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"A Vision of Greyness": The Liminal Vantage of Illness in *Heart of Darkness*

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In her 1926 essay “On Being Ill,” Virginia Woolf questions why illness has failed to be featured as one of the prime themes of literature, alongside love, battle, and jealousy. She observes, “Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza” (4). Choosing an experience most readers are unlikely to savor, Woolf seems to sardonically comment on the novel’s failure to capture universal human experience. However, it is also a statement made in the wake of the 1918-1919 global pandemic of influenza that killed an estimated fifty to one hundred million people in four months. In responding to this cultural trauma, what precursors could modernists such as Woolf look to? Woolf’s reviews of Joseph Conrad praise the rich and strange off-center focus of his later works, which, she finds, offer a glimpse of what the novel could do in exploring illness. In “On Being Ill,” Woolf revalues the “outsider” and “outlaw” (18) perspective that illness creates as the subject relinquishes citizenship among “the army of the upright” (18). Illness generates a mode of “ethical or political counterreception” (Samolsky 8) that encourages digressive thought; for Woolf, the exile’s perspective alternates lyric (stasis prompted by the interruption of illness) and narrative (progression in the return to day-to-day life). This juxtaposition enables modernist experimentation and defamiliarization—vantage points that make possible revolutionary thought. As Susan Wendell writes, illness and disability create experiences different from normative disciplinary regimes and result in “different perspectives which have epistemic advantages” (73). In this essay, by examining Marlow’s perspective on the horrors of Leopold’s Congo, I show how Conrad’s depiction of illness in *Heart of Darkness* opens the possibility of such a revolutionary perspective and develops a new aesthetics. Marlow’s perspective is shaped by his near-fatal illness, which occurs between Kurtz’s death and Marlow’s meeting with the Intended, a scene largely missed by readers but which colors his entire tale. Woolf’s essay likewise emphasizes the potentially revolutionary perspective illness grants, using it to examine the postwar status quo. Although Marlow’s tale evokes a nihilistic ambiguity, both Conrad and Woolf suggest that illness may offer a fertile creativity that engages readers actively through a modernist aesthetics.

The Victorian novel conventionally identified the sickroom with feminine sympathy and silence. Conversely, for modernists, particularly women writers who rejected the martyrdom of the angel in the house figure, as well as for male outsiders such as Conrad whose work put notions of masculinity into question, writing illness is emblematic of the problem of the other.³ As Woolf’s essay emphasizes, illness is most often an encounter with othering, whether an embodied other (an encounter with otherness marked by gender, culture, or race) or the othering of the embodied self (an undermined Cartesian duality). The loss, absence, and change illness brings in its reorientation of the self from citizen to outsider points to the prevailing theme of “On Being Ill”: the problem of sympathy. The desire for and failure to achieve sympathy is central to Conrad’s work as it is to the inconclusiveness of most modernist novels.

The aesthetics Woolf and Conrad turn to in writing illness are thus indicative of their ethics. By engaging the reader through the use of lyric stasis (an opportunity to reflect on one’s own embodiment and mortality) within the narrative progression (particularly the genre of the journey and return), these two novelists attempt to get closer to communicating a “truth” (“Preface” 147) of experience, in order, as Conrad writes, to “make you see” what the perspective of illness reveals (“Preface” 147). Here I follow scholars such as Rita Charon in attending to the individual’s narrative experience of illness and the non-normative telling it entails as well as to how the individual experience is defined and shaped by “society’s attitudes and expectations concerning the body, what it stigmatizes and what it considers ‘normal’” (Wendell 32). Marlow’s experience of illness destabilizes how readers may perceive the health and disease of the Africans and Company men portrayed early in his tale.⁵ As I will argue, Conrad’s work is a precursor to modernists for whom the desire for and despair of achieving human connection is provoked and represented through the body’s fallibility. That is, although the protagonist may fail within the story-world to achieve sympathy, through his or her ordeal of illness and return, sympathy is nonetheless achieved between the text and the reader. Through the use of lyric narrative form, *Heart of Darkness* draws the reader into the episteme revealed by the confrontation with one’s mortality. Its inconclusive ending dissatisfies the reader by withholding the consummation of sympathy within the story-world, compelling the reader to take up the work of interpretation and judgment—the ethical work of forging a sympathetic understanding of the otherness of illness.

In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf argues that the novelist’s problem presently is to be free to write what he or she “chooses,” “to say that what interests him is no longer ‘this’ but ‘that’” (162). Getting “that” onto the page means employing new methods that reveal “other aspects of life” that are potentially “more important” than those found in the plots of the conventional novel. To Woolf, the anti-epic that journeys into human psychology is modern, and she illustrates this method with a story in which illness serves as the “that”: Chekhov’s “Gusev” seems to have no recognizable emphasis and culminates in illness and a seemingly meaningless death. But Woolf appeals to her (modern) reader’s readiness to take on the difficulty of appreciating such a text, first acknowledging her own sense of bewilderment and then describing the effect of the story’s method and marveling at its radical novelty. Since the places of emphasis are so “unexpected” (163), it at first “seems as if there were no emphasis at all.” Only when immersed in the story do our eyes become accustomed to its “twilight” and “we see how complete the story is, how profound.” Woolf does not, however, attempt to say what the story means or to use the terms which “we have been taught” to categorize it as “comic” or “tragic,” since the wholeness of the story itself lies in Chekhov’s twilit vision.

The scene of “Gusev” and indeed Woolf’s passage echo that of another “modern” (158) named earlier in “Modern Fiction,” Joseph Conrad, for whom (in contrast to the disappointing “Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy”) she reserves her “unconditional gratitude.” The focus of *Heart of Darkness* is a journey into the “dark places of psychology,” and its narrator, the teller of Marlow’s tale, chooses a distinctively modernist method of telling—beginning and ending with an emphasis on the twilit horizon in which sea and sky are indistinguishable. It is precisely this inconclusive openness that Woolf admires in her precursor and that characterizes the ambiguity Conrad achieves in his scenes of illness.

Victorian fiction conventionally depicted illness off-stage with known, domestic connotations. However, Conrad’s late novellas, *Heart of Darkness* and *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* show the sickroom at sea, exposing civilization’s desire and simultaneous inability to contain Western civilizations’ iterations of illness. Conrad’s unreliable narrators and enigmatic protagonists require readers to engage in the problem of sympathy with the other by displacing a conventional narrative of culmination; illness here defies domestic and divine formulas for ascribing meaning according to a conventional morality of sacrifice or punishment. Conrad’s depiction of illness is professedly center stage but inevitably inconclusive. However satisfyingly conclusive the message of the “manager’s boy” (85)—“Mistah Kurtz—he dead” (86)—feels, it is hardly a precise judgment and offers no enlightenment. In considering scenes of illness that are distinctly (and distinctively) male, Conrad’s work shows the disruptive nature of illness; liberated from the space of the domestic scene and its interpretations, illness is shown to create a revaluation of beliefs, an alteration of one’s sense of time, space, self and other. It thus produces an ethical vantage that can interrogate gender, culture, and race expectations. The modernist intervention in telling the experience of illness displaces not only feminine, Victorian narrative frames but also romantic, epic, masculine narrative frames. I turn, then, to a focus on the act of telling in *Heart of Darkness*—which Conrad uses to develop an aesthetic that functions both to veil and to “make [the reader] see” (“Preface” 147).

Specifically, what we see in “one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (21) is his experience of illness, which is the culminating experience of *Heart of Darkness*. To make such a claim may be surprising, particularly given that many readers fail in a first reading of *Heart of Darkness* to register that Marlow nearly dies. However, the experience falls between two key events (both of which are conventionally deemed by critics as the novella’s culmination) and brings the narrative progression of an older Marlow’s storytelling to a halt—a lyric interval. The first event, preceding Marlow’s illness, is the culmination of Marlow’s desperate attempts to connect with the fevered Kurtz, whom he finds “kicked” free of human sympathy (82). The reality of Kurtz’s inhumanity is the most significant of the many events that Marlow’s telling recounts in what he, as a young man, had hoped would be a narrative about retrieving a fallen hero. Although Marlow is able to retrieve him, Kurtz is no hero (indeed, he compels Marlow to reconsider the very notion of heroism) and ultimately dies on the journey out. Kurtz’s ignoble death is followed by Marlow’s own illness in which, facing the void, he finds he has no language with which to describe his experience. The thwarted connection—the inability to find sympathy or understanding even in the shared experience of mortal illness—underwrites what critics see as the other culminating event of the novella: the lie Marlow tells Kurtz’s Intended. Marlow is thus compelled to tell his story by a double failure of sympathy: the impossibility of connection with Kurtz and the withholding of truth from the Intended. The latter ironically creates a false sympathy since he relegates her to a feminine domesticity while he returns to a masculine public sphere with which he has become disillusioned. Having failed to destabilize the structures of corruption behind the horrors of the Congo, Marlow is thus compelled to tell his tale, shriving like the Ancient Mariner.

The novella's emphasis on retelling, coupled with Marlow's unsatisfied desire to make his auditors understand, marks a change of interest in Conrad's aesthetics and his modernist turn. It is the encounter with illness—rather than “love, battle, and jealousy” (Woolf “On Being Ill” 4)—that is Conrad's source of departure, a shift that proved influential to later modernists who repeatedly invoke Conrad's narrative.⁶ In the context of a modernity lacking many of the narrative consolations of the nineteenth century, modernists experienced not only common illnesses such as typhoid, tuberculosis, and heart disease but also collectively confronted the profundity of a virulent pandemic that touched nearly every human life. These scenes (and perhaps Conrad's own experience of illness) lack a redemptive vision, and it is such ambiguity that appeals to modernists who wrote not only in the wake of World War I, which killed approximately nine million soldiers, but also in the aftermath of the influenza pandemic.⁸

The first installment of *Heart of Darkness* was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899; in the decade before, Conrad's travel charted the same path as the one Marlow recounts and as several waves of influenza pandemics. Mark Honigsbaum notes that between 1887 and 1890,

The “Russian” flu pandemic came in three waves . . . sweeping west from Bokhara in Tsarist-controlled Uzbekistan to St. Petersburg via the new Trans-Caspian railway. From St. Petersburg commercial and diplomatic travelers conveyed the disease to the Baltic ports while rail passengers spread it to Warsaw, Berlin and Vienna. By December the disease was in Paris, and by the early winter of 1890 it had reached London from where it was disseminated to the rest of Britain. (12)

Conrad became a British citizen in 1887; in February 1890 he visited his uncle in the Ukraine, intending to stop in Brussels on his return to England in order to press Albert Thys for a steamship command in the Congo. However, learning that his Uncle Aleksander (actually his cousin) “was ill and failing fast” (Murfin 10), he traveled to Brussels first. After Aleksander's death, he left his Aunt Marguerite and traveled to Warsaw and ultimately to his Uncle Tadeusz in Kazimierowka, staying for two months. Returning, and partly due to his aunt's influence, he secured the command of a steamer in the Congo, its captain Freiesleben having died

Conrad's travels were both influenced by and parallel to the ebb and flow of influenza across continents. During this time, the cultural valence of the disease was changing. By the 1890s, although scientists could not identify the correct etiology of influenza, they did recognize that the waves of the illness were not caused by tropical miasmas and its spread was exacerbated by the increased mobility of capitalist modernity.¹⁰ Dr. Franklin Parson's report on the 1889-92 influenza epidemic described this link. Parson “concluded that the disease was imported (probably from Russia), that it followed the lines of human intercourse, that it was spread from person to person, that it prevailed independently of season and climate, that the first cases were mild and the subsequent cases more severe” (Great Britain vi). Whereas the miasmatic theory of infection had reinforced imperialist characterizations of southern climates and inhabitants as sources of contagion, *Heart of Darkness* undermines this assumption by critiquing the vulnerability of Europeans to their own excesses while simultaneously exposing the machinery of modernity as the conduit of illness for previously isolated populations.

In contrast to Victorian novels that tend to associate susceptibility to illness with corruption, in Conrad's work it is the character of the Europeans, who venture into the Congo with “entrails,” that determines vulnerability (37). The Company men, who have “nothing inside” (41) and hypocritical pilgrims whose principles are supposedly the light of civilization are portrayed as immune. These imperialists, characterized by Marlow as unnatural and mechanistic, enhance their efficiency by refusing to nurse those who do fall ill, European or native.¹² In characterizing the Europeans' hardiness as inhumanity rather than as a mark of racial superiority, *Heart of Darkness* depicts imperial endeavor as equivalent to disease—“the germs of empires” (19). Although radical in decoupling racial superiority from health, Conrad's Marlow nonetheless expresses a fundamental conservative belief in ascribing physical corruption to Europeans' desire to enter and control non-European spaces and “Nature”(29). Ultimately, it is Europeans' inappropriate encroachment as well as a masculinity perverted by modernity (in Marlow's point of view) that makes illness inevitable.

Marlow emphasizes the unnaturalness of this imperialist endeavor in his surreal description of sailing down Africa's coast, where they discover a French man-of-war anchored and shelling the empty bush, a scene with a “touch of insanity in the proceeding” (28). Marlow notes parenthetically, “I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a day” (29). This scene is repeated with an ironic variation later in the novella when Marlow's ship, piloting up the Congo to reach Kurtz's station, nearly founders and comes under a precise and effective barrage of arrows by the natives on shore. Only Marlow and the natives onboard, whom Marlow calls “my hungry and

forbearing friends” (59), save the ship from disaster. It is this self-discipline and loyalty (even if misplaced) that Marlow has understood as a model of masculinity. The pilgrims only produce greater confusion by taking their Winchesters and “simply squirting lead into that bush” (60).

In contrast to the imperialists, Marlow doesn’t ascribe the natives’ suffering to infection but to starvation and maltreatment. The imperialists are sickened by the natives’ displacement and subjugation. In the infamous grove scene, “the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (31), Marlow discovers natives abandoned in the final stages of starvation. His description ironically echoes the language used to justify this displacement:

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. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air—and nearly as thin. (31)

The biting irony that underlies each mimicked phrase (“all the legality of time contracts,” for example), would serve as a primary form in later modernist texts to expose the hypocrisy of dominant discourses—cultural, legal, and scientific.

Marlow juxtaposes the dark grove’s “picture of a massacre or a pestilence” (32) with the bright “vision” of the chief accountant, dressed all in starched white (Marlow emphasizes the color white in every clause of his description), a man he sardonically praises as a “hairdresser’s dummy.” Hollowness is key to the chief accountant’s three-year tenure, as it has kept him from the illness that has befallen the “sick man (some invalidated agent from up-country)” who suffers on a pallet in his office (33). The accountant “exhibited a gentle annoyance. ‘The groans of this sick person,’ he said, ‘distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate.’” This sickroom scene notably lacks the feminine sympathy concomitant to the coffin-like spaces of the European domestic sphere, a sympathy Marlow will ultimately disparage as fabricated from lies. Nonetheless, Marlow’s depiction of the sick man and accountant likewise indicts a masculinity that lacks fellowship in its obeisance to efficiency.¹³

Marlow meets a prostrate young man; ineptly offering him a ship biscuit, he is “horror-struck” by the Company’s inhumanity (32). Whereas the Africans’ bodies are crouching shapes of “pain, abandonment, and despair” (31), the accountant presents a “faultless appearance . . . perching on a high stool” with his back to the sick man (33). Given this juxtaposition of the silent African seemingly returning to the earth and the unnatural machine perched high on a stool, Marlow can only offer a gesture of human sympathy that is pointedly inadequate but, nonetheless, attempts connection. He gazes into the man’s eyes and is left questioning.

Of course, Marlow hardly presents a paragon of sympathy himself, given his sardonic description of the dead natives seen on the tramp to the next station, but his tone is directed at the imperialists’ violence, exposing their dehumanizing language and “methods” and the wake of profound silence it has wrought (73). Marlow may, like the accountant and his sick man, be “annoy[ed]” (35) by the illness of the “white companion” with whom he leaves the first station: “not a bad chap, but rather too fleshy and with the exasperating habit of fainting on hot hillsides.” Nonetheless, Marlow holds his “own coat like a parasol” over the man until he revives and, when the man gets “the fever,” attempts to command the natives to carry him on a hammock, despite the man weighing “sixteen stone,” and his own acknowledgment of their right to mutiny. Marlow attempts these misplaced acts to restore his sense of humanity, but they violate the new capitalist model of masculinity. The accountant would have abandoned him as quickly as striking a clerical error, and, moreover, the man’s illness reveals him to be similarly ruled by the bottom line: Marlow asks, assuming the man has figured himself as an “emissary” of light, “what he meant by coming there at all. ‘To make money, of course. What do you think?’” As Woolf suggests in “On Being Ill,” “illness is the great confessional” (11) and “truths [are] blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (13).

Conrad’s novella draws out the ways imperialists used medical innovations to overcome natural deterrents and further control the designation of health and human in the service of profiting on ivory. Like the accountant, the manager at the Central Station has also survived three years, and it is this immunity that inspires uneasiness in those around him. While lacking every virtue of a leader, the manager has succeeded at his work simply by keeping the routine going: “He had no learning, and no intelligence. His position had come to him—why? Perhaps because he was never ill. . . . Because triumphant health in the general rout of constitutions is a kind of power in itself. . . . Perhaps there was

nothing in him” (36). When “almost every ‘agent’ in the station” had sickened, the man was heard “to say, ‘Men who come out here should have no entrails.’ He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness” (36-37). Marlow thus couples a lack of ethical capacity—“for out there there were no external checks” (37) and there is “nothing in” the manager to act as a check—with an unnatural capacity to resist illness. His role is to facilitate the capitalist machine, and he excels, in Marlow’s eyes, by being inhuman: moral vacuity and inner darkness confers a kind of immunity on the pristinely white man.

Marlow has attempted to hold up Kurtz as a possible alternative to these hollow men, a desire Marlow first recognizes when the manager explains that Mr. Kurtz has become ill. The manager says that Kurtz’s illness makes him “very, very uneasy” (37). The manager inspires unease from his appearance of “triumphant health” (36), but Kurtz inspires unease in the manager and his men from the threat of corruption he holds for their company. For example, the first-class agent of the station appears to Marlow as empty as the accountant, a “papier-mâché Mephistopheles” (41) whom Marlow could poke his finger through and “find nothing inside.” Kurtz inspires uneasiness in this agent, who, like the manager, nonetheless praises Kurtz as “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else” (40). Although Marlow cannot predict whether Kurtz will be “an angel or a fiend” (41), he hopes to find some substance in Kurtz which might represent a potentially infective agent to the internally bankrupt men of “triumphant health” (36), restoring his beliefs in a particular notion of masculinity and humanity.

The ill man, not yet seen, seems more real to Marlow than the “unreal[ity]” of the “sixteen or twenty pilgrims” (39). Illness, then, is a signifier of substance, of nature doing its work as a corrective to the illusions and unnatural measures taken to veil and propagate the imperialist machine. Marlow further castigates as unreal “the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work” (39). Marlow sees their lack of real work as unnatural.¹⁵ Whereas the pilgrim’s exploitive capitalism is a “desire to . . . earn percentages” (39) on the ivory they take, for Marlow work is “the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others—what no other man can ever know” (44). Nonetheless, in either case, human sympathy is impossible for Marlow—the hollow men willfully fail to recognize the humanity of those they profit from, and those who find or expend their humanity in work cannot communicate that knowledge, as the wordless gazes of both the native at the grove and Marlow’s helmsman suggest.

Since Kurtz has reputedly gone native, Marlow believes Kurtz may have found himself in his work and thus his presence threatens to undermine the imperialists’ economy. Marlow confirms the Company’s view of Kurtz as a destabilizing and displacing “influence” when he overhears a conversation between the manager and the manager’s uncle from the Eldorado Exploring Expedition: “Is it not frightful?” (46). Listening to the story of Kurtz’s journey, Marlow envisions Kurtz turning back to return to his station with the natives; he “seems to see” him as “the lone white man turning his back” and muses, “I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own stake” (47). Such a motive seems possible given the manager’s grievance that, when Kurtz had been there, he was always going on about how “each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, , a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (48). The uncle offers the manager the consolation that “the climate may do away with this difficulty for you” (46). But Kurtz’s refusal to return, instead posting an invoice, suggests he won’t be easily quarantined. Likewise, it belies Marlow’s idealistic characterization of Kurtz as a kind of enlightened artist engaged in the “work for its own sake” (47). Nonetheless, Kurtz’s status as ill makes him vulnerable, and the Company men plot how he, and his “wandering trader” friend who is also a “pestilential fellow” (the Russian admirer), can be extracted: “anything can be done in this country.”¹⁸

Anything can be done by the Company because the colonial space operates not according to ethics and law imported from Europe but by the rules of the imperial machine. In this case, it is the test of whether a man can successfully become part of the machine: “nobody here, you understand, *here* can endanger your position. And why? You stand the climate—you outlast them all” (47). Indeed, the nephew attests that the new men are “All sick. They die so quick, too, that I haven’t time to send them out of the country—it’s incredible” (48); however, something he’s learned or taken from his uncle before coming out works “like a charm.” This charm is associated with the inner vacuity Marlow has glimpsed behind the manager’s smile. The manager concludes, “Ah! my boy, trust to this” and gestures to the forest, which Marlow sees as a “dishonouring flourish” that beckons “the profound darkness of its heart.” Science (medicine and armaments) and ideology (the philanthropic pretense) confer immunity on men who do not belong in the Congo and who lack any internal moral compass. Perversely, the darkness of the jungle he gestures to—nature’s dangers such as tropical disease—allows the Company to corner the ivory market since imperialism can harness

science and medicine to do their “work” (46). Disillusioned with the men at the station, Marlow concludes, “Still, I was curious to see whether this man [Kurtz], who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all, and how he should set about his work when there” (46).

Kurtz will ultimately disappoint Marlow’s desire for a redemptive alternative to the immune hollow men. Nonetheless, the displaced natives offer an example of internal substance that are emblematic of their redeeming ethics and vulnerability. Indeed, Marlow specifically meditates on the uneasiness created by the humanity of the natives. The Company’s “work” (43) has depended on their revocation of the Africans’ humanity; treating them as machines or animals, the Company men are able to use the racist ideology of imperialism as a form of “necropolitics” (Servitje 134).¹⁹ Despite Marlow’s recognition of its immorality in his storytelling, his early life was conditioned by this ideology, and an important aspect of the narrative’s telling is its ambiguity regarding Marlow’s attitude toward the Africans. In contrast to Servitje, I suggest that Marlow isn’t unwittingly dependent on using imperial discourses in order to critique them. Rather, Marlow is aware of his culpability and chooses to narrate the story of his difficult realization of it. Speaking to an audience steeped in that ideology, Marlow’s interruptions in his telling and his ironic use of their discourse create openings for Conrad’s reader (if not Marlow’s auditors) to consider and judge. Marlow’s ironic tone in the moment of the telling underscores his distance from the younger self within his story, who struggled to accept that the Europeans’ worldview proved fundamentally perverse. The “earth seemed unearthly” (51), Marlow tells his auditors. Moreover, “the men,” the Africans, “were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. . . . What thrilled you was the thought of their humanity—like yours.” Marlow may use his auditors’ binary of civilization and savagery, but irony scores his speech and deconstructs the prevailing codes. Marlow may be unwilling to go native himself, but, increasingly disillusioned by the Europeans’ perfidy, he recognizes the latter’s greater barbarity. Compelled to indict the auditors of his tale with his testimony, his irony and intermittent sniping at these men communicate to readers Marlow’s destabilized worldview.

Marlow further comments ironically on his auditors’ racism and his own a priori beliefs regarding the cannibals who are commandeered to work the steamship: “Fine fellows—cannibals—in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them” (50). The comment “in their place” is telling as a critique of imperialist rhetoric but is also symptomatic of Marlow’s anxiety about his destabilized sense of humanity, including his sense of the private domestic sphere (a destabilized masculinity and femininity), the public sphere (divided as humane workers and hollow capitalists), and civilization itself (the unnaturalness of its inhumanity). Conrad has been critiqued for the latent racism the phrase “in their place” could indicate; however, Marlow’s reflections on the grove of death suggest that, despite having internalized such racist views, he nonetheless critiques that racism, seeing that it has resulted in this group of dying human beings. Marlow increasingly understands the “enlist[ment]” (51) of these men is unnatural not civilizing; moreover, it is a displacement of their civilization: home, tribe, food, and freewill. The men on Marlow’s ship have been starving because the pilgrims threw away their food and replaced it with a useless currency, fragments of brass wire. Marlow is amazed that when “faced with an inexorable physical necessity” (57) the men never “go for us” (56):

No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. Don’t you know the devilry of lingering starvation, its black thoughts, its somber and brooding ferocity? Well, I do. It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly. (57)

Marlow marvels at their inner strength to resist the “devilry” the body’s hunger produces. While “these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple” (57), he is nonetheless faced by “the fact dazzling, to be seen,” that they practice “restraint,” Marlow’s greatest manly virtue.

The ethic of restraint signifies for Marlow some inner flame the natives (as well as the Russian) manifest as an inborn morality, a morality that nonetheless confers mortal vulnerability. Kurtz, whom Marlow will discover lacks all “restraint” (66), also proves susceptible to mortal illness, unlike the hollow men. This would seem to contradict Marlow’s alignment of mortal vulnerability with inner substance. However, Kurtz’s lack of restraint is really a lack of the supposed philanthropic principles of the Company and its double-speak. The ethics which mark him as “unsound” (78) in the latter’s view are evidenced in the late, hand-scrawled addition to his seventeen-page report commissioned by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. Marlow describes it as “unbounded by the power of excellence” (65), but the “beautiful” (65) but banal report is countersigned by an ultimate act of corruption: the order that states, “‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (66). Marlow suggests Kurtz has either forgotten this striking addition or endorsed it in his extremity of illness, since Kurtz entrusts him with the care of his papers.

While Marlow cannot condone Kurtz's ethics, the report's countersignature attests to Kurtz's journey from a worker within—indeed a leader of—the system to a renegade who rejects its veneer of civilization. The countersignature exposes the Company's work for what it is in the Congo—not an avowal for improving humanity or even of dedication to the work of empire, but instead a license “to make money, of course” (35), its own form of savage custom. It likewise prepares the reader to reconsider the valuation of “beaut[y]” (65) by presenting it as a false veneer; for Marlow the beauty of the pamphlet is not in its eloquence but in the truth its countersignature exposes.

Kurtz ultimately proves “hollow at the core” (73), an even more ruthless imperialist who lacks “restraint in the gratification of his various lusts,” but, in contrast to the Company men, he bears the knowledge of civilization's ultimate corruption: the wilderness “had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know.” This conflict between some inner knowledge and the immunity of a lack of restraint is what Marlow sees (or projects) on Kurtz's sickbed: “The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham” (84). When the Company attempts to remove him, Kurtz dismisses their designation of him as ill, exposing it as a means to shore up their operation: “Save me!—save the ivory you mean. . . . Sick! Sick! Not so sick as you would like to believe” (77). Kurtz's protest points to the ways dominant groups (in this instance, the Company) can utilize the “myth of control” (Wendell 94) over the body and nature that Western medical science has fostered for its own ends. Kurtz is removed for what has been deemed his “unsound” mental health, which threatens the Company's profits (78). Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz comes from their shared knowledge of civilization's immorality. Scandalized by the manager's failure to denounce the brutality of Kurtz's “method[s],” Marlow realizes their concern is only to quarantine Kurtz's rival imperialism—the construction of illness here is used as a weapon (78). Forced to choose between two “nightmare[s],” Marlow thus becomes to the Company one of the ill or unsound (80). Tellingly, he falls ill himself after his final encounter with Kurtz.

Faced with the soulless Company men and Kurtz, whose “soul was mad” (82), Marlow sides with the latter, but he claims that “I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried” (78). Just as Kurtz offers Marlow no vision of humanity, Marlow offers his auditors no redeeming heroic vision having reached the goal of his quest but instead attempts to communicate his own disillusioned perspective—a departure from civilization's narratives and a turn to encounter the abject in the silence of either the wilderness or death. Marlow's pointless quest culminates not in clarity but a final confrontation with illness that, while he survives it, further undermines his sense of self and world. It is a disruption of narrative expectations essential to the effectiveness of Conrad's novella to unsettle readers' given cultural narratives. According to Marlow, the scene of illness is valuable for the “kind of light” (22) it throws on the darkness of the gender, race, and capitalist hierarchies of civilization that the tale implicitly indicts.

As I have suggested, the scene in which Marlow falls ill is often passed over by readers, perhaps because of its brevity and Marlow's sardonic framing of the experience, but also because it occurs between, on the one hand, his confrontation with Kurtz, and, on the other, his meeting with the Intended. However, Marlow's illness offers an important perspective for understanding these two scenes because his confrontation with illness and mortality alone exposes to him the limits of language and our ability to know others' experience. As Oliver Sacks writes of one of his case studies, “We are in strange waters here, where all the usual considerations may be reversed—where illness may be wellness, and normality illness” (107). The experience of illness exposes how the self is constructed through language and disciplines of normality, thus allowing the construction of self to be put into play by opening alternative perceptions of value.

This is the same modernist ethic of defamiliarization Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* presents. That novella places illness at its center in the character of the black sailor James Wait. In doing so, it undermines expectations of a sea-faring quest and instead meditates subversively on questions of race, gender, and fraternity. As Conrad famously, and with deliberate vagueness, wrote in his appended preface, his aim as a writer is to “make you see” (147). Conrad attempts to explain “the work” (“Preface” 145) of the artist, which is to bring “to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect”. This manifold truth is marked by “the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation” (145) that is obscured by day-to-day life, and “veil[ed]” (147) by conventional fiction because of its changeable fashions—“Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism; even the unofficial sentimentalism” (147) and publishing's concern to make a “profit” (“Preface” 146). Conrad's “not typical” (*Heart of Darkness* 20) sailors' stories anticipate modernism's shift from narrative progression to introspective discovery. Conrad articulates the early modernist ideal of connection as the goal of art and appeals to the reader to understand the difficulty of achieving it. The artist “descends within himself, . . . that lonely region of stress and strife” (“Preface” 145). As in *Heart of*

Darkness, Conrad identifies the interior body as the locus of meaning and the exterior as a manufactured “armour” (145): the author appeals “to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body and steel armour.”

The “Preface” suggests how innovations in “form” (“Preface 146) could penetrate to the vulnerable body to reveal an epiphanic truth. In shifting from a concern with story (given to “fashions” and “profit”) to telling (the effort to connect that is always necessarily unfinished), Conrad articulates an early modernist manifesto. The vulnerable teller of the tale becomes key in appealing to the reader to take up the collaborative work of seeing and thus doing justice.²² Conrad’s frame narrative departs from the positivism of the previous century through its retrospective and idiosyncratic speaker, Marlow. As Woolf observed, Conrad’s ability to “ke[ep] his hold over boys and young people” (“Joseph Conrad” 228) in telling seafaring stories, what Conrad denigrates as “your deserts” (“Preface 147), is exceptional because of his equal ability to achieve a lasting appeal to the discerning critic. She attributes this ability to his being “possessed of the double vision; . . . at once inside and out, . . . together with the sea captain dwell that subtle, refined, and fastidious analyst” (“Joseph Conrad” 229) of psychology “whom he called Marlow” (229).

The philosophy of Conrad’s “Preface” is represented in the characterization of the frame narrator of *Heart of Darkness*, who hears and relays Marlow’s story and contrasts him with other sailors and storytellers. Whereas most sailors lead “a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them—the ship; and so is their country—the sea” (19), Marlow is “a wanderer.” An “not representative . . . wanderer” (*Heart of Darkness* 19), he is compelled to tell his story to the very men (the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant) whom his tale indicts. The narrator introduces Marlow’s story as a strange deviation from those of other “adventurers and the settlers . . . Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame . . . bearing the sword, and often the torch” who have sailed the Thames; Marlow, indeed, characterizes the Thames as having “been one of the dark places of the earth,” the source of “the germs of empires.” Marlow’s use of imperialist language such as “the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires” invokes imperialism’s laudatory connotation but undermines it in with his ironic tone, which brings to the fore the connotation of infection and corruption.

Resembling a “Buddha” (21), Marlow evokes the epic of conquest only to expose the false aura of honor or civilizing duty it has acquired. With deep sarcasm, Marlow “preach[es]”:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. . . . Not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . (21)

The loss Marlow suffers is precisely the idea of civilization, which he chooses to expose in its hypocrisy to those he sees as responsible.²³ Marlow’s emblematic auditors are asked to see their pretenses as justifications for barbaric acts. They likewise “bow down” and “offer a sacrifice,” but to a different idea—ivory, or the ill-begotten capital it represents. Whether they do see this comparison is unknowable, but the narrator recognizes the ironic tension of Marlow’s telling, thus enabling Conrad’s work.

In introducing his story, Marlow claims that the only interest of his personal role in it is his encounter with illness. Indeed, it is “the culminating point of my experience. It seemed to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was somber enough too—and pitiful—not extraordinary in any way—not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light” (22). Servitje’s analysis of the coloniopathy in the novel attributes Marlow’s thoughts on illness to his observations of Kurtz’s death; it is Marlow’s “meeting with Kurtz” (138) and the latter’s death that “reveals the significance” of his story. Notably, Servitje makes this claim having pointed to the “impressionism” of Conrad’s literary style, which perhaps explains how there seems to be a blurring of Kurtz’s and Marlow’s illness in his reading. My point here is to illuminate what Marlow claims is the source of illumination—not Kurtz’s illness, but his own—that “throw[s] a kind of light on everything.” Marlow witnesses Kurtz’s death and nearly dies himself; facing mortality leads him to face the question of life’s purpose, “some knowledge of yourself” (86).

Whereas Kurtz’s death appears to pronounce judgment, Marlow finds only retrospective regrets. Marlow will offer no clarity or moral directive in describing his illness, as he forewarns at the beginning of his tale, only “inconclusive experiences” (21). The narrator explains that 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, in the likeness of one of these misty

halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (20). The “misty halo” of Marlow’s “inconclusive” experience may be unsatisfying as the culmination of an epic journey but rich ground for social and psychological critique. The narrator’s instructions for attempting to understand the “episode” foreshadow Marlow’s own interpretive work speculating on the darkness—an increasingly destabilized metaphor—within the men he meets in the Congo.

Illness is able to “throw a kind of light” on this darkness by removing Marlow from the upward march of capitalist work into the horizontal space of observation. In “On Being Ill,” Woolf praises the ill as a deserter of “the army of the upright” (12), who, “lying recumbent” (13) is able to finally “look round” (13) at their world. Illness departs from the linear march of conventional narrative tracks, the habit of prosaic perception and its attending illusion. According to Woolf, health facilitates the sustenance of the status quo: “in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed—to communicate, to civilize, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work together by day and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases” (12). Woolf’s sardonic gesturing to the work of empire is particularly evocative of *Heart of Darkness*. For Woolf, the literal displacement of the body triggers a metaphoric displacement of one’s metaphysical orientation and opens up new interpretative possibilities. Thus the “light” that Marlow’s encounter with illness sheds on the darkness of his encounters with Kurtz and the Intended lead the reader to reflect on his or her own a priori structures for constructing meaning. The inconclusiveness of Marlow’s experience confronting mortality in his illness and Kurtz’s silencing in death invites interpretive work. Marlow, indeed, is haunted by the burden of Kurtz’s legacy, which the Company intends to reframe as the tragic loss of a hero, an emissary of light. It is up to Marlow to do him “justice”(90), but illness has led Marlow to put into question all given structures of justice, and his storytelling, in its refusal to pronounce judgment, guides the reader towards a different kind of justice.

Marlow as a self-proclaimed unreliable narrator invites the reader’s active performance through a repeated interruption of his story.²⁴ “Do you see the story?” (42), he asks in a narrative break, “Do you see anything?” In creating a space between the implied author and Marlow (as well as the narrator), the novel requires collaborative interpretation—invites, if not the auditors, then the readers to drop out of the army of the upright. Marlow acknowledges that such work is difficult, offering no clear distinctions or sureties, but for him work is a source of solace from the nightmare of exploitative capitalism since it offers through self-directed labor the possibility of self-understanding and fellowship.

Marlow’s questions, which return to the now of the frame narrative, call on the reader to find a meaning in his encounter with Kurtz and what Marlow has seen and done (lying to the Intended, attempting the “truth” now [42]) with the use of the second person: “It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream” (42). Despairing, Marlow falls silent and then laments the limits of language and the possibility of sympathetic understanding: “it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning. . . . It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone.” (42). Marlow recognizes not only that perfect sympathy between the teller and listener is impossible, but also that his own understanding of his experience is flawed: “Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then” (42). Though the others may be asleep, the narrator nonetheless listens, “awake” and “on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative.” While perfect sympathy is impossible, Marlow nonetheless emphasizes the work’s value in the individual experience of interpretation, the chance it offers to find oneself and one’s own reality. Conrad thus undermines the imperialist narrative by granting the vigilant narrator a sympathetic, more comprehensive vision than the protagonist’s own and by refusing to convey a conclusive judgment. It is the narrator who searches for the clue, modeling for the reader a mode of active reception.

Marlow detests the inevitable lying that telling a compelling narrative entails (and any storytelling, in its partiality, its omissions, is by nature fabrication), but getting to a “truth” (42) beyond the mortal world can only be achieved indirectly (in the vision of his auditor and Conrad’s readers) and fleetingly. Marlow explains in a narrative break that “there is a taint of death, a flavour of morbidity in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick” (42). Ironically, then, the work of the storytelling artist is potentially complicit in the morbidity that lies signify to Marlow, since it is the human impulse to impose meaning and truth (often to the detriment of another’s meaning and truth, and possibly life). Made “sick” (42) by the lies and the pretences of Belgian imperialism, Marlow appeals to more metaphysical experiences as a means to connect through shared meaning. The fact of mortality, its incommunicability, and the possibility of its meaninglessness is paradoxically a shared truth realized in illness but veiled by prosaic discourse.

Desiring a timeless truth rather than endless fabrication, Marlow's experience with illness compels him to face the reality that the mortal world necessarily entails lies. Indeed, each narrative break in *Heart of Darkness* apports the mortality of lies, discovered in illness, with the difficulty of trying to communicate the truth Marlow has seen. For example, "This is the worst of trying to tell . . . Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses . . . excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd!" (63). Marlow can only tell a narrative that reveals the lie that perfect or "triumphant health" (36) conceals in order for the reader to glimpse a truth. Consequently, Marlow as a man in the now of the textual breaks finds a purpose, a motive for going on, "an idea" (21) perhaps not unlike the one he has critiqued at the start of his story. In retrospect, the story Marlow tells is of his crisis of meaning and its final three encounters are its culmination. First, he seeks to stabilize his worldview in confronting Kurtz, seemingly the only alternative to the lies of civilization but who proves abhorrent. Second, he falls mortally ill and faces the abyss, an experience that engenders his silence and invokes Nature as a brooding force that is likewise fearsome in being beyond language. Third, he seeks a sympathetic other in the Intended and tries to do justice to Kurtz's legacy.

Marlow confronts Kurtz when he discovers that the ill man has crawled away in the night to return to the lake tribe that idolizes him. In intervening, Marlow attempts to redeem Kurtz to the ideals of his eloquent "voice" (81). He attempts to "break the spell—the heavy mute spell of the wilderness" but has only the language of "common everyday words" (82), whereas Kurtz's entire being is its powerful voice. "A voice! A voice! . . . It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart" (84). Facing a broken body "kicked . . . loose of the earth" (82), Marlow lacks any ground for rational appeal "high or low" (82). Marlow's attempt to use language to empathize with or draw Kurtz back to civilization (as Kurtz himself defines it in his powerful declarations) is too late, but Kurtz's turn toward Nature and its defiance of language cements Marlow's personal connection: "he could not have been more irretrievably lost than he was at this very moment, when the foundations of our intimacy were being laid—to endure—to endure" (81). For Marlow, the most disturbing revelation may be that civilization, a fabrication of language into beliefs, is essentially unnatural, veiling a barren darkness. Both storyteller and author are exposed as fashioning language in an effort to master and contain both Nature and human nature, thus Marlow indicts his own work as not unlike that of the imperialists.

Marlow may detest lies as well as Kurtz's barbarity, but Kurtz's refusal to veil the fact of that barbarity (that is, to lie) and instead embrace the darkness of nature reveals a truth to Marlow. Marlow accounts for Kurtz's darkness by identifying with the latter's confrontation with the void, asking, "how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude . . .—by the way of silence—utter silence" (64). Readers learn that Marlow can imagine it and even frame this complaint because he has "peeped over the edge myself" (86), come to the edge of utter solitude and silence, not only in the wilderness of the Congo, but in the terrain of illness and the threshold of death. For Marlow, it is above all the muteness of "the wilderness" (82) that maddens the "eloquence" of Kurtz, who is drawn "to its pitiless breast" that is "so withering to one's belief in mankind." Readers cannot know whether Kurtz shares Marlow's nihilistic revelation about the false reality language fabricates, and indeed Kurtz seems instead concerned with his legacy and his ivory. Nonetheless, his illness serves as a mirror or "echo" (87) for Marlow's own disillusioning discovery. Marlow acknowledges that he had "for my sins, I suppose, to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself" (82).

Although it is easy to miss, given the weight on the page of Kurtz's last words that follow soon after, Marlow reveals that he falls ill while still returning on his ship with the dying Kurtz. While Kurtz seems to be "lying at the bottom of a precipice" (85), Marlow is busy toiling at the work of his ship, "unless I had the shakes too bad to stand."²⁵ After the manager's boy announces Kurtz's death, Marlow describes it as "a judgment upon the adventures of [Kurtz's] soul on this earth."²⁶ Marlow then self-deprecatingly turns to an account of his illness: "And then they very nearly buried me" (86). This line, set off from the previous and following paragraphs, marks a pause in the narrative, a quieter self-irony that represents a meditation on the attempt to tell the story of one's illness. Like Woolf in "On Being Ill," Marlow begins with the declaration that illness is boring: "It is the most unexciting contest you can imagine" (86). Nonetheless, the two pages that follow attempt to convey the profundity of his experience—one quite different from the clichés of conventional fiction.

If the novella so far has framed illness as a heroic battle against death, with wisdom and a fresh embrace of life as the survivor's spoils, Marlow undermines each facet of that narrative. The contest with death "takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory" (86). It is a featureless landscape in which the self ventures alone.²⁷ Moreover, the propulsion of Eros, or desire, is whelmed by

the quiescence of Thanatos. According to Marlow, the so-called struggle takes place “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 that of your adversary.” The grand narratives of civilization (religion, progress, and duty) provided ground for belief in a purpose in life, thus containing death as a tragic but heroic necessity in the Victorian era. But in a modernity in which a skeptical, perhaps modernist, mind such as Marlow’s has rejected these narratives as false and indeed ruinous, the self finds “nothing” and, what is worse, “nothing to say.” If the nothing revealed in the contest with death is “the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be.” At the start of his disquisition, Marlow defines “life” as “that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose.” Marlow’s irony suggests that the “ultimate wisdom” of this contest with death is its lack of wisdom, its lack of meaning. The abyss of death, like the evolutionary timescale of nature which reduces man’s life to “the flicker” (20), reduces the tale-teller Marlow to silence.²⁸

The humiliation of having “nothing to say” (86) when faced with “the last opportunity for pronouncement” in his own illness is what makes Marlow best able to understand “the meaning” of Kurtz’s universe-encompassing stare on his deathbed: “He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror!’ He was a remarkable man.” Although neither readers nor Marlow can know what “‘The horror! the horror!’” (85) meant to Kurtz, Conrad shows that Marlow interprets it as an expression of “some sort of belief” (86), praising it for the “vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate.” Thus Marlow, who claims a lack of sympathy for his “own extremity,” instead finds in “[Kurtz’s] extremity” an expression of some personal philosophy, his “glimpsed truth” of the absurdity of the “merciless” conflict, the “desire and hate” of Eros/Thanatos, the life and death drive which seem to serve no ideal but proves instead a “futile purpose” (86). Whereas Marlow describes Kurtz’s pronouncement of the horror as “remarkable” (86) and a “victory” (87), Marlow derides his own vision, mentioning it only in an aside as “—a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—” (86). Conrad thus creates a parallax vision of two confrontations with the void: one that uses the familiar form of tragedy, which Marlow disingenuously attempts by framing Kurtz as a fallen hero, and one that belies such narrative containment by exposing death’s banality.

Following his subversive redefinition of life, Marlow further notes, “The most you can hope from it [life] is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets” (86). The slim spar of “hope” in the first clause points to the modernist reaction to the nothing familiar to the modernist anti-quest: the creation of an aesthetics that attempts to open spaces for a “glimpsed truth” that entails a rigorous journey into the human psyche.³⁰ The best one can do, Marlow’s sarcasm suggests, is to tell the story of one’s approach to an existential threshold. Marlow cannot know the truth revealed in death since his “hesitating foot” (86) did not actually “step over the threshold of the invisible” (87) as Kurtz has, yet some “echo of his magnificent eloquence” becomes the ground for the propulsion of Marlow’s narrative, both in moving back from the metaphysical threshold and in telling his tale to the narrator in an attempt to find some knowledge of himself.

Marlow theorizes that “perhaps all the wisdom, and all the truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible” (87). Thus, unlike Kurtz, Marlow must return to life and wander as an exile of either world in search of judgment. Recounting the period following his illness and his return to the “sepulchral city” (87), Marlow offers the defamiliarized perspective of the invalid who crosses from the “night-side of life” (Sontag 3) and regains “citizenship” in “the kingdom of the well,” what Auden calls the “common world of the uninjured” (9). However, the very health of the citizens proves repulsive. Marlow resents their trivial pursuits of making money, devouring food, and gulping beer, “because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew” of life (87). He is offended by their sense of immunity—“the assurance of perfect safety.”³¹ Marlow admits that “I was not very well at the time,” and notes that recovery will require more than physical renewal from his “dear aunt’s endeavours to ‘nurse up my strength’” since “it was not my strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing.” His imagination bears the burden of Kurtz’s legacy—an appalling confrontation with life’s absence of meaning, countersigned by the manager’s boy and reaffirmed by Marlow’s own illness. Thus Marlow will require an affirming other for restoration from his dis-ease.

Disillusioned with the lies of the public sphere and its construction of masculinity, Marlow nonetheless has retained some illusions about the domestic sphere, seeing in Kurtz’s Intended “the delicate shade of truthfulness” (89). She appears to him “ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself.” Marlow’s motive in going to her is obscure to him, but readers see that he wishes both to connect with a sympathetic other and to have his imagination soothed. Ultimately, Marlow reveals a retrospective disappointment after realizing how her

“world” (63) is equally implicated in fabricating the veneer of civilization. Again facing the void alone, Marlow is unable to tell her the truth of Kurtz and is fearful of sharing the intimacy he believes he has with Kurtz—deeply flawed though it is.

Detesting lies, he frames his lie to the intended as saving her from his authentic knowledge and protecting the Intended’s “beautiful world” (63). With a deeply ironic tone, Marlow indicts his own complicity in fabricating detestable lies. His condemnation, after all, is couched in his storytelling—a mode fundamentally undermined by his critique. An earlier break in Marlow’s narrative has already foreshadowed this condemnation: “I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie. . . . ‘Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse’” (63). Marlow defers his testimony and gives the Intended what she believes are Kurtz’s last words, a lie that provides her “something—to—to live with” (93), and which compels Marlow’s future telling since he must also “live with” Kurtz’s truth.

The “lie” with which Marlow lays Kurtz’s ghost restores a kind of symmetry to his experience both practically, shoring up the ideological status quo of the gendered, imperialist public and private realm, and poetically, exposing his lie in his subsequent narration as a means toward creating a stoic understanding of the impossibility of truth. That is, Marlow tells of his encounter with the Intended in a way that could be interpreted within the narrative conventions of heroic stoicism, but he undermines it by brandishing it to his auditors as a trivial, corrupting lie. Conrad stresses that this is a fabricated symmetry; his protagonist’s indomitable irony undoes any satisfying conclusion or sense of justice for the reader. Marlow creates an ironic tension by juxtaposing the conventional image of the Intended’s self-sacrifice and her beauty, which is “illuminated by the unextinguishable light of belief and love” (91), with the dark irony of his perception in the now of the telling (a perspective readers would share), which recognizes that the “saving illusion” was also Marlow’s own (92).

Denied a stable pronouncement of judgment by Marlow or the narrator, the reader nonetheless is compelled by the artfulness of the telling. Through self-reflexive lyrical breaks, inverted binaries, and broken symmetries, Conrad invokes the outsider status that illness confers to reorient the reader’s aesthetic and ethical conventions. In this final scene, the duality of Marlow’s conversation with the Intended—he is aware of the irony of his statements but the Intended is not—shows that the affirming other to whom the ailing Marlow is not the pale-visaged angel with the “ashy halo” (90) but his auditors, specifically the narrator. After leaving the Intended, Marlow reflects, “Would [the heavens] have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn’t he said he wanted only justice?” (93). The double-voiced sentence is a rendering of justice; the tale exposes his lie to the narrator and thus to the reader, who, like the faithful narrator, has been “on the watch” for “the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative” (42). Moreover, it ironically achieves a force of truth in emphasizing the lying inherent in all artfulness. His lie, that Kurtz’s last word was her name, leaves her heavens intact but relegates Marlow to a darkness that the narrator echoes in his concluding description of the scene.

The final symmetry Conrad achieves is the implied truth that the reader’s work reveals, a different and difficult notion of beauty, which produces a pleasurable uneasiness characteristic of modernism. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry follows Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch in arguing that “beauty prepares us for justice” (78). Scarry does not oppose ugliness to beauty but rather injury to justice; our desire for beauty/justice is created by the vulnerability of our mortal selves to injury/injustice. Thus one would believe that conventional, stabilizing forms of beauty which can provide meaning and pronounce justice in the face of meaninglessness would appeal to those facing illness and mortality. However, both Conrad (through his story) and Woolf (in her essay) argue that social and narrative forms should not, as they had, cordon off the perspective that illness and mortality reveal. Instead, it is in the ambiguous space of illness that a defamiliarized perspective of life emerges, one that can reveal difficult and startling truths about the self and other. In a novella that contrasts light (the glow of the moon, Kurtz’s deathbed an echoing cliff of crystal, the Intended’s “pure brow” [90]) to darkness (the river of the Congo, the Thames, Kurtz the “hollow sham” (84) of the hollow men), Marlow’s telling draws readers into a liminal space (the haze, the “impalpable greyness” [86] of Marlow’s illness). Rather than a final darkness or light, *Heart of Darkness* ends in a state of greyness. The narrator describes the “overcast sky” (94) when Marlow finally has “ceased” but offers no clarifying commentary. Conrad thus breaks the frame of conventional narrative, both the imperial epic and the heroic overcoming of illness, and instead requires readers to dwell in the liminality of the conclusion’s ambiguities.

Marlow's final reflection that he could not "render Kurtz that justice which was his due" (93) creates a burden for both narrator and reader. Marlow's unfinished business has given the text a proleptic cast in the twentieth century. Russell Samolsky argues that the "apocalyptic trajectory that is materialized" (9) in Conrad's text positions it to "release an ethical or political counterreception." This proleptic cast is applicable not only to Samolsky's focus on race in the novella, but also to illness and how it comes to be reimagined in modernist fiction as a source of an alternative ethical vision—a grounding in the shared awareness of human vulnerability. The deep ambivalence of Conrad's work lies in its exposure of civilization as a source not merely of discontent but of iniquity. *Heart of Darkness* sets the precedent in modernism for a consideration of how that which is ill might be the viral antidote to the injustices of civilization by reorienting the civilized auditor or reader to how the construction of meaning serves to stabilize the self and other in often deeply destructive ways when language employs given narrative frames. Further, Marlow's revaluing of health and the technological innovations of medical science put into question the myth of control. Woolf follows Conrad in "On Being Ill" by questioning fundamental beliefs about sympathy, the ways in which bodies and thus individuals are valued, and theorizing how art might achieve the defamiliarized perspective illness creates. In contrast to the grey liminal space of Conrad's work, Woolf's essay turns in its final pages to nature, a snowfield which describes the journey of the self alone in illness. She then pivots to reimagine a scene from Augustus Hare's *The Story of Two Noble Lives*, suggesting a potentially feminist interpretation of the scene of Lady Waterford, a suppressed artist newly widowed, looking out at the landscape as her husband's hearse departs. Although Woolf keeps the darkness of Conrad's revelations at the heart of her fiction, in her embrace of modernist experimentation she celebrates the evanescence of life, valuing how meaninglessness ironically generates the effort to connect and create and the resulting different, difficult beauty of reinterpretation and creative engagement.

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Notes

³ Kimberly Engdahl Coates argues that Woolf's "On Being Ill" "posits an aesthetic strategy . . . braided with the complexities of phantoms, fancies, and symptoms that speaks to Woolf's lifelong preoccupation with her mother as muse, nurse, Madonna, and the quintessential Angel in the House" (1).

⁵ G. Thomas Couser has described the fraught boundaries of the terms "illness" and "disability." The two terms may be distinct but "have a reciprocal relation" (106). My goal in viewing *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of feminist disability studies is to point out how Conrad is emblematic of modernists who turned to the common experience of illness with an uncommon aesthetics to disrupt conceptual categories and create an alternative ethics.

⁶ One example germane to this analysis is Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), in which a young English woman voyages to South America and there takes a tour upriver into the jungle. The novel ends with her illness and death.

⁸ Johnson includes a key graph summarizing the death rate from influenza that shows a fairly even rate of mortality between 1837 and 1889, when "there were large scale epidemics of what was termed the 'Russian flu' during the early to mid-1890s" (17), and the following decades show a significant elevation of mortality until the dramatic spike of 1918-19.

¹⁰ Servitje compellingly shows how Conrad uses tropical disease to signify "the effects of European imperialism" (132), coining the term "coloniopathy" to describe the pathological effects of imperialism on natives. He argues that Conrad's personal experience with illness and understanding of tropical medicine enabled him in his work to destabilize Victorian miasmatic theories and their grounding in "imperial romantic narratives" (133) of the heroes of tropical medicine.

¹² Duteuil de la Rochere counters readings of *Heart of Darkness* as racist or sexist by examining its "complex 'body politics'" (186), arguing that in figuring the "anatomy of empire" as hollow and the African landscape "as an organic and feminized space," Conrad uses the tropes of "colonial binaries and hierarchies" to invert and undermine them."

¹³ In "On Being Ill," Woolf sardonically notes that capitalist efficiency has done away with sympathy, which is "nowadays is dispersed chiefly by the laggards and failures, women for the most part . . . who, having dropped out of the race, have time to spend upon fantastic and unprofitable excursions" (10).

¹⁵ Marlow's obsession with work is in part a commentary on how imperialist, capitalist work as opposed to the day-to-day work of natives or laborers is unnatural. As Susan Wendell notes, control and "idealization of the body is related in complex ways to the economic processes of a consumer society" (86).

¹⁸ It is the Russian's unacquisitive relationship to nature that grants him a kind of immunity. Although "pestilential" (47) to the pilgrims because of his susceptibility to Kurtz, Marlow notes his indifference to the Company and his loyal caretaking: "He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through." (70)

¹⁹ Servitje cites Achille Membe's concept of necropolitics, which describes a sovereign power's right to "define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" in a colonial space (134). Servitje analyzes this relationship by focusing on the technological advantages tropical medicine enabled for imperialist Britain.

²² Conrad recognized his readers' likely resistance, as the earnestness of his infamous line suggests: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see!* That—and no more: and it is everything! If I succeed, you shall find there according to your desserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand; and, perhaps, also the glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask" (147).

²³ Further, Marlow's nostalgia for the loss of "an unselfish belief in the idea" is cauterized by his recognition that any ideology requires barbarity, is enabled by what would be considered idolatrous rituals—such as holding aloft the Intended's sphere as sacred.

²⁴ In "Joseph Conrad," Woolf identifies Marlow's emergence in his work as a "shift [in] his angle of vision," making the "rough-and-ready distinction . . . that it is Marlow who comments, Conrad who creates" (231).

²⁵ Marlow has foreshadowed his illness earlier, in the middle of his discussion of the cannibals' remarkable restraint, noting that he perhaps "had a little fever . . . trifling before the onslaught which came in due course" (57).

²⁶ That Marlow would describe the message in this way is significant given Marlow's desire for a moral judgment not framed by European ideology (86).

²⁷ In "On Being Ill," Woolf similarly describes the way in which illness exposes the impossibility of perfect sympathy: "We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. . . . There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretense must be kept up and the effort renewed" (12).

²⁸ Dutheil de la Rochere does not include a close reading of Marlow's illness, but does consider the inversions of imperialist notions of infection and disease: "Although he has survived to tell the tale, Marlow bears the trace of the exposure to the disease of Kurtz's voice in his own feverish verbosity" (198). I argue that the horror of his encounter with "nothing" in illness suggests that, if Marlow is compelled to the "feverish verbosity" of telling his tale, he nonetheless uses the "infectious seductions of rhetoric" against the source of its "pestiferous absurdity" (*Heart of Darkness* 48).

³⁰ Just writes that *Heart of Darkness* sets forth the very questions that modernism sought to address: "namely, the speechlessness in the face of Western atrocities. Only by laying bare an empty abyss of language and not hiding one's inability to tell a story, Conrad believed, could one try to do justice to the negative effects of the narrow-minded and egocentric cultural values" (285).

³¹ In *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, Leslie Heywood persuasively argues that Conrad evidences modernism's anorexic aesthetic in equating the intellectual sharpness of "ascetics and philosophical or religious sages" (121) with "outward thinness." She suggests that Marlow, after his return, "becomes 'anorexic' through insisting upon this truth in which he does not want to participate" (131).