

Chapter 1

History, Fantasy, and Horror

Horror is a shock, a time of utter blindness.

—*Milan Kundera*

The twentieth century was marked by catastrophe and by large-scale political violence as no other one before it. When I ask my Brooklyn students to write about the ways in which political violence has affected their families, there is rarely a student who is lacking in rich materials for the assignment. Catastrophe throws lives and social relations—all patterns of normal living—into disarray. More subtly, but with profound and wide-ranging implications, catastrophe subverts the very conventions and understandings by which we speak our experiences to one another. It is not that we cannot record and tell one another of the extraordinary and violent events that have scarred us; it is that these stories conform to a very different set of understandings, conventions, and rules. It is the assumption of this book that the better we understand the underlying rules or grammar of these stories, the better we will grasp the burden of what they

have to tell us and the closer we may come to a knowledge that begins exactly where words and "telling" end.

One purpose of this book is to deflate a rhetoric in which these events and their literature is often discussed, a rhetoric that intones but also confuses, an "impossibility" of telling with the functions of such a statement.¹ I am fascinated by the ways that a rhetoric of impossibility plays with and permits a "virtual" trespassing of representational limits. I am interested in the complex ways in which stories of catastrophe take on the epistemological issues extreme experiences raise by so often turning into the story of how the story came to be told, as in Tadeuz Borowski's "World of Stone," Dan Pagis's "The Tower," Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939*, or, as we shall see in this very chapter, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In each of these cases, the story told is not that of the particular catastrophe but of the telling of (or failure to tell) its story.

In this chapter, I will be concerned with making an important distinction between narratives of "horror" and narratives of "historical horror."² The point of my comparison of Edgar Allan Poe's stories "Metzengerstein" and "The Assigination" with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is that the comparison requires us to examine more carefully the specific problematic involved in representing historical horror: in representing events that insist that they cannot be put into words even as they insist upon the need for transmission. These are writings that must invent the means to circumvent their key characteristic—the disbelief that they produce.

When we think of horror in literature, we think of the grotesque, the macabre, the gothic; we think of conventions and strategies of a horror that derives from the imagination. These conventions and strategies are to be found not only in what we have labeled as "gothic," but in all sorts of works, from *Oedipus Rex*, to *King Lear*, to *Crime and Punishment*, in which the projection of horror is an important element of the aesthetic whole. If the classic example of the horror tale is the writing of Edgar Allan Poe, the connection of "horror" to dream and to the imagination is apparent. Richard Wilbur writes that Poe's narrative:

is an allegory of the mind's voyage from the waking world into the world of dreams, with each main step . . . symbolizing the passage of the mind from one to another—from wakefulness to reverie, from reverie to the hypnagogic state, from the hypnagogic state to the deep dream.³

Like the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is also a symbolic voyage into the horror and evil in the human soul. Conrad, like Poe, relies heavily upon the manipulation of point of view and upon the impressionistic posturings of a central narrative sensibility. And yet his is a very different rendering of horror.

As a literary realization of "horror," Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is about a horror that is both more familiar and also, perhaps for that very reason, less well understood—certainly, in literary terms—than horror as we conventionally think of it. It is well known that Conrad's story is based on his own trip to the Congo in 1890; Conrad, in his "Author's Note" to the book edition of his story, famously described *Heart of Darkness* as "experience pushed a little beyond the actual facts of the case. . . ." In *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, Ian Watt shows how the novella is part of the polemic of its day, having been written at a moment in which King Leopold and his imperialist policies on the African subcontinent had aroused a storm of criticism.⁵ Watt is meticulous in his study of the discrepancies and correspondences of Conrad's text with its biographical and historical background.⁶ Similarly, Adam Hochschild, whose recent book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, provides the most detailed account of this period yet to appear, compares Conrad's navigation records and diaries with identical detail appearing in *Heart of Darkness*. Hochschild, who sees Leopold's exploits in the Congo as the beginning of a murderous century of wide-scale opportunistic and genocidal violence, notes the variety of critical spins that *Heart of Darkness* has accumulated since its publication and suggests that:

European and American readers, not comfortable acknowledging the genocidal scale of the killing in

Africa at the turn of the century, have cast 'Heart of Darkness' loose from its historical moorings. We read it as a parable for all times and places, not as a book about one time and place.⁷

As much as Conrad includes an exotic African setting, structures his narrative around a symbolic quest and is fascinated with themes of depravity and madness, the horror he would present is fundamentally different from the invented and aesthetically dictated horror we find in Greek drama, in Shakespeare, or in Poe. In the pages that follow, I will examine the different strategies and assumptions functioning in works by Poe and by Conrad, the one that elaborates deep intuitions of horror from within the human mind, and the other that represents the unmasking and penetration of horror as it exists outside the human mind, in history.

Edgar Allan Poe and the Horror of Fantasy

Asked to adapt Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* for the stage, Milan Kundera wrote that:

even if I were starving, I could not do the job. Dostoevsky's universe of overblown gestures, murky depths and aggressive sentimentality repelled me. . . . What irritated me about Dostoevsky was the climate of his novels: a universe where everything turns into feeling; in other words, feelings are promoted to the rank and value of truth.⁸

The Dostoevskian world is a world that, for all of its vast embrace and historical reference to place and events, is utterly circumscribed by the feeling-world of its protagonist.⁹ The world of Poe, like that of Dostoevsky, is a world in which plot, description, and style point to the internal world of the speaker, only more so. If Dostoevsky works his rich palette on a large canvas, Poe wields his more concentrated effects in precise

brush strokes of black and white. And always, story and its elements serve subjective ends. An early Poe story, "Metzengerstein," opens on a note of foreboding: "Horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages."¹⁰ The story details the relationship of the protagonist, a reclusive prince, and a horse that has mysteriously appeared on his property. The mysterious horse is identical to a horse pictured on a family tapestry that the Prince has been studying and it terrifies him. After the real horse appears on the estate, this section of the tapestry is discovered to be missing. Poe notes that no one except the Prince has ever touched the horse.

In other words, the horse is at once real and also supernatural, fabulous, unreal. The mysterious horse both repels and attracts the Prince and eventually races with him into a conflagration that has mysteriously overtaken the palace. The description of the Prince is a study of extremes:

The agony of his countenance, the convulsive struggle of his frame, gave evidence of superhuman exertion; but no sound, save a solitary shriek, escaped from his lacerated lips, which were bitten through and through in the intensity of terror. . . . (68)

As horse and rider disappear, images of chaos and strife in nature give way to their opposite, to quiet. With the triumph of the horse in the form of a smoke apparition, the inversion of unreal over real is completed:

The fury of the tempest immediately died away, and a dead calm succeeded. A white flame still enveloped the building like a shroud, and streaming far away into the quiet atmosphere, shot forth a glare of preternatural light; while a cloud of smoke settled heavily over the battlements in the distinct colossal figure of—a horse. (69)

The overblown rhetoric of this and other passages and the piling up of typical gothic props and conventions in rapid and melodramatic succession provide the bits and pieces of an anti-

realist mode. They form an inverted world of romance and pure invention upon which "historical reality" barely impinges.¹¹ Within such a mode, character is one-dimensional; history is appropriated as myth as, for example, in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (in which Inquisitorial Spain is another gothic prop), as in Mathew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and in a host of other works of gothic imaginings. In all of these works, as in Poe, pitch of emotion ranges from one extreme to another and is more important than variety and kinds of emotion.

It is of interest to observe that while Poe's stories thematize the irrational and ways it can overwhelm the personality, they are not concerned with individual character and psychology. "Metzengerstein" is not about a particular villain, but about fiendishness. Poe's stories are about mythic forces that make destiny inevitable rather than about the intricacies of individual psychology that shape the history and possibilities of the individual. Gothic conventions have no connection to our sense of the historical world in which we live, and function instead as formulas ready at hand to elicit a response of horror from the reader. They are a most unambiguous example of T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative": "... a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion."¹²

Poe's description in "The Philosophy of Composition" of the writing of his poem, "The Raven," gives insight into his choices, priorities, and concerns as a working artist.¹³ In the passage that follows, he treats the question of an appropriate setting in which to place the dialogue of the lovelorn student and the Raven:

The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing together the lover and the Raven—and the first branch of this consideration was the *locale*. For this the most natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields—but it has always appeared to me that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of an insulated incident:—it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place.

Poe rejects the suggestive possibilities of a natural and open setting for the greater effect upon the reader created by the closed space of the student's study, "a chamber rendered sacred to him by memories of her who had frequented it" (460).

This focus upon effect is the counterpart of an anti-realist mode and is apparent in Poe's use of description in virtually all of his prose tales. At every moment in a narrative, Poe's aim is to work the sensibilities of his reader to their utmost. If in so doing, he can show us something about the workings of the mind, as in "The Tell Tale Heart," or of the irrational that undermines and overwhelms the mind, as in "Metzengerstein" and "The Black Cat," so much the better. And the objects, persons, and events he describes are portrayed not for any value or any interest they might possess of themselves, but for their value in producing particular effects upon the reader, including, at certain moments, the revelation of a state of mind.

Here is the narrator's description, in "The Assigination," of the protagonist of this story:

There are some subjects upon which I take pleasure in being minute. The person of the stranger—let me call him by this title, who to all the world was still a stranger—the person of the stranger is one of these subjects. In height he might have been below rather than above the medium size: although there were moments of intense passion when his frame actually *expanded* and belied the assertion. (73)

Even in these few sentences, which announce themselves as an excursus in description, there is precious little information—descriptive or otherwise—provided. In a passage pretending to describe the proportions of this individual, we find an attempt at specificity (" . . . he might have been below rather than above medium size: although . . ."), which is a cover for acute linguistic nonsense. The "description" is long. We are told that, under certain conditions the protagonist's strength is Herculean and that his mouth and chin are those of a deity. Details accrue that give no information whatsoever about what they purport to

describe ("Yet his countenance was, nevertheless, one of those which all men have seen at some period of their lives, and have never afterwards seen again.") and which together create a web of association. When, for example, the narrator tells us he has never seen anyone with features as regular, "except, perhaps the marble ones of the Emperor Commodus," associations of marble, statue, kingly rank, and of an ancient Roman past build upon one another in ways that bear no mimetic relationship to life and character, but that draw upon a storehouse of image and reference that is literary, pictorial, and, often, period associated.

Where the utterance, then, is of horror of an imagined origin, a text such as Poe's can afford to indulge and even to luxuriate in the horrors it produces. Poe explains the burden of this strategy in "The Raven":

The student . . . is impelled, as I have before explained, by the human thirst for self-torture, and in part by superstition, to pro-pound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer "Never-more."

And Poe continues:

with the indulgence, to the extreme, of this self-torture, the narration . . . has a natural termination. . . . (462)

Thus, on the one hand, we see in Poe an absolutely ascetic sense of purpose that he brings to his writing, which is such that all elements are subordinated to the creation of effects while, on the other hand, we find an indulgence in the grotesquerie and embellishments of horror that is characteristic of the mode in which he writes.

If Poe's stories fall on one end of a spectrum of literary horror, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* falls on the other end of the spectrum, where horror originates not from within the mind but from without. As much as Conrad shares with Poe a penchant for melodramatic gesture, for overheated language, an overall commitment to the subjective point of view, and a deep fascina-

tion with the human mind, his strategies for the representation of literary horror are the very antithesis of Poe's. A work of horror that draws upon the mind as its source and only point of reference must use every device available to project the horror that is its expressive goal. In such writing, the decibel level of emotion is high while, on the other hand, horror is safely tucked away in the formulas and conventions of an anti-realistic mode. Conversely, where horror is impressed upon the mind by events experienced in the historical world, the writer will seek not to reproduce that horror, but to represent the attempt of the mind to resist and master the horror experienced. This involves the very opposite strategies from those of Poe: strategies of silence, omission, obliqueness, and reticence which present horror in indirect ways, along with a set of strategies that seek to anchor the factuality of a horror whose first characteristic is that it can neither be believed nor put into words.

Joseph Conrad and the Problematic of Historical Horror

At the center of the experience of historical horror is a disbelief that both undermines and shapes the attempt to represent or portray it. Like Poe, Conrad is concerned with the real and the unreal. But the unreal that is so crucial to Marlow's quest in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is the unreal, not of fantasy, but of historical events too horrific for description. Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, describes *Heart of Darkness* as "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa."¹⁴ Conrad captures the stirrings of hope and of greed that fed the Belgian king, Leopold, and the entire imperialist enterprise. Thus, Marlow recounts his visit to the Company offices upon receiving his command: "I had no difficulty in finding the Company offices. It was the biggest thing in town, and everybody I met was full of it. They were going to run an overseas empire, and make no end of coin by trade" (10). Conrad's analysis of the phenomenon of imperialism extends to such unassuming passages as the one in which Marlow meets the Director of the Company:

"A door opened, a white-haired secretarial head, but wearing a compassionate expression, appeared, and a skinny forefinger beckoned me into the sanctuary. Its light was dim, and a heavy writing-desk squatted in the middle. From behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat. The great man himself. He was five feet six, I should judge, and had his grip on the handle-end of ever so many millions. He shook hands, I fancy, murmured vaguely, was satisfied with my French. Bon voyage. (10)

Marlow, who is usually loquacious and detailed in describing the impressions the surrounding world makes on him, here notes only the height of the Director. The meeting is dramatically abbreviated, foreshortened and condensed. It is not the secretary who appears to usher Marlow into the presence of the "great man," but a "white-haired secretarial head." A "skinny forefinger" signals him to enter the room. Marlow notes such things as the dim light and the desk in the room, without noting in his more usual manner the impression these details make on him.

Of course, this is the very point: the foreshortened description conveys an inhuman quality. Here is no meeting of persons, but of persons dismembered and turned into things. Marlow, like the secretary, his head, and his forefinger, is but an instrument, a cog in the wheel of bureaucracy. This description, as much as any of the more famous passages indicting imperialism, is a dramatic representation of the mode of being and of interacting in the world that made possible, in Conrad's analysis, the devastation and rape of the Congo. Conrad's language, unlike that of Poe, is about the mind interacting with a real historical world out there. However much *Heart of Darkness*, with its exotic setting, its quest structure and other motifs reflects the romantic palette of the period, Conrad writes in a fundamentally realist mode in his preoccupation with and engagement in a real historical world.

Conrad shows us the effects of policies that, according to Hannah Arendt, reduced the peaceful Congo population from

between twenty million and forty million in 1890, to eight million in 1911, and which Adam Hochschild more recently described as having created “one of the major killing grounds of modern times.”¹⁵ Conrad portrays the black man’s thralldom to the white man: “He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge” (37). He describes how “strings of dusty niggers with splay feet arrived and departed,” and how “a stream of manufactured goods, rubbishy cottons, beads, and brass were set into the depths of darkness, and in return came a precious trickle of ivory” (19). He portrays early on and in detail the treatment of the black man:

“A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path. . . . Black rags were wound round their loins, and the short ends behind wagged to and fro like tails. I could see every rib . . . each had an iron collar on his neck and all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. . . . (16)

But Conrad’s interest in the real world in *Heart of Darkness* goes beyond historical portraiture, beyond description and moral critique of European imperial, commercial, and colonial activities in the Congo. *Heart of Darkness* grapples with an opacity at the heart of historical catastrophe that robs us of our ability to meaningfully come to terms with the most disastrous events of human history.

Two Narratives of Knowing

Catastrophe, by its nature, exceeds the ability of the mind to grasp it. Its facts are, at one and the same time, known and not known; they blind, confuse, and enlighten all at once. They call out for narrative and insist that they are part of a narrative at the same time that they refuse to be contained within narrative. In

Heart of Darkness Conrad is concerned with the epistemological, psychological, and narrative issues that are the defining marks of catastrophic historical experience. He is concerned with what Cathy Caruth calls the "unclaimed experience" of historical trauma, with the contested status within consciousness, of catastrophic or traumatic fact.¹⁶

Or, better, he is concerned with fact and traumatic fact, and with the distinct paths of apprehension that each calls upon. At one point Marlow marvels that the starving cannibals on his steamship do not eat him and his passengers:

"Don't you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its exasperating torment, its black thought, its somber and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul—than this kind of prolonged hunger. Sad but true. And these chaps had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma. . . . (42, 43)

The "fact" at issue is one of great historical importance since it is this mysterious "restraint" of the black man that helped make possible the repeated degradation and colonization of the black masses in the Congo and across Africa by a relatively small European presence. Conrad lingers on that fact: "the fact facing me—the fact dazzling, to be seen, like the foam on the depths of the sea, like a ripple on an unfathomable enigma."

Conrad is preoccupied, then, in *Heart of Darkness*, with fact, with the idea of fact, with the perceptual and epistemological issues that surround fact. Fact, like the foam that rides atop a cresting wave, or like a ripple that disturbs the surface of a body of water, calls attention to itself and disconcerts our picture of things. It "dazzles." It is experienced in sensory, physical terms like a sliver of light that irritates the eye as it "dazzles." The light

blinds but also illuminates. Conrad's language suggests an imaginative path of grappling with fact, a path that moves from initial wonder and apprehension of fact to its physical and bodily integration.

Two more weighted instances occur in which simple objects come to signify a state of ultimate integration and facticity that is morally and symbolically charged. Marlow is much concerned with the rivets which lie uselessly about in crates at other trading posts and which he now needs to fix the tin pot steamship that is to pick up Kurtz. "What I really wanted was rivets, by Heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work—to stop the hole . . ." Marlow exclaims to one of the trading agents (30). A page later he continues: ". . . but what I wanted was a certain quantity of rivets—and rivets were what Mr. Kurtz wanted if he had only known it" (31). The quest for Kurtz and for the knowledge Kurtz possesses cannot get under way without the rivets to hold the steamship together. Rivets are needed quite literally, then, for structural connection and symbolize, by virtue of that function and of their physical properties, an integration of self and world that is the foundation of knowing and the goal of Marlow's quest.

After three months of delay, the voyage to the Inner Station and to Kurtz begins. Along the way, Marlow and the pilgrims come upon an unlikely but "significant" object, a sailor's book left in an abandoned hut in the middle of the jungle. Marlow picks it up:

"It had lost its covers, and the pages had been thumbed into a state of extremely dirty softness; but the back had been lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread, which looked clean yet. It was an extraordinary find. Its title was *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson—some such name—Master in His Majesty's Navy. The matter looked dreary reading enough, with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures, and the copy was sixty years old. I handled this amazing antiquity with the greatest possible tenderness, lest it should dissolve in my hands. Within, Towson

or Towser was inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships' chains and tackle, and other such matters. Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which make these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. (38, 39)

Once again, fact calls forth astonishment and investigation before it yields up its meaning. Marlow ponders the content and purposes of the book; it is "an extraordinary find," a book that is filled with "repulsive tables of figures" but that, upon reflection, is "luminous with another than a professional light." Again, the formulation of meaning is experiential, and, in its literary representation, takes a sensory, nonverbal form. To stumble upon this "delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real," is to move somewhere past the physical object or fact to its integration within a human consciousness. The passage describes knowing as a process, as a journey of consciousness into a world of physical, historical and human fact, and consciousness as something that exists as a primary awareness within the body. The cannibals' restraint, the rivets, and the book are parts of a world of fact outside mind and consciousness, facts that call forth on the part of Marlow a complex journey of consciousness seeking to take in those facts, their meaning, their perceived "reality" or facticity.

The central quest of the novella is really about the problem of fact and how we can know fact, especially where the fact involved is catastrophic. And it is this problematic of catastrophic fact—of fact that is, finally, unknowable—that shapes *Heart of Darkness* as a journey, not toward the object itself since, in any case, that object cannot be known, but toward Kurtz, the European agent who has participated in the horror and gives

testimony to that horror in his famous dying words. *Heart of Darkness* is not the story of the white man's shocking behavior in Africa, but the story of Marlow's journey to receive Kurtz's testimony about that shocking behavior.

Conrad's meditation on fact and on questions around the knowing and telling of fact in *Heart of Darkness* suggests that where the subject is historical catastrophe, one path of knowing and telling must be laid aside in favor of a very different way of knowing and telling. It is as though Conrad offers us, in the course of *Heart of Darkness*, two different narratives of knowing. The first, including the stories of the cannibals, the rivets, and the book, is the story of how we may know objects in an essentially familiar and knowable, and therefore also representable, world. This is a narrative in which the objects—the cannibals, the rivets, the book—take center stage, and the process of knowing involves a movement or journey within the consciousness of the individual. Such a journey is temporal in nature and is therefore narratable: it can be put into words, told in the form of a story, shared with others. Narrative itself functions as a means or form of knowing for the reader. The second narrative of knowing, the story of Marlow and his quest—the story of how we may know objects that fall outside the familiar representable world—is a very different narrative. It is also about an object, but one that is consistently experienced and described in *Heart of Darkness* as “unreal,” and thereby unknowable. And it is about a process of knowing that relies on the experiences and knowledge of someone else—of a witness. The knowledge gained is thus second-hand, indirect, distinctly social, and also deeply problematic. Marlow journeys upriver to hear Kurtz's testimony, testimony he then betrays and fails to pass on to Kurtz's Intended but that, at the same time, he does indeed transmit in the course of telling his tale to his cronies on board the *Nellie*—including to the narrator, and through the narrator, to the reader.

The narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, then, is double. It includes an untold story—the utter horror of catastrophic experience that cannot be put into words—as well as the story of a journey to hear the story of a witness to that horror. Marlow's journey to

hear Kurtz's voice functions as a sort of default narrative that comes into play precisely when and where direct knowing as a narratable act of the individual consciousness is not possible. The narrative of historical horror in *Heart of Darkness* involves us in an omitted, as well as substituted, narrative. The point of the substituted narrative (Marlow's journey to hear Kurtz's story) is exactly that: that it is a substitution, that it leaves intact—morally, aesthetically, structurally, formally—an opacity or silence at the heart of historical catastrophe. The story that cannot be told, *is not told*. It is the integrity of this omitted narrative, and the utter negation that is thereby foregrounded within the larger structure of such a double narrative, that marks a boundary separating what is representable from what is not. This clear and clearly marked boundary brings the unrepresentable, if not into view for the reader, within some sort of existential, or felt, proximity.

Thus, while Conrad provides us, in *Heart of Darkness*, with a narrative of knowing the world in its knowability and representability (the restraint of the cannibals, the rivets, the book), he also provides us with its opposite, with a narrative about the impossibility of knowing (and thereby, also, of representing) where the knowledge at stake involves experiences of historical catastrophe. And he provides us with a modality of knowing—a “witnessed” modality—that comes into play exactly where words and stories fall apart, where events disengage themselves from a sense of the “real,” of the plausible, of the remotely possible.

It is where traumatic fact cannot articulate itself credibly in words or story that narrative falls back on a witnessed mode of knowing. Kurtz, like the horror to which he is witness, is mostly absent from *Heart of Darkness* except for his final testimonial words:

“Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before and hope never to see again. . . . It was as though a veil had been rent. . . . Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete

knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath:

“The horror! The horror!” (70, 71)

A veil is rent, a revelation takes place at this climactic moment of “complete knowledge,” but the content of this knowledge is never fully articulated. Unlike the journey of consciousness undertaken in order to apprehend fully and completely the fact of the cannibals’ restraint or the “meaning” of the rivets and of the book, this knowledge seems to involve the opposite: a meaning or effect that is detached from its referent. If a veil is rent, only Kurtz can see behind this veil and give testimony to what he sees. Marlow merely responds to Kurtz’s facial expressions and listens to his voice, to his “cry that was no more than a breath.” He is privy to a truth at which he did not arrive through an act of his consciousness, but one that he receives and passes on to others. He is witness to the witness in a narrative mode that centers on a relay of witnesses and that comes into play exactly when, and because, other forms of knowing are not available.¹⁷

Narrating Unrepresentability

Marlow’s voyage, a voyage to “make real” the unreal, involves the turning from a narrative to a witnessed form of knowing, the elements of which include an untold or omitted narrative and its substitute narrative—the journey to hear the story of the witness. The narration of unrepresentability does not move from fact to meaning to the integration of meaning as with the cannibals, the rivets, and the book; it moves from the unreality of certain facts, to the sensed “reality” and truth of other facts, to the testimony provided by Kurtz, and its problematic transmission.

Thus, the European presence in Africa, the horror and exploitation made possible by the bureaucratic system, the treatment of the black man, and the description of life at the trading stations occur for the most part in the first section of *Heart of*

Darkness as we follow Marlow from Europe to the shores of Africa and to the Central Station where he finds the vessel he is to command at the bottom of the river. These are the unintegrated facts of historical existence that Conrad lays before us, facts that Conrad consistently describes as "unreal" by contrast to the African natives, the jungle, the sea, the rivets, and the book, which are described as conveying a sense of "the real" to Marlow. In the passage that follows, Conrad describes Marlow's first view of Africa from on board a passenger ship carrying him to the first of several trading stations. Already the historical, physical, and sensory "facts" of the world around him are categorized into those that seem to be a delusion and those that are natural, that have reason and meaning; those that keep Marlow away from the truth of things and those that "gave one a momentary contact with reality":

"We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a god-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it: landed more soldiers—to take care of the custom-house clerks presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. . . . The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning. Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that

was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts; but the feeling would not last long. . . . (13, 14)

As in the descriptions of the rivets and of the book, the material and the sensuous are explicitly linked to "truth" and experienced as factual and real. The black men paddling their boats along the shore are "a great comfort" for Marlow "to look at," and he describes the black men themselves in triumphantly sensuous terms: "but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast."

Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, then, the unchanging, exotic, and fabulous jungle and its people are associated, in Conrad's words, with vitality, energy, nature, truth, meaning, straightforward fact, purpose, and reality while the traders and the European world they represent are just as consistently described as (the adjectives in both cases are Conrad's) dissembling, cruel, inhuman, sham, hollow, rapacious, ludicrous, muddled, flabby, greedy, without seriousness, and absurd. Significantly, Marlow feels isolated among the traders whom he calls—here and elsewhere—"phantoms," so that he is positioned throughout *Heart of Darkness* between the two, between the unreality of the world of the traders and the reality and truth of the world of the jungle:

"They wandered here and there with their absurd long staves in their hands, like a lot of faithless pilgrims bewitched inside a rotten fence. . . . By Jove! I've never seen anything so unreal in my life. And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing of this fantastic invasion. (23)

Thus the world around Marlow is one that is fragmented into pieces that Marlow experiences as real, and pieces that Marlow

experiences as unreal. As Marlow journeys upriver toward Kurtz, the jungle becomes a more active presence and organizing motif, taking over from the shabby and destructive world of the trading stations. His journey progresses from a world of the unreal (historical, traders) to the world of the real (natives, jungle), a journey that is indeed about a fragmentation within the experiencing subject that persists and that cannot achieve integration except through the agency of another (Kurtz), and even then only temporarily.

Historical Horror and the Strategies of Silence

The portrait of unrepresentability, then, involves the silence of a story that cannot be told along with another story, the story of Marlow's witnessing. Where the object of knowledge is horrific, the object remains silent and speaks, at best, only through the testimony of others.

Horror, because it is the word that Kurtz uses to sum up his judgment of himself, bears the accumulated weight of all that draws Marlow onward to meet Kurtz. It is the revelation promised, deferred, sought, and revealed. Narrative time slows as we draw closer and closer to Kurtz and the meanings promised, not because Conrad indulges in leisured description of a primeval landscape, its sounds, its imposing reality, but because the sounds and silences and stillness are part of an inner resistance, part of that which shrinks before a fully experienced illumination of "'The horror! The horror!'"

Horror is the most significant word in this work, and it is also the most sparingly used "significant" word. Except for Kurtz's cry, it appears four or five times in a narrative of close to eighty pages. It appears for the first time in Marlow's description of the "gloomy circle of some Inferno" to which the sick and diseased blacks retreat to die (17). Marlow describes himself as "horrorstruck" at the sight which is like "some picture of a massacre or a pestilence" (18).

This reticence with respect to the word "horror" takes other forms as well. Marlow reacts to the sight of human suffering in