that opposes our singleness, the outside that envelops our inside, the dark that swallows our light. Monsters like Orgoglio are The Other and dwell in The Other. Grendels stalk out of that dark to snuff out Heorot. The shapeless waits in The Other to take on the forms that allow it to usurp our shaped, our known, our own. In the clutch of The Other, clear and univocal speech loses precision, multiplies in connotation, becomes confused, becomes *self*-contradictory – the telltale taint of The Other – and degenerates (grows) into allegory.[2]

It's best to be reductive now, to reduce our problem to manageable proportions. We stalk the literary Other, the Other that allegory can mean or say. What can we, without allegory, say about it? Much, as it happens. For one thing, we can posit its existence, or at least its verbal existence. We can posit its existence as words, or at least as signs, as an encoded, semiotic system of some sort. Why? Because Saying Other, the function by which allegory defines itself, demands the existence of a referential area beyond the literal statements of the text. There must exist an Other to be referred to or drawn upon or signified or indicated. There must be,

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[1] The science of chaos (non-linear systems) has suggested several useful terms and analogies for this study. I had been struggling clumsily for some time with finding language for the ideas that were emerging from this study of allegory before I realized the utility of the patterns and behaviors and terminology being generated by the scientific study of seemingly irregular and "indescribable" physical systems. For a good general introduction to the whole field, see Gleick, *Chaos: Making A New Science* (Viking Press: New York, 1987).

[2] Carolynn Van Dyke, in *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory* (Cornell University Press, 1985), argues for a totally different version of the Other, and consequently for a completely different view of allegory, than the one I am presenting here.

> It follows that allegory as exemplified by the *Psychomachia* is indeed "other-speech," but not in the sense of the rhetoricians' *alieniloquium*. "Otherness" aptly designates the relationship not between words and meaning but between elements of the poem's implicit code. Out of context, the subjects and predicates of the narrative propositions seem alien to each other – respectively timeless and timebound, realistic and mimetic, native on one hand to philosophical discourse and on the other to literary narrative. We imagine the *Psychomachia* as the child of Christian doctrine and Virgilian epic. I postulate that nonnarrative allegories are based on similar conjunctions of disparate elements. In descriptive allegory, intelligible subjects receive sensory descriptions; lyric becomes allegorical when ideas are apostrophized or otherwise evoked. In each case a localizing medium is opened to the timeless and the general. In short, the "pure allegory" of the *Psychomachia* is realistic narrative, or narrative whose agents are universals, and literary allegory in general is the set of genres that are based on the synthesis of deictic or nondeictic generic codes." (*Fiction of Truth*, 40).

To such argumentation I would of course respond that, no matter how thin you slice it, it's still personification.

before our *prima facie* text, what Maureen Quilligan calls a "pre-text," an area of reference, a myth or scripture, a sign system or body of knowledge that can be drawn upon or drawn into, likened to or distinguished from, the *prima facie* text.[3] This must exist for the simple reason that without it there can be no Other and no Other Meaning: something other than the literal, immediately comprehensible sense of the words of the *prima facie* text must be either referred to or borrowed from.

This is not reflex binary thinking: there are no other possibilities, given the constraints of our minimalist definition of allegory. The only remotely conceivable *tertium quid* is that the words of the *prima facie* text somehow combine among themselves to generate another meaning which is not definable by conventional notions of metaphor, symbolism, imagery, etc. I don't question the theoretical possibility of such a phenomenon, but equally I cannot imagine it occurring without externally existing referents to complete the meaning of the pattern or gestalt or configuration of the pre-, post-, hyper-, or meta-verbal construct generated by those words. Even if the final Other created by the allegorical process remains, as the greatest poetry is conventionally thought to be, non-paraphrasable, it must nevertheless be apprehendable – and except for the very few of us who think mathematically, that means at least a rudimentary assemblage of words plus concepts plus pictures (plus perhaps assorted sensual stimuli). These must be "encoded" – already rendered into a textualized or textualizable form – or they are *de facto* not usable, not available, for allegory. An Other so alien, so radically disjunct that it is not sayable at all can be and often is the goal of allegory, but it can never be its means.

Therefore – and this is a very strict therefore – it follows that insofar as The Other is drawn upon, insofar as it provides an area or pool of reference that spills over to inform the *prima facie* text, The Other must be encoded. It must be already "literary": it must exist in a form that readily permits its transference into a literary text, because it is otherwise unusable. It must exist already as a special language, a distinct vocabulary (whether of words or pictures or concepts) possessing the qualities of significance (importance, resonance) and distinction (recognizability, specialness, separateness). Without those qualities, The Other would not be "encoded" and therefore would not be available for allegory. Maureen Quilligan argues that such a pre-text must be a Scripture; indeed, for all practical purposes she limits the usable "pre-text" for western allegory to the Judeo-Christian Bible. I don't see the necessity for that: the important and necessary qualities, to my mind, are that the area of reference possess authority and recognizability. *The Aeneid*, for instance, for many centuries in the West served quite well as a tappable area of reference for allegory, as the example of Dante's poem makes clear, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could have done the same, as could, with even less formulized and formalized narrative, "the matter of Troy."

To my mind, to narrow the referential range of allegory in the way Quilligan does is unnecessary and erroneous. Allegory, in my view, can use any texts and any kind of texts for its areas of reference, provided they have achieved a level of cultural centrality, distinctiveness, and recognizability that makes them, for lack of a better word, "alludable." In the twentieth and

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[3] See *Language of Allegory*, 97-155 and *passim*. The concept behind it is a key one for allegory, and it is about the nature of this "pretext" that I differ most strongly from Maureen Quilligan's theses. This will be discussed below.

twenty-first centuries, there are almost as many candidates for usable areas of reference as there are formulators of canons: *The Odyssey* for Joyce, *Hamlet* for Stoppard, the grail legend for Eliot, the life and fictions of Daniel Defoe for Coetzee. Even the artifacts of popular culture can serve as "pre-texts," or, to use the words I prefer, areas of reference, for allegory: Pynchon uses Grade B movie clichés, Auster employs the plots and devices of detective fiction. For the purposes of allegory, even the terms and referents of ordinary discourse and quotidian experience would be available as an area of reference to a text or a genre that did not otherwise employ them (as they are, for instance, in *The Satyricon*). Particularly in a secularized society, the choice of "sacred texts" tends to be an integral part of the individual allegorist's total esthetic and ideological vision rather than a universal given.

Areas of Reference

The question that usually arises at this point is how this use of pre-texts differs from allusion, and it is probably a good idea to clarify beforehand just how radically distinctive allegory's employment of areas of reference really is. It is true that allusion and allegorical areas of reference are alike in that both draw into the *prima facie* text some other text and "turn it on" there, make it somehow operative within the *prima facie* text. That, however, is the end of their resemblance. Allusion uses its referential text either locally, for very specific ends (frequently irony) or pervasively, to establish a frame whose values condition the way we understand the actions and characters of the *prima facie* text. Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, for instance, offers us an example of allusion used in this manner: Dryden counts on his readers' registering both the changes he has made from his referential text and the events he has faithfully transcribed or translated from it into his *prima facie* text. Allusion's referential text, no matter how complexly used, is in effect an *idée fixe*, an anchor of meaning: its values, its terms, often even its events and its language bear value, and that value becomes a constant in the *prima facie* text to which it is imported.

With allegory, referential texts have a totally different status. They may – in all probability will – be used locally, pervasively, and sporadically within the same text. They will never be used universally, uniformly, or systematically, in such a way that actions and characters of the referential text have precise correspondents, part for part, in the *prima facie* text: readings of *Heart of Darkness* that attempt to force elaborate correspondences between Conrad's story and either Virgil's or Dante's epic provide an example of this kind of misperception of the relation of an allegorical text to its areas of reference.

The more usual relationship is like that between the actions and characters of *The Faerie Queene* and the Christian Bible. Biblical narrative – particularly the events and actions of Apocalypse – pervades Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, yet Apocalypse is not invoked explicitly to inform every action and event of that book: many of Una's adventures, for instance, as well as the education of Red Crosse Knight in the House of Holiness, lack even loose correspondents in Apocalypse. On the other hand, allusions to (and even parodies of) Biblical events, even events of the New Testament, are hardly confined to Book I of *The Faerie Queene*: they show up at crucial points throughout the poem, trailing with them their contextual clouds of glory. Yet further: even Red Crosse Knight, who of all the poem's characters is most closely linked to Scripture, does not always appear within a Biblical frame or context, and when he does, the

values he thereby imports into the poem by that context are not always clear. In the whole Orgoglio episode, for instance, while it is relatively easy to assign a role out of Apocalypse to Duessa, no such readily identifiable function can be found for the constellation of Red Cross Knight, Una, Arthur, and Timias: they seem to demand that what is one role in Apocalypse be divided among several players in *The Faerie Queene*, with no diminution of the contextual relevance of the reference but a with a consequent and highly meaningful readjustment of the accompanying values.

Perhaps the Bible and *The Faerie Queene* are not the best examples possible for talking about this, because the Bible is – in most modern critics' imaginations at any rate – an overprivileged, overdetermined text vis-à-vis *The Faerie Queene*, but the point I am trying to make is that Spenser's use of it undercuts if not eliminates that total authority and makes it one referential text among many – Arthurian legend, English history, Homeric and Virgilian epic, even pastoral myth – which his *prima facie* text can activate or be activated by. If I can put it paradoxically, the use of areas of reference in allegory, like the use of Biblical narrative in *The Faerie Queene*, is simultaneously pervasive and intermittent.[4] The Bible is at one and the same time omnipresent in *The Faerie Queene* and absent from long stretches of it, a shadow barely glimpsed behind the events of Spenser's narrative, an echo just heard above or behind Spenser's language.

So when Britomart, late in the poem, berates her eyes for failing to keep alert, for failing to watch one hour with her (V.vi.25-27), we are brought up short by the echo of Christ in Gethsemane: it puzzles us to see how that fits this situation, puzzles us too with the implication that the apostles were in some sense Christ's eyes. It reminds us of Una's diatribe against her eyes much earlier in the poem (I.vii.22-23), in a context where the Biblical allusion would have seemed appropriate but where it wasn't employed. In a case like this, the Other to which allegory refers manifestly does not function as the clearcut determiner of value that allusion usually is. Rather, it becomes Other not just in the sense of being a text other than the *prima facie* text, but also in the sense of being alienated from its "normal" identity, becoming Other than itself, verging on self-contradictory, and thereby complicating rather than simplifying the person or event in the *prima facie* text that allusion would clarify. Its strange Otherness is imported into the *prima facie* text, which it is in the process of rapidly making over into allegory.

The *prima facie* texts of allegories play the Other, repeat the events or characters of their areas of reference, much the way minimalist music repeats its notes: with changes of instrumentation and volume, with shifts of phase, with microtonal differences, so the auditor hears one line behind another, one voice around another, the same but different, replicating (making

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[4] In a contemporary text, and on a much smaller scale, Paul Auster so uses Poe's story "William Wilson" as a pervasive analogue or frame or referent and also invokes it explicitly at specific times in his novel *City of Glass*. He also, in that novel, employs several other specific literary referents as well as the general frame and expectations of the detective story as it has developed in English from Poe onward. Such multiplex usages result in a story remarkably dense and complex for its brief length: indeed, *City of Glass* verges on allegory. The same thing can be said, for very similar reasons, of J.M. Coetzee's short noel *Foe*, which employs elements of Daniel Defoe's biography and fictions – *Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, Roxana* – plus a (Defoe-inspired) motif of doubling to generate unusual complexities within a brief compass. On a larger scale, *The Odyssey* over-informs Pynchon's *Vineland* and turns it into some sort of complex American answer to *Ulysses*.

replicates, as in music also, where a replicate is a tone an octave higher or lower than another) but not duplicating, in small and in large, above and below, solo and ensemble. In music systems employing different tuning and scales than conventional western music – e.g., "just intonation" and/or microtonal systems as opposed to "equal temperament" systems – the resonances and overtones of the notes actually played are capable of combining to produce distinct sounds that "have not been played" in any conventional sense. The auditor hears instruments that aren't there. Similarly, in some minimalist and microtonal music, repetition of identical or near-identical sounds slightly out of phase produces a sense of great variation and depth, even with only a few actual instruments or notes involved.

I am trying to suggest here that similar actions and effects are at work in allegory. The area(s) of reference and the *prima facie* text call into being (between or among them) a kind of phase space or interphasal space wherein both have equal authority, where the actions of the *prima facie* narrative are drawn variously into the vortices of either the values implied by the referential areas or the meanings suggested by the conventional thematics of the *prima facie* text, and where both those noumena are equally modified by the events themselves.

Perhaps the best analogy for all this is the notion, drawn from the arena of artificial intelligence, of ideas as basins of attraction, magnets with unsteady fields of force and indeterminate boundaries or ranges, pulling and releasing, attracting and repulsing. That notion, in turn, is drawn from chaos theory, where the "strange attractor" accounts for turbulence and endless variation, order and disorder,[5] arising from the same few principles within a closed system. That, I would argue, is what the interaction of *prima facie* text and areas of reference do in allegory. In a manner totally unlike allusion, the area of reference in an allegory becomes a strange attractor that frees the *prima facie* text from any possibility of static correspondences and recreates it as a dynamic system of multiplex and shifting, unstable signification.

The Case of Conrad

The operations of The Other will vary in every allegorical text, just as the identity of The Other itself will be different, and presented in different terms and perspectives, in each allegory. For instance: the unnamed narrator of *Heart of Darkness* posits that the meaning of Marlow's tale lies not inside, like the kernel in a nut, but outside, like a nimbus, a halo. That statement, echoing and at least in part contradicting centuries of conventional allegorical theory, raises far more questions than it answers (more too than we can hope to answer in this chapter alone). Is outside as opposed to inside the true direction of allegory? Does that mean, for instance, inside in the sense of in the reader rather than in the tale? Or do the verbal and stylistic dynamics of

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[5] "Many other scientists began to apply the formalisms of chaos to research in artificial intelligence. The dynamics of systems wandering between basins of attraction, for example, appealed to those looking for a way to model symbols and memories. A physicist thinking of *ideas* as regions with fuzzy boundaries, separate yet overlapping, pulling like magnets and yet letting go, would naturally turn to the image of a phase space with 'basins of attraction.' Such models seemed to have the right features: points of stability mixed with instability, and regions with changeable boundaries. Their fractal structure offered the kind of infinitely self-referential quality that seems so central to the mind's ability to bloom with ideas, decisions, emotions, and all the other artifacts of consciousness. With or without chaos, serious cognitive scientists can no longer model the mind as a static structure. They recognize a hierarchy of scales, from neuron upward, providing an opportunity for the interplay of microscale and macroscale so characteristic of fluid turbulence and other complex dynamical processes." Gleick, *Chaos*, 299.

Conrad's and Marlow's language, the piling up of figures of speech, the sheer accumulation of evocative language, add up to an outside that somehow is, or contains, the allegory? Does that mean then that allegory transpires in and as purely verbal process? And if allegory does turn out to be rooted in process of some sort, does this in turn imply or necessitate that narrative is its vehicle? Can we extrapolate from these slender reeds and argue that allegory minimally must be built of a narrative and an area of reference? How important then would reader interaction be to allegory? Of what sort? Do we, or should we then, read allegories differently than we read other texts? Just what is the reader's role in allegory? And if, as I've been maintaining all along, personification characters do not lead to allegory, what kind of characters do? If allegory does in fact have nothing at all to do with one-to-one correspondences, we evidently cannot ask "what is this an allegory of?" And if that is so, what then can we ask? What is the right question?

We can at least make a start on answering those last few questions. My (I hope by this stage I can say our) repudiation of the one-to-one correspondences of prosopopoeia and Conrad's narrator's dismissal of the "kernel" as the heart of Marlow's tale both work to divorce the idea (and ideas) of allegory from static formulations or relationships. Both free allegory from the mooring of fixed meaning. Both push us as readers and allegory as phenomenon/noumenon precisely in the direction of process. If allegory is in no way necessarily connected with personification, if allegory is not to be found in the point, the message, the insides of its own tale, then allegory, whatever it may turn out to be, has thereby been cut loose from the strings that bind it to any conceivable web of fixed meaning. It exists as a self-contained dynamic system, a system that can only be understood in terms of its own flow.

Symbolism is useless to explain allegory because it is a device of attachment and *ipso facto* not allegory. If symbolism were adequate to explain allegory, allegory would not be a problem. Readers and critics, from the earliest mentions of allegory, have always stated or implied that it is neither simply symbol nor simply metaphor (though these are hardly simple: you may wish to look at Angus Fletcher on this subject). Likewise, Rosemond Tuve has made very clear that the moral meaning of the text (the lessons or maxims or morals that are deduced from it or exemplified by it: one, at least, of the candidates for the "inside" that *Heart of Darkness*'s narrator rejects) is not allegory. Indeed, common sense will tell us that, because we do not even need a literary text to draw such morals: for that, life will do as well as literature.

Besides, symbol and allegory are phenomena of a different order: a symbol is device of literature, a figure of speech, a mode of crystalizing meaning – in that respect not entirely unlike personification. While allegory does not appear to be a genre in that it lacks a fixed form, it nevertheless clearly belongs to one of the larger, constitutive classes of literature, insofar as it seems in all observable instances to control the way we read and respond to works in which it preponderates. That is, allegory appears to belong to a class of phenomena that employ symbols and personifications rather than being a member of the class to which symbols or personifications belong.

In action, allegory often behaves a great deal like satire: like satire, it appears free to adapt itself to just about any form it chooses. Like satire, it dictates the mode (or modality? or style? or rhetoric?) of works in which it dominates. Like satire, it may include materials and sections

that are not of its own kind. Viewed from the perspective of scale, neither personification nor symbol (nor, for that matter, metaphor or simile) can offer any explanation of allegory: that would be like saying that sarcasm or disease imagery accounted for satire. If this line of reasoning is correct, then no allegory is explicable by any series of equations or substitutions, no matter how simplistic or intellectualized: Kurtz cannot *be* "Western Man" or "Imperialism" any more than Swann can *be* decadent French aristocracy or The Red Cross Knight can *be* Holiness. Those are insides substituted for outsides, personifications, one-to-one correspondences of a sort that are essentially (I mean that word literally) inimical or at least irrelevant to allegory's way of meaning.

If that is so, what then is allegory? If that is so, where then do we look for allegory? The best possibility seems to be in the observable process or kinds of processes – perhaps dialectical, perhaps linguistic, perhaps some other species entirely – by which meaning embodies itself in event, the process by which things-in-themselves are made to manifest their meaning. This is not symbolism, by which things are charged with meaning, nor is it metaphor, by which the meaning of one thing is transferred to another. I intend something closer, on a literary plane, to the action Gerard Manley Hopkins calls "selving" – the process by which an existent simultaneously displays, in a singular and utterly characteristic action, its intense specificity (its uniqueness even: its *haeceitas*, in Hopkins' terminology, the quality that makes it this singular being and no other) and its connections with a world of ideas (it represents, even in some sense embodies, all the existents of its class, and it simultaneously reflects/embodies an aspect of the infinite variety of the One: all very Platonic). In allegory, the case is further complicated (no surprise here) by the fact that the tension and interplay between those two realms is mediated by, in fact takes place within, the shifting apprehensions and comprehensions of the reader. Allegory is and will always be difficult to talk about precisely because it has no steady state: it exists in and as flux, as the sort of unpredictable dynamic system the strange attractor calls into being.

For any sort of corroboration of all this we must first do as Conrad's narrator advises: we must look at the outside of Marlow's tale. Not yet at the readers (at least not now), though they are definitely an outside. Not yet at the language in itself, though that too is definitely an outside. Not even at the bare narrative: outside (*involucrum*, *integumentum*, envelope, veil) though it may be in conventional allegoresis, that is exactly what the narrator's warning prohibits. We must look first at what in itself stands essentially – i.e., wholly: existing independently in conception or previously in time – outside of Marlow's narrative: not at the frame of yachtsmen and London and Thames that the narrative both contains and is contained by, but at what is outside even that, at what is both chronologically and ideologically – even physically – outside Conrad's tale and prior to it.

Conrad's allusions and the areas of reference they tap form the outside of his fiction. They are the intellectual containers or ideological frames that enclose the narrative, which is the *prima facie* text, the ostensible outside, the false face of allegory. They are, if you will, a version or part or aspect of The Other that allegory says: its most visible aspect and, happily for our purposes, its most readily describable and appraisable aspect. Rather than the tale, the narrative, itself constituting the envelope of the allegory, Conrad has interposed a genuine and recognizable envelope around his tale – or to state it more accurately, Conrad has written his

tale within an envelope which does indeed bring out its meaning. This envelope profoundly and accurately *expresses* Marlow's and Conrad's narratives by drawing structural, thematic, imagistic, and ideological patterns for *Heart of Darkness* from Dante's *Inferno* and from *The Aeneid*, specifically from Virgil's account of his hero's journey to the heart of darkness, Aeneas's descent to hell in the sixth book of that poem. Conrad has "commingled" (the word is a favorite one of Conrad's: it echoes *Commedia* and in itself signals the action of allegory) Virgil's narrative pattern with a bit of structural patterning borrowed from Dante's related pilgrimage into his own heart of darkness to produce a frame – at once narrative, thematic, imagistic, and ideological – exterior to his own narrative, prior to it in time and literary tradition, and perhaps superior to it in signification. This multiple framing, this layering of narratological references looks similar to but is far from identical with what has been called metadiegesis, just as it looks similar to but is different from straightforward literary allusion. That frame is – perhaps it is more accurate to say those frames are, though they function singly – the halo that paradoxically illuminates and in all probability magnifies Marlow's tale and makes its darkness visible.

Conrad's Referentiality

It is no news to critics of Conrad that *Heart of Darkness* draws upon both *Aeneid* 6 and *Inferno* for many structural details,[6] but to see in them the necessary frames of Conrad's meaning may well be novel.[7] Nevertheless, from the moment Marlow enters the "sepulchral city," he moves through the realm of the dead. Marlow's language and the details he presents persistently remind us of his inward progress from the borderland of the grove of death to its most inward stations. Typical of this is one of Marlow's earliest encounters after his sea journey, his entrance into the shade of a grove of trees, beneath which cluster wraithlike dying laborers: the whole episode at once vividly recalls the huge elm that stands at the margin of Virgil's

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[6] Critics have worked this territory for some time, and I have drawn throughout this discussion on their data though not too often on their conclusions. See for instance Thomas R. Cleary and Terry G. Sherwood: "Women in Conrad's Ironical "Epic: Virgil, Dante, and *Heart of Darkness*," *Conradiana* 16 (1984), 183-94; Robert O. Evans, "Conrad's Underworld," *Modern Fiction Studies* 2 (1956), 56-62; Lillian Feder, "Marlow's Descent to Hell," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9 (1955), 280-92; James Guetti, *The Limits of Metaphor: Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1967); Stewart C. Wilcox, "Conrad's 'Complicated Presentations' of Symbolic Imagery," *Philological Quarterly* 39 (1960), 1-17. Other critics have suggested other referential areas – most provocatively (to my mind at least) the legends of the death of Alexander the Great, one of the first western "enlightened empire-builders," but also the grail quest, the inner or psychological journey to self knowledge, the actual facts of European colonialism, Conrad's own experiences in the Congo. Without in any way wishing to deny the validity and/or utility of any of these (or others I haven't named here), I intend to focus my discussion of *Heart of Darkness* on its exploitation of *The Aeneid* and *Commedia*, which will furnish more than enough material for my purposes and more than enough complications for any reader's taste. The fact that these other referential areas – or at least some of them – can also be simultaneously operative in Conrad's text should begin to indicate the density of signification that an allegorical work can achieve.

[7] In the discussion that follows, I am going to give my primary attention to the roles of these two literary progenitors in the generation of meaning in Conrad's tale. I want to make clear, however, that this does not mean that I am seeing *The Aeneid* or *Commedia* as the exclusive sources of *Heart of Darkness*'s meaning. Far from it, in fact: by itself, the logic of the theory of allegory I am trying to communicate would predispose me to eliminate no readings of the tale save those that are patently false to its facts. True allegory demands multiple meanings, and I would be false to my own arguments to adopt anything like an exclusivist position here or with regard to any other allegorical text. The only things a critic of allegory can legitimately be exclusivist or dogmatic about are the literal statements of the text, the bare *littera* as Dante understood it.

underworld, with phantoms beneath its every leaf, and at the same time pointedly differs from it.

> At last I got under the trees. My purpose was to stroll into the shade for a moment; but no sooner within than it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound – as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had become audible.
>
> 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. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
>
> 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.... These moribund shapes were as free as air – and nearly as thin. (*Heart of Darkness*, 81-82)

Conrad's narrative recreates, in a "realistic" mode, details and particulars of Virgil's mythological landscape.[8] The dreams and phantoms that cluster in the dark of the elm tree, "thin lives...in the hollow semblance of a form," reappear in Marlow's experience as "black shapes," "moribund shapes...free as air – and almost as thin," "brother phantom[s]." The personified abstractions – Grief, Cares, Disease, Hunger, Fear, Death – that Virgil locates at the entrance to hell Conrad literally personifies in the "black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom."

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[8] Here is the parallel Virgilian episode, in Allen Mandelbaum's translation:
[Aeneas and Sybil] moved in darkness, through the shadows...
even as those who journey in a forest
beneath the scanty light of a changing moon....
before the entrance, at the jaws of Orcus,
both Grief and goading Cares have set their couches;
there pale Diseases dwell, and sad Old Age,
and Fear and Hunger, that worst counsellor,
and ugly Poverty – shapes terrible
to see – and death and Trials....
Among them stands a giant shaded elm,
a tree with spreading boughs and aged arms;
they say that is the home of empty Dreams
that cling, below, to every leaf. And more,
so many monstrous shapes of savage beasts
are stabled there....
And here Aeneas, shaken suddenly
by terror, grips his sword; he offers naked
steel and opposes those who come. Had not
his wise companion warned him they were only
thin lives that glide without a body in
the hollow semblance of a form, he would
in vain have torn the shadows with his blade.
(Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.354ff)

We must pay particular attention here to the linguistic mode Conrad is adopting, to what he is doing with language and style. These are the clues to his particular kind of replication without duplication. They constitute the means by which he achieves those disruptively interphasal effects of repetition with difference, so that in later (and earlier) events we will see shades of Aeneas and the Sybil even when they are not explicitly invoked. Conrad is here taking a particular kind of data from a particular kind of text and exploiting it in a particular way. Mythological details of the sort that we are used almost automatically to converting into their psychological or metaphysical "equivalents" are being transferred from their *locus classicus*, the paradigmatic beginning of a paradigmatic descent-to-hell narrative, the kind of narrative that, once again, we all-too-readily translate into moral or philosophical or psychological terms. But Conrad's transferral both of detail and of event involves the preservation of the – what Dante would have called – *littera* of Virgil's text.

The figures that Virgil describes as *there* for Aeneas are seen in their full literalness by Marlow. Even more so, in fact: what Aeneas saw as phantasms resembling bodies and Dante saw as souls nearly turned bodies, Marlow sees as flesh-and-blood human beings, body and soul and idea together. Aeneas's spirits in the guise of bodies become for Marlow either scarcely embodied spirits or bodies in the guise of spirits. The terms of Virgil's narrative do not become metaphors in Conrad's, or for Conrad's: what Aeneas saw *sub imperio romano* (which was, if you will, the mode and species of his vision) Marlow sees *sub imperio brittanico* (or *franco*, or *belgico*: the difference is minor) as well as *sub auctore (et auctoritate) virgilii*, but just as literally as Dante saw the very same details and event *sub specie Christi et sub auctore virgilii*. In *The Aeneid*, Virgil's spirits look like ethereal bodies. Dante's spirits in *Inferno* look and feel like substantial bodies. The unsubstantializing bodies of Conrad's narrative strike Marlow as spirits. Those three different relationships/perceptions cohere simultaneously in Conrad's text, the outlines of each visible around and through the others, like overtones in music combining to create sounds that weren't played, on an instrument that isn't there. That phenomenon – that lamination of presences in the text and awarenesses in the reader – is exactly the outside of Marlow's tale, where his and its meaning is to be sought: that phenomenon is where the allegory lives.[9]

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[9] I want to stress once more that what I am trying to suggest about allegorical meaning is in no way restrictive of other kinds of meaning or other ways of meaning, even ways which seem to participate in a significant "outside": for example, the common and I believe correct reading of *Heart of Darkness* in a political light (ranging from humanist anti-imperialism to Marxism), which sees the background of European colonialism and/or racism as an outside that provides the meaning of the tale. The only readings I really quarrel with are those that themselves claim either exclusivity or some sort of superiority (in profundity, importance, or whatever) to other readings. That I disagree with many readings in particular terms of course goes without saying: for instance, by my terms, imperialism is very much inside the tale, one of those implicit or explicit "messages" that the narrator warns us are not the final meaning of Marlow's yarns.

In this regard, it is worth spelling out here that even the most profound political meaning of that sort shares a common root with the most naive moralistic readings of texts. Both are only more and less sophisticated ways of extracting a "message" from a text. Implicit in both is a denial of the validity or reality or worth of the whole text as a thing in itself and a similar repudiation or suppression of the experience of reading each text. Such readings make all texts into media for messages and value them only as their message is valued. Much Marxist and feminist criticism suffers precisely from this unwillingness to accept texts as anything other than acknowledged or unacknowledged propaganda, as does much non-affiliated, "humanist" criticism. The attitude is one that even casual reflection will show to be false to the text and untrue to the act of reading.

What I am trying to describe here, however complex it may seem, are the bald facts of Conrad's or Marlow's prose. That prose is not presenting the descent to hell as a metaphor or figure of any kind: it is narrating it as a fact. This is not arguable. It is not a matter of interpretation. It is a simple matter of what the words on the page say. We readers, in our normal haste and superior wisdom, usually register the details that convey this as metaphoric or hyperbolic: Marlow isn't really saying that he saw phantoms, but that the people he saw were *like* phantoms. That judgment, however, will not hold up in the face of a careful look at the gradations of Conrad's rhetoric. Prior to Marlow's stepping into the grove of death, he views and transmits a scene of realistic detail bordering on the chaotic – abandoned machinery that looks like dead animals, "objectless blasting," "a vast artificial hole" and "a very narrow ravine" and the "wanton smash-up" of "a lot of imported drainage-pipes" – that serves to precipitate his movement from the blinding sunlight into the dark. The ordinary, as it has from the start of his journey to Africa (significantly never named in the tale), here verges on the hallucinatory.[10] The mental and emotional disorientation that that induces in Marlow frees him to see what is normally dark, the truth that underlies or surrounds ordinary reality. He relates this to us by way of a comment not about what he sees but about the mode of his seeing: "[I]t seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno." This reference to Dante and his poem rather than to Virgil and his *Aeneid* explains Marlow's understanding of the mode and species of his experience, and at the same time both confirms and complicates the literalness of his vision. Conrad carefully brackets what Marlow subsequently sees in the grove of death in such a manner as to underline its literal truth. The precipitating reference to *Inferno* is paralleled, at the end of this particular phase of Marlow's journey and vision, by his explicit recognition of the ordinary as visionary:

> I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station. When near the buildings I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up that in the first moment I took him for a sort of vision. I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trowsers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear.
> I shook hands with this miracle.... (*Heart of Darkness*, 83)

"He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his ear." That wonderfully laconic sentence, comic in its juxtaposition of an assertion of the extraordinary with the most mundane of details, signals Marlow's and the reader's entry (re-entry?) into the world of the ordinary now seen in a totally new light – or rather, dark. Between those two points of perception, in a prose movement that is repeated at many phases of Conrad's novella, Marlow entered a realm of "spiritual" perception, wherein he and the reader witnessed directly the doings of shades and souls and "ideas" – "as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become

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[10] Throughout this whole section of *Heart of Darkness*, there is also a continual juxtaposition of the inanimate – specifically machinery and the appurtenances of industrialization – with the animate – specifically black human beings, usually presented as demoralized, undernourished, imprisoned, etc. This contrast, which is often adumbrated further into the color contrasts of white and black, bright and dark, serves further to disorient both Marlow and Marlow's auditor/reader. The whole experience borders on high-contrast nightmare imagery, a kind of polarized or solarized *Chien Andalou*.

audible."[11] Conrad's prose moved us into a world of "shapes" – Plato might have said forms – that constituted one more threshold for Marlow to cross. Each of these thresholds in turn promises revelation, each seems ready to show us The Other – enter here into the heart of the mystery – and each in turn opens finally onto ordinary reality, the outside of things as we know them, an accountant in a white suit. Conrad's narrative reincarnates Virgil's descent to hell in its literalness (and it is important to remember here that Virgil too insisted on his hero's descent in the flesh rather than in the spirit) just as Dante's version did – not to turn us inward but to turn us outward, not to substitute for our daily phenomena an exceptional noumenon but to show us that phenomena are noumena, that the ordinary is, *ipso facto*, extraordinary.

Meaning will not be found by piercing through texts and surfaces to dig out a hidden inner reality: meaning lies out in the open, on the outside, and attention must be paid to it. Conrad's language and imagery drive this point home again and again, both in macro and in micro. The compound or courtyard that fronts the Central Station, for instance, is yet another one of those apparent containers that are actually contained, and whose reality is dwarfed by the greater reality that lies outside them.

> Beyond the fence the forest stood up spectrally in the moonlight, and through the dim stir, through the faint sounds of that lamentable courtyard, the silence of the land went home to one's very heart – its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life. (93)

Marlow's language echoes the words of the unnamed narrator's explanation of how Marlow's tales mean:

> ...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 those misty haloes that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine." [68]

This echo[12] focuses the reader's attention on the forest itself as the envelope which contains Marlow and the pilgrims. The forest – *foris*, the outside, what lies outside the walls, the unfenced, outside of ordinary law – becomes the meaning which surrounds the unperceiving pilgrims, whose attention is all turned inward toward a dying fire. Readers of a philosophic bent will be forgiven for hearing in that synopsis echoes of Plato's fable of the cave: I would suggest that the echoes are true to Conrad's narrative.

Thresholds

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[11] Beyond the general "impact" of this clause – most readers respond to it as vaguely signaling heightened perception or foreboding some unusual happening – its language itself is significantly ambiguous. Are we and Marlow suddenly hearing the speed of the "launched" – i.e., propelled – globe as it makes its daily rush through the universe and rotates on its axis? I.e., no matter how extraordinary our hearing, is the phenomenon heard a quotidian one? Or are we hearing the pain of the earth torn and "launched" – i.e., "lanced" – by that gaping "artificial hole?" I.e., is both that we're hearing and what we're hearing extraordinary?

[12] 0nce again, it echoes also Hawthorne's language from his preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, another tale which makes a much of a forest surrounding a small community.

Much of our contemporary critical and linguistic theory treats language as liminal, if not terminal (all puns intended). Not to put too fine a point on it, this confuses the analytic tool for the object analyzed, language used semi-scientifically for all language. More concretely, some languages are more or less liminal than others. French and German are more liminal than English; American English, I think, is even less liminal that its British cousin. Conrad is clearly a writer obsessed with thresholds and limits and the crossing of them, and he uses language not liminally but anti-liminally, to "deconstruct," if you will, the barriers and limits of ordinary perception. Don't look inside: look outward; look out. After creating the almost featureless sense of place that opens the *Heart of Darkness* – the yawl Nellie at anchor at slack tide in a near calm – the very first perceptions the unnamed narrator offers us involve the erasing of horizons, the breaching of thresholds:

> The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint.... A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. (65)

This featureless waterscape, without hard edges or firm outlines, is significantly similar to Marlow's description of the situation of his fogbound steamboat just before reaching Kurtz's Inner Station:

> What we could see was just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her – and that was all. 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. (110)

In turn, that "white fog, very warm and clammy," resembles in important ways Marlow's terse description of his own near-death by fever:

> I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire for victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. (148)

Such imagistic conjunctions of the domestic and seemingly drama-less Thames, the tension-filled up-river approach to Kurtz and his sinister Inner Station, and Marlow's understated approach to his own "extremity" (to use one of *Heart of Darkness*'s supercharged terms) work to erase the borders between physical places, physical states, and psychological states. Such prose moves the whole narrative out of a realistically conceived geography and into a dynamic space where physical details can fully embody psychic data, where noumena and phenomena can act upon each other unimpeded by "normal" boundaries and limitations. In this live and unstable phase space, nothing is inanimate: everything "selves," and in its action attracts and repels whatever wanders into its orbit. The river lives, attracting and threatening, the savage Congo drawing the tame Thames into its shadow. The jungle lives, calling and warning, its

"impenetrable darkness" stretching to cover "the greatest city on earth." Most of all, Kurtz lives, more intensely and more extremely, and therefore attracting and repelling more powerfully than all the other basins of reference – so much so that Aeneas and Anchises and the Sybil, Dante the pilgrim and Virgil the guide and Satan the goal are all drawn into his orbit, sometimes eclipsing him, sometimes eclipsed by him, and sometimes all moving in harmonious rhythm with him.

Conrad's narrative, the perceptions and prose with which he gifts Marlow, constantly establish walls only to break through them, as if the concept of liminality itself were the ultimate object of Marlow's ethical and psychological wrestlings. To cite one example more from *Heart of Darkness*:

> On the fifteenth day I came in sight of the big river again, and hobbled into the Central Station. It was on a back water surrounded by scrub and forest, with a pretty border of smelly mud on one side, and on the three others enclosed by a crazy fence of rushes. A neglected gap was all the gate it had. (86)[13]

This sort of blurring of limits, the imagistic or figural demonstration of the porosity of frontiers, is precisely the function of the much-remarked-upon poetic quality of Conrad's prose: all of Marlow's rhapsodies and seeming hallucinations in *Heart of Darkness* are carefully manipulated to that end. Both fugal language and fugue states work to create or reveal the lacunae in our quotidian notions of reality, to permit us to leave the stockade and enter the forest. Depending on from which side you view them, thresholds are beginnings or endings, limits that close things in or limits that close things out, portals that lead inside or open outward.

Porosity is a two-way street. Literary realisms and the versions of reality to which they are tied are as provisional and as limited as the cultures that create them. The normal purpose of both is to paper over the void, to hide the cracks in "reality" and keep us from thinking about what lies outside our versions of the true. The characters of such fiction and the believers of such theories are all more or less like the agents of the Central Station, "wander[ing] here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence" (89), excited by a dying conflagration of muffs and beads, or like Lord Jim repairing clocks inside Rajah Allang's flimsy stockade while others decide his fate.

This is no more or less true of the realism of the "high bourgeois" novels of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century than it is of, for instance, the "totalizing theory" of Marxism that is used to criticize their oversights. The truly subversive work (of literature or anything else) – the work, I believe, of every allegorist – is to cross the thresholds of theory and belief, to make us see the gaps in reality without the comforting plaster of a back-up system to patch or cover them again

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[13] Readers of Conrad will rightly recall Jim's situation in Rajah Allang's stockade and his escape from it by leaping over "the broken stakes of the palisade" into a Homerically swampy mudbank (182-83). Similarly, Marlow's description of the inhabitants of the Central Station ("They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence") closely parallels Jim's situation in the stockade before his awakening to reality. *Lord Jim*, of course is another novel (and allegory) entirely, with very different concerns of its own, but Conrad's method and his iconology in the two works remain remarkably similar.

as quickly as they're found. The great image of this openness in *Heart of Darkness* – and of the dangers it brings to the unprepared – is the Inner Station itself:

> Through my glasses I saw the slope of a hill interspersed with rare trees and perfectly free from undergrowth. A long decaying building on the summit was half buried in the high grass; the large holes in the peaked roof gaped black from afar; the jungle and the woods made a background. There was no enclosure or fence of any kind; but there had been one apparently, for near the house half a dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with round carved balls. The rails, or whatever there had been between, had disappeared. (126)

To understand the Inner Station as an image of the erasing of thresholds and limits – as, simultaneously, a literal and a figural representation of openness rather than/in addition to closure – contradicts the logic of the inward journey to the heart of darkness, but our narrator's early warning that the meaning of Marlow's tale was outside rather than inside contradicts that logic too. The Inner Station as an embodiment of openness rather than/in addition to closure also, and much more seriously on the ideological level, contradicts the movement and figural logic of the *Inferno*, which provides so much of its frame of signification. Such duplicity is typical of allegory, and far from invalidating either the inward journey or *Inferno* as patterns and meaning centers, it enriches both and expands – opens, if you like – their role in the tale. Allegory keeps open as many possibilities as it can, or we can, conceive.

In this respect, Conrad, whom I take to be a modern allegorist *par excellence*, reveals a core truth about the characteristic use of language in allegory. Conrad's language in *Heart of Darkness* constitutes an interface or interphase system, a phase phenomenon transitional between the putatively steady states of subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious, private and communal. Marlow's consciousness and his perceptions, as I have already hinted, move uncertainly between "normal" and "abnormal" states, between the graphic recording of "realistic" (i.e., physical, empirical) details and almost hallucinatory (i.e., non-material, intuitive) accounts of what underlies the material scene.

> He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams....
> No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone. (94-95)

Just to complete the movement between all those aforementioned poles, right after these remarks Marlow invokes his auditors' knowledge of and sight of him – precisely when it so dark they can't see him – as a guarantee of their understanding of what he is saying.

Pulled by certain ideas, fascinated and led on by forces he doesn't comprehend, Marlow has entered a psychic space where all is flux, where the outward appearances of ordinary reality constantly elide into surreality. Kurtz becomes for the adult Marlow the same kind of strange attractor that blank spots on the map had been for the younger Marlow, an attractor just like the huge, serpentine river that "fascinated me as a snake would a bird" (71) and drew him to this adventure in the first place. Things alike but different draw Marlow on: first the needs-no-explanation curiosity of a child about blank spots on a map; then, as those spots fill up with names and features, the strange fascination of the adult with the serpent river; and, finally, what becomes both obsession and inexplicable commitment to a man he's not yet met. Those replications with variations move Marlow literally – literally – from the objective to the subjective, from the known and named world to the un-named and unknown, to the reality that underlies a false and unreal name,[14] a movement paralleled by that of the reader who follows him from the familiar Thames up the river with no name, out of "the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (65) and into the forest outside.

Allegory is the paradigm expression of this interphasal phenomenon: it is the playing field where meaning systems compete, the cyclotron where patterns of perception collide and are shivered into their component atoms. At even the most superficial levels of *Heart of Darkness*, at least four meaning systems meet in violent collision – the colonial and the anti-colonial, the pagan-Platonic-psychological and the Christian-moral (these last two are probably four or more by themselves) – and we could go on with not too much subtlety to talk about the capitalist and the humanist or the corporate and the individual. Conrad's language activates all those systems and eliminates none of them. Readers must juggle all of them – and who knows how many more? – as best they can, balancing them against the text's various explicitnesses and reticences, and drawing their own more or less equally valid conclusions about the combined or mutually modified meaning of all those theoretically exclusive systems.

This is something substantially more than the conventional interpretive act, which consists largely, however much it may be glamorized, in registering, remembering, and connecting, with a screen that discards as unacceptable anything that appears contradictory. The allegorical reader, on the other hand, has not merely to live with contradictions but to revel in them, to register, remember, and connect everything with everything in multiple ways. Allegory permits us to screen out nothing, to discard nothing: it demands that we always take everything into account. We can't do it, of course. We just don't have the capacity to perform that task at once, exhaustively, so all our readings of allegory are only ever partial readings, interpretations of pieces of the whole. This is why our readings of allegory are never the same twice, and why your allegory will never be exactly my allegory. Allegory forces its readers to become co-authors, to half-create the text they read. That is why and how allegory creates participatory readership.[15]

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[14] "Kurtz - that means short in German – don't it? Well the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long" (135). "He was just a word for me" (94).

[15] Maureen Quilligan also sees the reader's role in allegory as vital and active and one of the criteria that distinguishes allegory from other forms of writing, but I differ from her position with respect to both the kind and degree of reader involvement I believe allegory demands – as I think my arguments above make clear – as well as in the way I think the areas of reference – the strange attractors: what Quilligan calls pre-texts – work in allegories. (I also think Quilligan scants the reader's role in "ordinary" texts.) My sense of the way readers are drawn to interact

To name no names, a great deal of contemporary criticism and critical theory acts and talks as if the idea of reading as active and creative – a creative activity, in fact – was a new invention, as if until it came along reading had only ever been the passive reception of information. Perhaps it is so (I doubt it) to linguists and their semiotic children, who seem to worry so obsessively about language as an accurate transmitter of data, but it has never been so to allegorists, who create their allegories precisely by banging their readers' heads against walls of meaning until they learn to climb over. This can move a reader, as it can a character, into some fairly strange territory, but it need not of necessity lead us to such far out places as it does Marlow. A good part of The Other which allegory both creates and is created from consists of nothing more exotic than the non-canonical: some of the pores in any individual's world-system are simply the other guy's point of view, the competing system's valid points, the outsider's relevant criticisms, the deconstruction of one's own edifices, be they verbal or physical. A great portion of the ethical Other that Marlow runs into in *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, is nothing more exotic than plain, old-fashioned greed, manifesting itself in forms as various and as familiar as inhuman cruelty and company politics. Allegory's Other, in at least this one of its many aspects, often has a familiar face.

At all key points in *The Heart of Darkness*, Conrad insists on the collision of competing systems in his language and in the reader's awareness. Most often he conveys this by the manipulation and juxtaposition of his two parallel and (it is too little realized) antithetical referential systems, Aeneas's Virgilian descent to hell to interview the shade of his father for information about his mission and the future course of empire (it is parenthetically worth remarking that even this is ironic, since in life Anchises had been consistently wrong in his reactions to and interpretations of everything bearing on Aeneas's fate), and Dante's Virgilian-inspired, Beatrice-arranged descent for vision and personal salvation. Depending on your point of view, either of those journeys could be understood as demonstrating heroic self-abnegation or an inhumane (not to say inhuman) denial of feeling and compassion, heroic self-fulfillment or egoistic self-serving. In their physical/spiritual goals and culminations, they can be seen as complementing each other or antithesizing each other, and that the author of one serves as the guide for the other does not simplify their relationship in the least. It is further significant, in this regard, that Marlow alone of the three sojourners lacks a guide and companion to lead him in and out of his underworld: only Kurtz draws him on, and the prospect of hearing Kurtz speak motivates him to travel up the long river. Kurtz as Sybil, Kurtz as Dante's Virgil, Kurtz as the shade of Anchises, Kurtz as the glorified Beatrice: that's multivocation; there is the collision of competing meaning systems.

Conrad is relentless in his pursuit of these sorts of ideological collisions. The journey up-river itself, like Marlow's sea-journey before it, taps an equally large body of potentially valid, partially complementary, partially contradictory, figural traditions. The first and most obvious,

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with allegorical texts comes closer to what Wolfgang Iser describes as the strategy of "alea" – "a pattern of play based on change and the unforeseeable. Its basic thrust is defamiliarization, which it achieves through storing and telescoping different texts, thus outstripping what their respective identifiable segments were meant to mean. By overturning familiar semantics, its reaches out into the hitherto inconceivable, and frustrates the reader's convention-governed expectations" (Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1989, 256).

in the context I'm dealing with here, is Aeneas's own sea journeys from fallen Troy through all his deceptive harbors (including the bustling, industrious city of Carthage, of which our last sight in the poem is Dido's funeral pyre) to his landfall in Italy and thence up the Tiber to the site of Rome. Less immediately relevant but by no means ignorable is Dante's ubiquitous adaptation of that sea-voyaging into the imagery of the ship which is the poem itself or the inspiration that bears the poem and the poet onward (not forgetting either the angelic ship that carries souls to Purgatory, though that seems to correspond most directly to Charon's ferry that transports Aeneas across Styx). Beyond that, of course, the hoary metaphor of the Ship of State most definitely comes into play in a work so concerned with ideas of empire. And when it comes to hoary metaphors, can the venerable *Narrenschiff* be far behind? The French schooner that carries Marlow to his landfall certainly qualifies as a hybrid child of the Ship of Fools and the Ship of State, while Marlow's "tinpot steamer," with its complement of pilgrims and cannibal crew, presents itself as a fully rigged out *Narrenschiff*: both craft invite apposite reflections on European politics and society, both in their internal and external relations.

Extrapolating slightly further from that, the steamboat in particular seems set up as a microcosm of colonial society, with its careful stratification of classes and roles and authority: there is rich satire in the practical "savagery" of the cannibal crew and the impractical savagery of the pilgrims. From the ship viewed thus as a human collective, it is then an easy step to the human individual and a secularized, psychologized version of the ship as, in effect, a macroscopic representation of the human body – an updated version of ancient metaphor of the body as the barque of the soul. In this sense the steamer's crew and passengers and captain enact differing aspects of one psyche, a sort of Marlovian superego presiding over a narcissistic and acquisitive ego (the pilgrims) and a scarcely housebroken id (the cannibal crew, who do all the real work), the whole entity enroute to confront an overwhelming question in the person of its twin/kin Other, Kurtz. All of those *figurae* cluster around Marlow's ships, and none of them is dismissable from consideration either as to how it affects the meaning of the tale or how it affects the relevance and meaning of the others. Each version of the idea of "ship" attracts the events of the narrative into its field of meaning and each surrenders Marlow's ships only reluctantly to another, competing attractor. Such is the sort of overlapping and competition of meaning systems that Conrad has set in motion throughout *Heart of Darkness*.

Marlow journeys from an explicit nexus of at least one set of meaning systems (his aunt viewed him as "an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle," while he "ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" [76]) through Outer and Central Stations with their "flabby, rapacious devils" and "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" to the Inner Station itself, where dwells, enthroned within a ring of skulls, the chief devil of that land, the voice that he has come to hear: Kurtz, seen simultaneously through the filters of Anchises and Satan, Sybil and Virgil and Beatrice. Just so Aeneas passed through hell to hear his father speak, just so Dante journeyed through all of hell to see, at its Inner Station, Satan ringed by the heads of sinners and, in a splendid simultaneous parody and apotheosis of literary figuration, disfiguring the human and divine images simultaneously.[16]

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[16] For readers of the *Commedia*, this figuration does not take on its fullest significance until the final vision of *Paradiso*, at which point the reader, the pilgrim, and the poet are at last one in knowledge in the completeness of the poem.

Frames and Gates of Ivory

By virtue of these specifically invoked frames – the course of empire and the eternal negation, Aeneas's divinely enforced, Stoic repression of all human affect and the Beatrice-inspired Christian sublimation of that affect, the father of Rome and the father of lies, the loftiest aspiration and the deepest degradation – all coalesce in the figure of Kurtz. Coalesce, converge, concenter, but not sum up. Kurtz is not Anchises any more than he is Aeneas. Whatever the relation of Conrad's Kurtz to those earlier figures whose penumbra we see around him, it is not identity and it is not typology. Kurtz does not stand as type or antitype to Dante or Virgil or any of their creatures. He is not a representative of them any more than he is a metaphor for them or a symbol of them. He is not even certainly of their class, of their species – yet indefinable as it is, there nevertheless persists an unmistakable relation between Kurtz and his *ombriferi prefazi*. For the reader, the actions and personae of Virgil's sixth book and Dante's first are strange attractors. They work not simply as passive areas of reference that we are free to invoke or ignore, nor as allusions activated by a few key words or phrases and used for local or even sustained irony or point. Rather, they act as dynamic basins of attraction that demand our attention to them. They are demons or machines that once set in motion cannot be turned off by the mere whim of the author, the narrator, or the reader, and they cooperate and compete, complement and contradict each other to drive us frantically scrabbling readers to grasp a point or points, to reach an apprehension or a series of comprehensions, that for convenience's sake we credit to Conrad though they are every bit as much the creation of each reader.[17]

The meanings they push us toward are hard to reach, and hard to take once we've reached them, because the convergence of patterns insists that we accept contrary figurations as simultaneously true, that we see both (or many) sets of denotation as equally valid: Kurtz manifests the roles, the *figurae*, of Anchises and Satan as goals, and Sybil and Virgil as guides, at one and the same time. He enacts the coincidence of good and evil, of light and dark: an ivory skull shining in the heart of darkness (Kurtz's baldness links him irrevocably with his victims: his own head becomes the fence within which he encloses himself to shut out the forest, the gapped and porous fence that let in the forest).[18] Literarily, this is hard to take because, just as Eliot warned us it would, it forces us to reassess Anchises and Satan, Aeneas the hero and Dante the pilgrim, in the light of their progeny.[19] Just how high is the cost of empire? and just

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[17] This is the point at which my ideas about the reader's role in allegory most closely resemble Iser's ideas about the reader's role in "aleatic" texts. My argument about the nature of the allegorical text, however, distinguishes allegory from "alea" rather sharply: first in that I argue that allegory both establishes meaning *and* remains open-ended (for Iser, this is an either/or proposition), and, second, in that I will argue below that allegory usually (not always, but usually) forces the reader to bring to consciousness the usually unconscious acts of reading – indeed, allegory sometimes makes its textual actions and its readers' reactions mimic each other, almost to the point of creating one more replicate, totally external to itself.

[18] We cannot overlook here either, in a tale so pervaded by greed for ivory, the double-edge of that imagery which links Kurtz at once with the "real" world of mercantile imperialism and the "surreal" underworld of Virgil's imagination, from which Aeneas exits by the gate of ivory, the gate of false dreams. Both Kurtz and Marlow enter the heart of darkness through the gate of ivory: whether they exit the same way is one of the tale's enduring puzzles.

[19] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 5: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so

which empire do we mean? It may be no wonder that Virgil knows hell so well, in his own poem and in Dante's.

It is certainly no wonder then that Marlow must give the devil his due and lay Kurtz's restless spirit with a lie. It is not just that, as Marlow says, lies have the taint of mortality about them.[20] If the purpose of language were only to accurately transmit data, then fiction antithesizes that purpose, contradicts it flatly and totally: all fiction, *de facto*, deconstructs language as an information system. Fiction is language's Other, the alterity that haunts clear statement of fact: recall the strictly logical Houyhnhnms' difficulties with "saying the thing which is not." It follows then that lies – fictions – are the doors of the Other world (which is, after all, what the underworld always is), the gate of ivory by which Marlow and Kurtz leave ordinary reality and conventional belief systems to explore what lies outside them. By so doing, they antithesize too the actions of their predecessor Otherworld explorers, both of whom *escape* from their underworlds (because both are fictions, kingdoms of lies?) by way of the alterity of falsehood: Aeneas leaves his underworld by the gate of false dreams and Dante exits from hell by making a ladder of Satan's body. With such contexts being simultaneously invoked and repudiated, privileged and contradicted at the same time, it should be no wonder that the shadows grow long around Kurtz's Intended in the sepulchral city, no surprise that her gestures remind Marlow of Kurtz's savage mistress, that her brow gleams white, reminding us ludicrously and unsettlingly of Kurtz's ivorylike bald head, and in turn of the skulls that surround his throne. Marlow has seen, even though he may not have fully understood, even though, like Dante at the end of *Paradiso*, he may not be able to say all that he has seen. He has imaginatively seen Kurtz and his Intended together, has perceived their identity – and Marlow knows as well as we do just what Kurtz Intended. In these final actions, Marlow perceives Kurtz mediated by his Intended, the Intended mediated both by Kurtz and the savage mistress: the integrity, the singleness, the unity of Marlow's vision has been shattered, fragmented, divided and/or multiplied through mirrors of duplication and duplicity, both physical and verbal.

So the shock of *Heart of Darkness*, the real terror of it for readers who have grasped the simultaneous presence in Kurtz of everything that the words nobility and degradation must serve as shorthand for, the final tremor as the whole story at last falls into place, is to realize that Marlow's lie – "the last words he spoke were your name" – that this lie is also the truth. That constitutes the tale's crowning *coincidentia oppositorum*. The name of Kurtz's Intended *is* "The horror! The horror!" – just as it is Kurtz's own name, and perhaps Marlow's too.[21] Kurtz

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the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted." Eliot was, of course, not speaking of allegory in this instance, or at least not speaking of allegory exclusively; nevertheless, his language expresses quite exactly the way allegory's intellectual free-market system forces reappraisal of traditional works.

[20] One may well wonder why the mere taint of mortality should upset Marlow so much when he seems able to handle so calmly repeated instances of the thing itself. Similarly, his detestation of lies seems oddly overstated in the context of not only the "lie" that climaxes his narrative but also his failure to clarify or deny the sustained misrepresentation of his beliefs, influence, loyalties, etc., that follows or precedes him from station to station. We do well at this point to remember that from the beginning of this tale Marlow has "not been himself" – turning fresh-water sailor, pestering his female relatives to use their friends and influence to get him a job – that is to say, from the start he is behaving self-contradictorily: he is caught in the toils of the Other.

[21] I can't resist underlining the obvious, that even the mere verbal form of Kurtz's naming is itself a duplication – a redundancy, a pleonasm, an unnecessary but emphatic duplication that, on the linguistic and logical levels, returns our attention to the logic of doublings and dualities in the tale.

has absorbed "all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (*Heart of Darkness*, 69). "There's no initiation into such mysteries" (69), Marlow tells us, yet Kurtz has been initiated into them ("The wilderness...sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation," 121), assimilated to them, and Marlow in turn has been initiated into the mystery of Kurtz: "This initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere honoured me with its amazing confidence[22] before it vanished altogether" (122); "It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through," (149). An initiation is a beginning, a threshold, not an end, and at the heart of most initiations lies the conferring of the sacred name, the name that is its bearer's secret and essential identity, the real name that transcends that public name which is, as Kurtz's had been to Marlow, "just a word" (94). In Kurtz's initiation, at the heart of darkness, "the knowledge came to him at last – only at the very last" (133), and Kurtz names himself. He pronounces his secret name. He names his Intended. He names Marlow and, in all probability, he names us. The secret name is the horror that lies at the heart of this particular darkness, the Grendel that waits in this particular Other. Kurtz has fallen victim – or sacrificed himself – to the Other of not-what-I-intended, not-what-I-said, not-what-I-meant-at-all. After that, it makes little difference that Marlow emerges from his dreamlike pilgrimage as Aeneas does, through the gate of ivory, the gate of false dreams, the portal of the lie, because, like Aeneas's vision, his is also true. Truth and lie are indivisible concepts, as inseparable as Marlow and his knowledge of Kurtz: the truth is only the threshold of the lie, the lie is only the threshold of the truth. The truth calls the lie into being – that is the inescapable logic of binary systems – as surely as Red Cross Knight gives rise to Orgoglio. If *Heart of Darkness* or *The Faerie Queene* were purely binary systems, they would end there. That they do not, that Orgoglio clearly and Kurtz inferentially are only way stations and not goals, thresholds as beginnings and not as ends, tells us something further about the ways of allegory: its Other is always open-ended.

Marlow has passed through trials by water and by fire; he has been initiated into great mysteries. Above all he has been initiated into Kurtz, whose "extremity [he] suffered through." Appropriately: Kurtz, you remember, "was an extremist." At the extremes, the opposites meet: lofty aspiration and utter degradation, true and false, coincide.[23] So do inside and outside, the one and the other: for the reader of the tale – I would argue, of any allegory – inside and outside are not separable. Just as for Tom Stoppard's Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, every exit is an entrance somewhere else. Thresholds have no meaning, whether they be linguistic or ideological: everything is at once threshold and center. We are not free to discard the narrative: the integument embodies the meaning, expresses it. Manifest and latent content, declarations and descriptions coalesce, more than coalesce, since they were never really separate. Is Marsyas' flayed hide, his integument, any less Marsyas than the bloody carcass it reveals? "Yesterday I saw a woman flayed, and you will not believe how much it altered her person for the worse."[24] The integument, the hide, the skin, the outside: by these, and only by these, do

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[22] The other phenomenon that Marlow found "amazing" in this tale was the accountant in a white suit, with a penholder behind his ear. *Verbum sapientibus satis*.

[23] Camille La Boissiere's *Joseph Conrad and the Science of Unknowing* (Fredericton: York Press, 1979) emphasizes the importance to Conrad of the idea of the coincidence of opposites.

[24] The *Tale of a Tub* plays profoundly with insides and outsides, as figures and as significations, and toys just as seriously with the whole question of interpreting texts. If ever a text attempted to deconstruct allegory, the Tale of a

we know the insides. Only because of these do insides exist: figuration bodies forth what is otherwise unexpressed because inexpressible. The truth of Conrad's fiction is not merely inward, and readers of allegory are never free, at any point, to analyze only: they must always synthesize as well. This is why we cannot simply discard the husk and extract a "message" from the fiction. We must read with the lenses of allegory's own dualities (and more); we must maintain at least a dual vision of Kurtz, as Satan and as Anchises, and of Marlow as a Dante seeking personal salvation – by means of what perverse Beatrice! – and as an Aeneas however reluctantly plotting the course of empire: self-abnegation and self-fulfillment embodied in both, and who can separate the good or ill of either?

Such enigmatic and multiplex figuration should serve as a large and general warning to readers of allegory, as forceful as the words over Dante's Hellgate and just as unbending: the hermeneutics of inwardness, the Augustinian search for interior meaning, is utterly inappropriate to the allegory of the poets. Inward is singular, solitary, impoverished: outward, the direction of the Other, is multiplex and rich. Kurtz looked within himself, and went mad (144). Marlow escapes that fate by going outside himself, by on one hand absorbing himself in the quotidian routine of keeping his "tinpot steamboat" running[25] and on the other by suffering through Kurtz's "extremity" rather than his own (149). Inside, for allegories and for allegorists, is the path of surrender: it leads not to understanding but only to easy sloganeering, whether the slogans be pious platitudes about enlightenment or "Exterminate all the brutes" (123). Think logically, even reductively, about it: if Dante, or Spenser, or Conrad had merely wished to say "Seek X; Avoid Y," they in all probability would have done so. That, instead, they wrote *Commedia*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Heart of Darkness* argues in itself that their aims were other (Other) and more complex than "Seek X; Avoid Y" can comprehend – an obvious point that one must make over and over again in discussions of allegory, because of the revanchist critical impulse to lapse back into the expectations and norms of personification or typology. And we are no further along if readers persist in naive questions like "What is *Heart of Darkness* an allegory of?"

For allegory and critics of allegory, there is a valuable lesson to be learned in *Heart of Darkness* about the cumulative workings of the allegorical Other, the something else that is both what allegory seeks to say and the means by which it says anything. This Other that makes allegory is not, cannot be – however much the necessities of my writing about it, the unavoidably reductive exposition of it, may have made it seem so – a matter of some simple transpositions of value or of drawing upon a fund of static symbolic values. Rather, the areas of reference that allegories may tap and draw upon as their means of signifying, the basins of attraction that capture and release their actions and actors, are constantly shifting in value and application. The descent to hell is present in *Heart of Darkness* in different aspects at different moments and sometimes in many competing aspects simultaneously: literary, political, moral,

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Tub volume (including The Battle of the Books and the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit) is that text. Of this, more later.

[25] Marlow himself only half-perceives the reality of this. He speaks of the threat of the forest, "an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" and how he had no time, during that journey up-river, to think about it because he had to pilot the ship and avoid rocks and snags and such: "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." (103)

psychological, Virgilian, Dantesque, personal and unique to Marlow, universal and applicable to all of us.

Comprehension

Crucially, however, what *Heart of Darkness* does at its closure is typical of what allegory must do somewhere in the course of its narrative: it brings together all the strands of all its areas of reference, all the possibilities of the pools of meaning that the fiction has been tapping, all the currents set in motion by the strange attractors, at a moment in the text that affords the readers a sudden understanding of the things that have been gnawing at their consciousness all along. The different orbital systems of the competing or complementary attractors at some point constellate and trigger something like an epiphany – but in the reader, not in the text or its characters.

I call this retrospective comprehension: from this place in the narrative, I can now look backward and understand, for instance, why Conrad had Marlow emphasize the whiteness and smoothness of The Intended's brow, why he had so exclusively used ivory as the exemplar of the pilgrims' greed, why he has stressed so often the dream quality of Marlow's experience. This sort of thing happens, I would argue, in all successful allegories: ideas, images, characters, references that had been separate, discrete, at best parallel, suddenly intersect, converge. Narrative and areas of reference coalesce and cohere, integrally establishing multiple meanings. That coalescence *is* the allegory, and it is no more paraphrasable than good poetry is. In that sense, "what is this an allegory of?" is an entirely inappropriate question to ask and an impossible one to answer. The more pertinent questions are "what are the elements that contribute to the allegory?" and "where do they and the narrative – and maybe the frame too – coalesce?" Those are things that we can say about allegory, though we will still never be able to say exhaustively what any allegory means in its entirety.

The answers to those two questions will provide the perspectives from which to talk about the allegory or allegories. What they will never give is certitude. Allegory will never let us simply say that X *is* Y. Rather, its purpose – not its whole purpose but an important one – is to make us think, to make better readers of us, and to that end it will not let us rest on any comfortable truism. That would be to open the door to rigid systematizing, which closes the door to openness. Allegories are difficult to understand and explain, as the ancients knew, precisely because their whole point is the process of coming to understand, a process that in allegory, as in life, is never finished. It is also a process that differs for everyone who undergoes it, each time they undergo it. Marlow says as much: his word for what I am calling process is work.

> 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. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means. (97)

Kurtz's work initiated him into the mysteries of the wilderness. Marlow's work vicariously and imaginatively initiated him into Kurtz, the voice he came to the Inner Station to hear. In turn, his voice – Conrad's work – initiates his auditors and readers into his mystery, or at least attempts to, though often he protests the impossibility of conveying what he wishes to express,

though occasionally he too seems to be looking in the wrong places for meaning (that is, inward rather than outward), though his auditors – our unnamed narrator, at least – seem sometimes to have a different focus of interest than he does. For example, the narrator early on refers to Marlow's tales as characteristically "inconclusive experiences" (70), a description which certainly does not fit *Heart of Darkness* except in the senses of allegorical signification we have been discussing. Immediately after that, the narrator punctuates Marlow's apologetic "I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally" with a very different point of view, "showing in this remark the weakness of many tellers of tales who seem so often unaware of what their audience would best like to hear." Even their psychological starting places seem very different: at the beginning of the tale, the Thames prompts the narrator to rhapsodize over history, over English seamen and explorers, over "The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empire." Marlow's first words in the tale antithesize that point of view by appealing to a prior history, an antecedent state: "And this also... has been one of the dark places of the earth" (67).

All of these small disturbances of narrative serenity work within the narrative to undermine the authority of the narrative, to establish or call attention to the pores and gaps in the fabric of the narrative itself. For instance: the vast bulk of the narrative is Marlow's own words, and it is implausibly reported *verbatim* and implausibly long. Its by-that-means already apparent artifice is further underlined by its "unrealistic" division into three sections in the obvious fashion of a book (Dante's book, to be specific) and not in the fashion of an extemporaneously told story. Such "anti-narrativistic" elements add yet more levels of unsteady mediation between the readers and the central nub of what Marlow professes to be trying to say. They make at least one more outside for us to look at clinically and – if the word's original meaning can be recovered – synthetically. All these factors make the process of simple information conveyance extremely uncertain and unstable in a text like *Heart of Darkness*. Each of these items amounts to another mediatory step between the readers and any simple "message" *Heart of Darkness* might have been meant to convey. That mediation compounds itself, because these items are neither static nor external to the tale's meaning. They are not "outside interference" blocking the transmission. Rather, they are integral parts of the "message" itself, entropic elements encoded into the transmission: they are the Other contained within the Same or the One, alterity springing from the same root as singularity. Their function is precisely the paradoxical one of making a simple transcription of a simple meaning impossible. They are analogous to the limited number of variables in chaos theory, the few degrees of freedom, which introduce indeterminacy into an otherwise orderly system and render it unpredictable.[26] Allegory lives in those few degrees of freedom.

Here is a final instance of what I'm trying to say about *Heart of Darkness* and about allegory: everything I've so far said about *Heart of Darkness* may be false and based on falseness – may be a delusory inside rather than a meaningful outside – because it doesn't take sufficiently into account the profound ironies set in play in the tale by the identification of Marlow and Kurtz, which are further compounded by the unnamed narrator's insistent depiction of Marlow as a Buddha. He is several times explicitly described as looking like an oriental idol:

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[26] It is in the study of fractals that mathematicians discovered that continuous spectra – e.g. a line infinitely long – could result from a few degrees of freedom within an otherwise closed system: See Gleick, *Chaos*, 138-39.

He had sunken cheeks, a yellow complexion, a straight back, an ascetic aspect, and, with his arms dropped, the palms of hands outwards, resembled an idol. (66)

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. (157)

This depiction is normally understood honorifically, but we must take into account the totality of its context. *Heart of Darkness* draws heavily for a great deal of figuration and signification upon the very Christian *Inferno*. Moreover, within the tale, the same character whom the narrator describes as an idol also identifies himself with and commits himself to a man who allows or causes a pagan tribe to worship him as a god: the natives "adored" Kurtz, you will remember, and the Russian too was "devoted" to him; he had as well taken "a seat among the high devils of the land." In that context we must view the narrator's exaltation of Marlow as idolatry of potentially the same sort: we may be being invited to play the same harlequin-fool to Marlow that the Russian plays to Kurtz. Marlow may be a false god for us, a false Sybil leading us to an underworld of lies and misperceptions. The image of Marlow as idol and the clear possibility of falsity it raises wrench all the "facts" of *Heart of Darkness* into indeterminacy. A meditating Buddha may be a sage with access to truth; he may equally be a false guide and a false god. The image, in its duplicity, calls into question Marlow's understanding of his own narrative: does he really know what he's talking about? Has he understood what he's experienced? The narrator's understanding of what Marlow is saying is even more questionable, and we as readers are even further removed than that from "the events themselves" – though of course we are not, since there are no such events, only Conrad's fictions, ergo lies. The only real thing in *Heart of Darkness* is the prose itself, and the only real event our reading it, our experiencing this narrative which holds us at arm's length from itself, forcing us inevitably to the outside, where meaning supposedly dwells, and where the circle most certainly starts again. Allegory is no respecter of limits or thresholds; consequently, it is always at least this double-edged.