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Getting to the Nut of Names in *Heart of Darkness*

As principal storyteller Charlie Marlow chronicles his journey through the Congo in

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, he is surrounded by dozens of nameless faces—the vast

variety of African natives and European traders and officers he meets—and a few faceless

names, most notably Kurtz, the enigmatic figure at the center of Marlow's quest. The anonymous

narrator who frames Marlow's story is both nameless and faceless. The disconnect between

name and identity is a key theme in the novella, as Marlow attempts to use labels to divine the

essence of each person he meets. Each kind of label attempted, however, proves inadequate in

describing its subject. Names, far from dispelling the haze, more often add to it; and Marlow is

confronted with the seeming impossibility of establishing a meaningful connection between

names and the concepts they represent. Conrad uses Marlow's struggle with labels, however, to

suggest a different approach to naming that *can* be meaningful—one that does not attempt to

capture an essence but rather the impression left by it.

It would be inappropriate to address the names given to characters in *Heart of Darkness*

without first addressing the namers; it is important to make clear that main-character Marlow,

while perhaps the most prolific namer, is not the only character responsible for naming and

labeling. Rather, his voice represents one ring in the series of concentric rings of storytelling

voices which encircle Kurtz. Starting with the "nut" of Kurtz, each ring, or group of characters,

is dependent upon the ring which encloses it (and thus every ring before that) to be named and

expressed. Kurtz is first identified and described not by Marlow but by the host of characters

Marlow encounters on his journey through Africa; these characters comprise the first ring. The

second belongs to Marlow, who labels and describes these characters, identifying only Fresleven,

the dead Danish officer whose post he is to assume, by name (12). The outermost ring belongs to

the anonymous narrator, who frames Marlow's story and who, on the first page, hints at the role

that names will play in the novella. The narrator's identification of Marlow by name, in contrast

to the labels with which he identifies the "Director of Companies," the "Lawyer" and the

"Accountant"—as well as the fact that Marlow at this point is the only one on the boat who

speaks—immediately establishes Marlow as a focal point, a voice with something to say (5-6).

Enveloping all of these "rings," of course, is Conrad himself—the ultimate namer on whom the

whole of *Heart of Darkness* depends.

This narrative structure serves as an early indication of Conrad's ultimate goals for

naming: because it is the outlying rings of characters who tell the story, they are the only ones

who can communicate the meaning of the events that happen at the center. We do not hear

directly from Kurtz; he is, as mentioned, dependent upon Marlow and each successive ring to

have his story told. That possibilities for effective communication may only lie in the radiant

rings of characters around the center character is an early hint that radiant rings of *meaning*

around the center, or essence, of an event or person are what names should focus on trying to

identify.

The narrator introduces the idea of locating meaning elsewhere than in the center at the

story's beginning when he describes Marlow's attitude towards events: "To [Marlow], 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" (8). In the same way, argues David Galef in his

article "On the Periphery: The Marginal Characters in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," it is in the outlying rings of narrative that Kurtz's meaning is found: Kurtz, as "a character without a center," is "hollow," but "his essence simply lies elsewhere; the displaced center of *Heart of Darkness* lies with the supporting cast" (118). Kurtz himself is merely a name; he depends on the other characters—the officers who praise him to Marlow as well as Marlow himself—for his substance, something Marlow acknowledges early on when he says, "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?" (36). Kurtz is that kernel: he "exists by evocation, a name that accumulates an aura" (Galef 118). Marlow's pursuit of Kurtz is thus only ever the pursuit of a name—first as *only* a name, a word, and then as a name in the sense of "reputation," or the "aura" Galef mentions.

While Galef limits his discussion of names in *Heart of Darkness* to Kurtz, and discusses the other characters only in the context of their relationship to Kurtz, Marlow has difficulty with the names of these characters as well; his search for the face behind the name "Kurtz" is merely the ultimate in a series of struggles with name and identity that Marlow undergoes during his journey through the Congo. As he meets character after character, native and European, both before his departure and during the long months in Africa, Marlow consistently refuses to identify them by name. This is perhaps a reflection of Marlow's self-professed hatred of lies and obsession with truth. He claims that "there is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies," and admits his frustration with the "[impossibility] to convey…one's existence…its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence" (35, 36). Marlow may feel that it is truer or more adequately descriptive of a man's character to use labels rather than arbitrary given names. Indeed, the two characters Marlow chooses to identify by name, Fresleven and Kurtz, are the two most distant and unknown to Marlow: he is using a name here in the absence of another, more

suitable identifying tag. Tracing Marlow's encounters with the people he meets in his journey

through the Congo—and his methods of naming each of them—reveals his mounting frustration

with the inadequacy of names, a struggle which both culminates in and is resolved by his

meeting with Kurtz.

The individual white officers Marlow meets are generally labeled by occupation, or more

precisely, by their positions within "the Company:" the immaculate "accountant" at the first

station, the cold, disconcerting "manager" of the second station, his subtly malevolent colleague,

"the brickmaker," "the foreman" obsessed with pigeons (24, 29, 31, 39). Galef points out that

Marlow takes great care to describe each character physically (122): The accountant is a striking

vision in pristine white; the manager is "of middle size and of ordinary build," but with

"remarkably cold" eyes and a glance "as heavy and trenchant as an axe" (28). Marlow takes care

to describe not only the brickmaker's appearance ("forked little beard and a hooked nose"), but

also his luxury-filled office—the candle, the dressing-case, the weapons, Kurtz's oil painting

(31-2). The foreman, for his part, is "lank, bony, yellow-faced" (38). With each of these

characters, their position is of seemingly less importance than other, more immediate

characteristics—a hunch that is confirmed by the utter breakdown between the labels bestowed

upon these men and the functions they supposedly represent. The accountant is shown doing the

odd bit of bookkeeping, but it is impeded by the sick African man in the office, whose presence

renders it, in the words of the accountant, "extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors"

(25). The manager's success is unfathomable to Marlow, as the station is in a "deplorable state":

"He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why?" (29). The

brickmaker never makes bricks and the foreman, along with Marlow, is incapable of continuing

progress on the decrepit steamboat without rivets (32, 37). Their labels, then, do not only fail to

name the essence of each man, they are utter misnomers, incapable of telling Marlow—or the

reader—anything about the person underneath.

Interestingly, it is when Marlow departs from accepted conventional labels attempting to

nail down a man's essence that he comes closest to expressing it. One important example is the

man Marlow encounters during his final journey to Kurtz, whom he refers to both as "the

Russian" (another conventional, European label) and "the harlequin." Based on the man's

colorful patchwork clothes, "harlequin" is a seemingly whimsical label which ironically manages

to tell us something substantial: "the harlequin" is exuberant, mercurial, almost manic in his

reception of Marlow and his eagerness to wax rapturous about Kurtz (68-9). One indeed gets the

impression of a deranged jack-in-the-box; with one of the strangest characters in the story, it

seems Marlow has been most successful in finding an appropriate name.

Marlow's perception of the African natives is even more ambiguous. He again uses

conventional European labels in his descriptions of them, calling them "niggers" and "savages"

at points throughout the story, and initially the natives seem to represent a straightforwardness

that he finds lacking in the host of inscrutable Europeans he meets. As he begins his travels, his

first sightings of natives along the shore reflect this:

> Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was
>
> paddled by black fellows….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. 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. (18)

Thus the "savages" are kept neatly in their designated place in the wilderness. In Carola Kaplan's

article "Colonizers, Cannibals and the Horror of Good Intentions in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness," she discusses Marlow's attitude towards the Africans, locating his perspective solidly

within the larger colonialist position of Self vs. Other. Kaplan claims that "the colonizer, fearing

to succumb to the Other, attempts to contain it—through subordination, suppression or

conversion" (323). To these three methods I'll add naming or labeling: by continuing to use

terms of oppression or dehumanization, Marlow hopes to ensure the natives don't stray from the

confines of these terms. Kaplan identifies Marlow's perspective as adhering to "a fixed

opposition between the self and the native, insisting upon the homogenous identity of the

indigenous population and taking refuge in the 'superior,' more 'enlightened,' and more

'civilized'…dominant culture" (324). Crucial in maintaining this opposition, according to

Kaplan, is "the failure to recognize as inherent within the self despised attributes the imperialist

projects onto the Other" (324). In other words, Marlow must deny the savagery within himself in

order to maintain his delusions about the Africans. Kaplan posits that while the "larger narrative

perspective of *Heart of Darkness*…exposes the limitations and self-contradictions of Marlow's

views," Marlow himself never manages to transcend his narrow position (324).

However, to claim that Marlow does not undertake a journey in perspective as well as a

literal journey as he travels downriver towards Kurtz reveals a stunning inattentiveness. From the

beginning, he singles out individuals among the "homogenous" groups of natives: the man with

whom he makes eye contact upon his arrival at the first station, the man among the dying with

the scrap of white worsted around his neck, the man who is said to have started the fire at the

second station (21, 23, 31). He also questions some of the conventional European terms, stirred

to sympathy as he watches a group of natives dying by the river: "They were not enemies, they

were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now…lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on

unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and

rest" (23). Marlow's recognition of the indignities suffered by natives reveals an appreciation for

at least a modicum of human feeling in them; not even in these early days are they wholly

"Other."

It is during the final trip to Kurtz, however, that the efficacy of Marlow's labels for the

natives truly disintegrates. The African crew on the steamboat, whom Marlow collectively labels

"the cannibals" based on what they have informed him of their lifestyle, represent yet another

example of a breakdown between label and reality, as the cannibals—like the brickmaker who

never makes bricks—never eat anyone on the difficult journey, even after the loss of their most

substantial provisions. Though he would as soon expect this remarkable restraint "from a hyena

prowling amongst the corpses on a battlefield," and speculates that it is practiced according to

"superstition…or some kind of primitive honour," Marlow is deeply impressed by it: "It takes a

man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly….I looked at them as you would on any

human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses….And these

chaps had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! ...But there was the fact facing—

the fact dazzling to be seen" (54).

This is an example of Marlow spying the subtle, sophisticated emotions and abilities he

has heretofore associated with "civilized" Europeans in the natives; there are also moments,

contrary to Kaplan's statement, in which he recognizes himself in the Africans. Gliding past

native villages and encampments along the shore, Marlow describes them thus:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a

conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was

unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the

worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They

howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the

thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild

and passionate uproar. Ugly….if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that

there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise,

a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night

of first ages—could comprehend. (47)

Marlow, though uncomfortable with this recognition ("that was the worst of it"), acknowledges

it. The "savages" are no longer "a great comfort" to Marlow; they are puzzling, disturbing, as

ambiguous (as capable of ambiguity) as any of the Europeans he has met. Soon after he makes

these comments, Marlow refers to the fireman on the boat as "the savage who was fireman,"

marrying, for the first time, the occupation-related labels he uses for the Europeans and the

"savage" label he uses for the Africans (48). In this instance, Marlow is acknowledging that the

Africans cannot be adequately named any more than the Europeans.

When cannibals decline to eat white men, when men can be savages and firemen at

once—when even the "straightforward" savages cannot be contained with a name—Marlow is

faced with the devastating possibility that no label may ever be able to tell him anything

meaningful about its subject. Names, which should be the "nut" at the center where the essence

of the self is focused, prove hollow. Eric Trethewey argues in his article "Language, Experience

and Selfhood in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" that Marlow's frustration with names is important

because it betrays a larger frustration with language in general: that is, the lack of any real

"metaphysical substance behind words," the "final inability of language to capture the presence,

the inwardness, the contextual fullness" of what it is meant to describe (107, 104). *Heart of

Darkness,* according to Trethewey, is ultimately "a representation of the power of language to

mislead and foster illusions about itself and those selves who call upon it as a repository of ideals

in order to fashion their identities" (107). Any attempt, therefore, to rely on names as bearing an

intrinsic relationship to that which they are naming is misguided.

As such, as Trethewey says, and as previously mentioned, "'The man in the name' is but

another figuration of the problematic relationship between surface, or sign, and underlying

reality, an evocation of the mysterious nexus between language and selfhood" (104). Kurtz is the

first and last, but by no means the only baffling name, the only nut proven hollow upon cracking.

In his article "Names, Naming and the Inscrutable in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Bruce

Johnson takes Trethewey's argument a step further to suggest that Marlow's hunt for Kurtz is not

merely another futile attempt to divine meaning from a name, but that Marlow comes to depend

on Kurtz as the one who will finally connect the disparate poles of name and identity:

> Whatever Kurtz's own moral condition, Marlow has learned enough about him to expect
>
> that he will offer correct and substantial names—names that have some connection with
>
> reality. He expects from Kurtz that most primitive sense of names: that they will have
>
> something intrinsic to do with the thing named, even that they possess in some ways its
>
> magic. (678)

According to Johnson, then, Marlow expects not only that Kurtz's name will mean more, but that Kurtz will be able to point him towards a more satisfying system of naming than the one he has been using.

Marlow's expectations for Kurtz are puzzling: in light of all the disillusionment with labels he experiences, he is all too eager to believe—and depend on—the labels given to Kurtz by those he meets. He accepts the faceless Kurtz as a "somebody," a "special being," a "prodigy" (26, 33). This is especially odd when one considers Marlow's discomfort with the exaggerated reputation attached to his own name before his arrival in the Congo. Having witnessed firsthand how empty names are and how easily they can be made to signify something other than the true nature of their subject, why is he not warier of the persona ascribed to Kurtz by these various increasingly eccentric characters, none of whom appear exactly trustworthy themselves?

But perhaps it is precisely this mounting sense of uncontrollability and ambiguity, this growing dissatisfaction with names, that causes Marlow to trust more rather than less in Kurtz as the story goes on. He admits as much when describing his own reaction to thinking Kurtz was dead:

> That was exactly what I had been looking forward to—a talk with Kurtz….The man presented himself as a voice….Of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words—the gift of expression…the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (61)

Kurtz, of course, has not "presented himself" thus far at all—he has been presented to Marlow by others, and none of them has mentioned his "gift of expression" (the Russian harlequin does,

but Marlow has not yet met him at this point). Thus Kurtz has not only been invented by others,

he has also been invented to a degree by Marlow himself. As Marlow descends further into

darkness, he focuses all his hopes for regaining the "straightforwardness" he has lost into a man

he knows next to nothing about. He has already connected "a sense of presence" with words he

has not yet heard.

And though Galef and Trethewey are right in saying that Kurtz's name proves as hollow

as the rest (if not *more* hollow, considering the disproportionately higher expectations Marlow

has for him), Kurtz's *ability* to name does not disappoint. Marlow is shaken by "the atrocious

phantom" Kurtz turns out to be, and stops for the first time to actually think about the literal

meaning of his name: "Kurtz—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" (77).

Marlow is initially crushed by this final, most devastating breakdown between names and

identities, as Kurtz is a grotesque version of all he has been promised, and nothing of what he's

been expecting. But when Kurtz utters his last words—that famous "The horror! The horror!"—

Marlow's faith in him is renewed. For Marlow, "The horror!" is, at last, a label with substance.

"The horror! The horror!" is, of course, the vaguest label yet: there is no personality, place,

situation or event it purports to describe. For this reason, it is the most accurate: it describes the

glow created by an unknown source of light, which is acknowledged by Marlow when he says

that Kurtz "could not see the flame of the candle, but [could] embrace the whole universe" (91).

It does not attempt to name the nut; it describes the haze, and the listener is left to interpret the

nut; the nut is whatever Marlow, or we, take it to be. Moreover, it is a final, stunning

pronouncement on the haze as the most important element; the nut hardly seems to matter.

But it is not the truth of Kurtz's statement that Marlow most admires; it is Kurtz's

confidence in naming, his conclusivity.

> I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with
>
> humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the reason why I affirm
>
> that Kurtz is a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it….He had summed
>
> up—he had judged….It had the appalling face of glimpsed truth. (91-2)

Marlow does not admire Kurtz for his character, his achievements, or even ultimately his "gift of

expression." He admires him for being able to do what he, Marlow, cannot: *name* something

with "belief…candour…conviction" (92). As Marlow says, "It was a victory! That is why I have

remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more,

not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence" (92).

It is an echo that reverberates through each successive ring of storytellers: from Kurtz to

Marlow to the narrator to Joseph Conrad himself. As a trilinguist and a man who more or less

named himself (he was born Józef Korzeniowski), it should not be surprising that his

ruminations on writing reveal an obsession with words and naming similar to Marlow's. In a few

paragraphs excerpted from *Life and Art*, a compilation of essays, he uses capitalized labels for

people as well as concepts close to a dozen times: "Fidelity…Aesthete…Philosopher…Master…

Quietist…Spirit of the Sea" (218-19). He is empathetic regarding an author's responsibility to

choose words carefully, to name appropriately:

> It is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and
>
> substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring
>
> of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour; and the light of magic

suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace

surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

(225)

As we're reminded throughout *Heart of Darkness*, accomplishing this suggestiveness is all we

can hope for in a name; a name cannot, and should not try to, reveal the essence of truth, but it

can hint at it. Names may be inadequate, but they are all we have; we have no choice but to rely

on them, just as we rely on those who retell our stories. In attempting to allude to the haze rather

than identify the nut, to name the echo rather than locate the voice, we may be able, finally, to

establish a connection between a name and its subject.