Things that Happen in the Dark: Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and Emmanuel Levinas on the Self and the Other

Hamza Karam Ally
University of King's College

When he began writing *Heart of Darkness* in 1898, Joseph Conrad had been home for eight years from the 1890 British trading mission up the Congo River that inspired the novel. Still a relatively young man, he had—mainly for the sake of his health—already taken his last major voyage in 1893 and spent his remaining years writing and reflecting on his youth abroad and at sea. His life was thus separated into two roughly equal halves, one tempestuous, the other ruminative; his time in the British Merchant Navy informed much of his writing as an older man. *Heart of Darkness*'s Captain Charles Marlow is based in large part on Conrad himself, or rather, a version of himself as Conrad the writer, recently married and a new father living in England, remembered Conrad the wanderer sailing on the Congo. In a 1917 author's note to the 1898 short story "Youth: A Narrative"—also narrated by Marlow—Conrad writes movingly of his relationship with the character who was both a memory and a shade of himself:

> [t]he man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened. For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when, in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony; but as we part at the end of a tale I am never sure that it may not be for the last time. Yet I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other. ("Youth" 3-4)

Heart of Darkness is to a degree, then, not only Conrad retracing his steps (or sails, rather), but also reliving an incarnation of himself frozen in a moment of emotional significance, a trauma perhaps, which bridged the two halves of his extraordinary life. Though he would base much of the novel and its successors on meticulous travel journals he kept on his voyages, the presence of his older self, walking alongside Marlow, listening, observing, recording, may also be, perhaps, one answer to the identity of

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL DECEMBER 2019 DÉCEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/19/46.4/561

the unknown frame narrator who hears Marlow's story; Conrad is effectively relating the story to himself, the sailor speaking to the writer.[1]

What is this experience, then, that gave Marlow his symbolic nascence as Conrad's fictional counterpart? *Heart of Darkness* is replete with possible traumatic births. While the writer had years to let his time on the Congo gestate in his own mind, his younger self experiences the events of the story in all their traumatic immediacy and urgency. Marlow is, by the end of the novel, almost as compromised and haunted as Kurtz, as demonstrated, for instance, by his reaction in the moments after lying to Kurtz's fiancée about the dying man's last words. The enormity of the lie crushes him, as he tells the narrator:

> It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark—too dark altogether. (92)

The novel ends with the narrator considering these words, as he looks "into the heart of an immense darkness" (92).

This article seeks to probe the nature of this moment, the sense of vertigo Marlow seems to feel on the precipice of darkness, and the meaning of the rhetorical 'darkness' itself. The question has, in one form or another, been already widely asked and answered, the most frequent interpretations being a version either of spiritual or psychic darkness (the "horror") or the opposition between the rational conceptualization of European 'light' and the unknown gloom of the new colonies.[2] Among the former kind, for instance, Albert J. Guerard asked in 1958: "The insistence on darkness, finally, and quite apart from ethical or mythical overtone, seems a right one for this extremely personal statement […] may it not also be connected, through one of the spirit's multiple disguises, with a radical fear of death, that other darkness?" (335). Less charitable critics, such as Chinua Achebe, have denounced "darkness" as a trope that reveals a deeply exploitative rendering of the Congolese, as a mere backdrop for the moral crisis experienced by the imperialist, as Achebe puts it, "props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (789). Ian Watt's impressionist reading of Conrad's darkness, meanwhile, explores the novel's deep metaphysical, perhaps mystical vein (185), noting Conrad's own comment in an 1897 letter on his work about trying to "get through the veil of details at the essence of life" ("To Helen Watson" 334).

Still, *Heart of Darkness* by and large keeps its secrets to itself, so that we are left rather double-visioned about what exactly Marlow (and Conrad) encountered in the darkness. Marlow and Kurtz spend the novel's most important moments searching the dark, or the shadows thrown by firelight, for something they never surrender. As if confessing, Kurtz at last abruptly tells Marlow, "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death" (83), but never states what the darkness is made of, or why death must be

met in the dark. Marlow's last memory of Kurtz, as he is about to deliver his message to Kurtz's fiancée, is similarly murky, alternating images of Kurtz swallowing and being swallowed by darkness:

> I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived—a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence. The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshipers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness. (87-88)

Whatever else this passage may mean, it suggests an anxiety, a tension between conquering and being conquered, as if there is in darkness some secret struggle which disappears by daylight. When Marlow leaves the jungle after Kurtz's death, he is greatly changed by this unnamed conflict which, crucially, he describes not as an education—as some acquired wisdom to retain—but rather as an unknowing, an unlearning of something false: "They were intruders," he says of the people he observes in Brussels upon his return, "whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew" (85). It is, in other words, as if Marlow leaves behind some part of his former nature in the jungle, and that returning to the world afterward, as Conrad may have felt in his own life after his last voyage, requires a sustained belief in something the darkness had shown to be an artifice, an illusion. On the Congo River and in the jungle, both Marlow and Conrad find a kind of second birth that is actually a death, a zero point at which the writer and his avatar decussate, a serrated edge between sailor and novelist.

The twentieth-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose work chiefly concerns the relationship of the self to the other, described as the basis for his phenomenological schema a quite similar, pervading darkness which proverbially underwrites the world of being and form. The latter, the world consisting of distinction, recognition, and individuation, always exists precariously at the edge of the former, as the twilit world does on the verge of night. Like the ephemeral course of the day, the permanence of the world of form, in which the self and the other are 'stable,' so that we may distinguish one from the other, is similarly dubious, even illusory.

In his well-known ethical philosophy, Levinas declares that "metaphysics precedes ontology" (*Totality* 43); the spontaneous encounter with the other pre-empts the 'I' of identity, which of course requires reflection, and therefore belongs to the world of form, the daylit world. Levinas's great intervention was to introduce an ethical responsibility which is neither a result of morals or laws—being similarly reflective—nor dependent on reciprocity. A phenomenological ethics, Levinas alleges, is both the beginning of one's relationship to the other and inseparable from one's spontaneous

experience of otherness.

The setting for this encounter is the ever present and always immanent darkness of *non*-form, what Levinas refers to as the *il y a* (literally, the *there is*).[3] In *Existence and Existents*, he describes the feeling of dissolution, the losing of one's grip on oneself, as not an incidental effect of otherness but as a coming into contact with the *il y a*. The *il y a* is the counterpart of form, both preceding and transcending; it is chaos within order, whole without subdivision. If the world we perceive is made recognizable by the light of day, the *il y a* is a nightfall, a seeping of everything back into its unsorted, indistinguishable form, as Levinas clarifies:

> indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness. There is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In this ambiguity the menace of pure and simple presence, of the *there is*, takes form. Before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one's shell. One is exposed […] What we call the *I* is itself submerged by the night. (*Existence* 58-59)

The encounter of self and other, each compelling the other toward ethics while both are always on the verge of slipping back into the formless *il y a*, is the foundation for what Levinas calls the "hypostasis" or coming together of the self, the 'I' of individual subjectivity, in the first place. The metaphysical sovereignty of the self is thus always pitted against the threat of this encroaching darkness, the *there is* of pure anonymity.

Ihor Junyk reads *Heart of Darkness* through Levinas as a potential way out of the novel's narrative enactment of the master-slave dialectic famously described by G.W.F. Hegel. Kurtz's thwarted Hegelian desire to dominate the native Congolese and the world around him in many ways defines his character. "I saw him open his mouth wide," Marlow remembers; "it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (72). This same aspect becomes his eventual undoing, when the horror evinced by the native other leaves him fatally emaciated. Junyk, however, considers Marlow's appearance as a disruption of Kurtz's desire to consume, the possibility of an ethical relation in which each must resist the temptation to enslave or subsume the other. Junyk reads Marlow's encounter with Kurtz as one that instead opens up a space for a radical ethics: "Unlike the harlequin, who is entirely under Kurtz's domination, Marlow maintains his distance, irony and autonomy […] abandon[ing] the anticipated Hegelian dialectical battle of mastery and slavery. Acknowledging Kurtz's degradation, he assumes radical responsibility for him" (Junyk 144).

The stakes of this encounter are established by the novel's structure and by Marlow's own early history, which heavily foreshadows the oncoming night of the *il y a*. Marlow's journey has from the outset a sense of inevitability. Remembering his childhood, he tells the narrator of his early fascination with maps, and particularly with "South America, or Africa, or Australia [… the] blank spaces on the earth" (16). Kurtz in a sense represents the fulfilment of Marlow's lifelong quest for blankness; in other words, for a negative space at the center of meaning toward which the latter is oriented throughout the novel. Concealed deep within this blankness, Kurtz

is, for Marlow, the bearer of a secret he already knows, one that takes the form of a sustained, nihilistic silence that draws Marlow into the darkness. The search for Kurtz offers Marlow an opportunity in his adult life to confirm what he had suspected as a child: that the world represented by the lines on the map—"civilization" or "modernity"—is a false and translucent edifice. He is quick to anoint all that sees in the jungle as truth, but truth "stripped of its cloak of time" (47). For Marlow, the darkness of the jungle plunges him into a terrible but purifying epistemological blankness, where no modern contrivances dare enter: "Principles? Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake" (47). Marlow's encounter with the jungle, and later with Kurtz, takes the form of Revelation, but the Word he receives erases the world outside rather than offering any guidance about living in it authentically.

It is this narrative refrain, of the truth of the world that ends where the truth of the jungle begins, which makes *Heart of Darkness* at least as much about Marlow's psyche as Kurtz's. As he travels further up the river, Marlow overtly compares his own fading epistemological confidence with the Fall and corruption of Man. "Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (44), he reflects. In this tableau, the Congolese become a mere prop, the "prehistoric man" (46) who calls Marlow and his compatriots back to something squandered and half-remembered. Again, Marlow expresses a sense of regret at having been displaced from some secret the Congolese possess which can only be rediscovered further upriver: "[w]e could not understand [them] because we were too far, and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories" (46). Marlow is propelled forward by the possibility of a reckoning and redemption, not only for himself, but also for himself as Man. As Junyk writes, *Heart of Darkness* moves "not only forward in space, but also back in time, to a primordial era […] what can only be described as an archetypal journey into a veritable underworld. The forthcoming encounter with Kurtz, then, is presented, not as an ordinary meeting, but as a primal scene of recognition, a primordial, mythical event" (143). It is in this setting that Marlow discovers Kurtz, who has ostensibly attained and been destroyed by the confirmation of what he, Marlow, had long pursued: the *il y a*, a blank space, the proverbial heart of darkness.

The obliqueness of Kurtz's last words become entirely consistent, from this perspective, with its intention; the origins and characteristics of the "horror" are unnameable precisely because the *il y a* exists beyond the purview of language or signification. Marlow begins his search for Kurtz with only a name and struggles to hold on to its meaning in the alternating silences and cacophonies of the jungle. "[Kurtz] was just a word for me" (37), he admits; yet, it is the word that sustains him, a monosyllabic utterance by which to navigate. By the time of their meeting, the word has been degraded to mere sound: "A voice. He was little more than a voice" (60). After Kurtz's death, Marlow is left with not even a voice but a "cry […] not [Kurtz's] own voice, but the echo" (85). Like Kurtz's last words, Conrad's great revelation must

remain a half-remembered dream, able to be glimpsed only out of the corner of the eye, as the *il y a* can be spoken about (if at all) only by not pointing directly at it: not with word, but with echo. This is the methodology by which *Heart of Darkness* "questions and undercuts the picture of a universe with secure coordinates and absolute reference points" (Junyk 148). Marlow at last gets his wish, for a world that now appears to him as it was rendered on the maps he once pored over, as a blank space.

The text gives several hints that the encounters between Kurtz and Marlow occurs in this unmapped space, in the *il y a*. Blindly seeking each other out in the dark, they seemingly re-enact Levinas' encounter with the other: "[Kurtz] was alone," Marlow recalls, "and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air" (80). The dimensions of the world seem to fade around them, between form and non-form, as Marlow watches Kurtz verge on dissipating: "He rose, unsteady, long, pale, indistinct, like a vapour exhaled by the earth […] misty and silent before me" (78). Marlow is left shaken by this impression, as though Kurtz had exposed him to the world as it truly is, a blank space. After Kurtz's death, Marlow even describes his vision of death as "a vision of greyness without form" (84). Having met Kurtz and outlasted him, Marlow is left to abide within the *il y a* alone.

Conrad's is only one possible literary incarnation of this other, deeper darkness. The analogy of an impenetrable night or transforming darkness does of course occur frequently in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European literary canon, perhaps unsurprisingly in parallel to western colonial adventures. As in Conrad, these occurrences are commonly read as a rendering of Orientalist dread or as a critique of it. My interest, though, lies in the darkness metaphor and its specific deployment. What can we learn from how darkness is written elsewhere in the modern European literary canon?

Like *Heart of Darkness*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) chooses as its primary metaphor an image of the unknown represented by the colonies. The particulars in *Passage* are different, of course; Congo's place is taken by colonial India and the Congo River is swapped for the titular "passage," the allegorically rich Marabar cave system in which the novel's key moments occur. Darkness, however, seems to haunt Forster's novel equally. *Passage*'s enduring question is the ambiguity of exactly what occurs in the Marabar caves and on whose account. Adela Quested, the young British woman visiting India, accuses Doctor Aziz, her Indian companion, of sexually assaulting her in the caves, but later recants after claiming that she was confused and distressed by a mysterious echo in the darkness. Like Conrad's "horror," Forster's echo is complex, a kind of symbolic key without an obvious lock to match. And like Marlow leaving the river, Adela and her prospective mother-in-law Mrs. Moore leave the caves haunted by what they learned (or unlearned) in the darkness. When Marlow returns to Brussels only to find a grating "pretence," he resembles Mrs. Moore's extreme disillusionment before leaving India for London, her faith somehow shaken by the echo in the caves: "Her Christian tenderness had gone, or had developed into a hardness, a just irritation against the human race" (Forster 187).

Mrs. Moore's disorientation and disillusionment in India cannot be treated separately from her Anglican roots and devoutness, which significantly inform the identity she carries into the Marabar caves. The caves, as Sunil Kumar Sarker has observed, reveal to her an ancient and "supra-sensuous" (344) mysticism, a counterpoint to the conservative "Northamptonshire church where she had worshipped" (Forster 242). Her preparedness, or lack thereof, for this experience is foreshadowed in the text before the incident in the caves, when she extols to Ronny—her son and Adela's fiancé – the limitlessness of universal Christian love, the message of a God whose reach extends into the deepest darkness: "God…is…love…God has put us on earth to love our neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, *even in India*" (46; emphasis mine). The caves, in their darkness and indifference, represent a stark delimitation to this notion, one that severely shakes her faith. What do Marlow and Mrs. Moore find, or lose, in the darkness that makes life afterwards feel so false? What could explain this similarly misanthropic, even nihilistic turn in the two characters?

The echo in the caves is *Passage*'s key allusion. Forster describes the sound as somehow both subsuming and formless, swallowing all other sounds while also hollowing them out:

> The echo in a Marabar cave […] is entirely devoid of distinction. Whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies, and quivers up and down the walls until it is absorbed into the roof. "Bourn" is the sound as far as the human alphabet can express it, or "bou-oum," or "ou-boum"—utterly dull. Hope, politeness, the blowing of a nose, the squeak of a boot, all produce "bourn." (137)

For Mrs. Moore, the caves come to define India; later, as she leaves for England, she imagines coconut palms in Asirgarh mocking her: "So you thought the echo was India; you took the Marabar caves as final?" (198), as though the land itself is rebuking this thought. The sound of this rebuke for Mrs. Moore, like Kurtz's "horror" for Marlow, is the "ou-boum" echo. In a sense, both sounds can be interpreted as the opposite of the Word, an unmaking of the world. The echo negates speech, reason, ontology and faith, preeminent over each of these.

As several critics have noted, "ou-boum" suggests, phonetically, an antithesis to the sacred Sanskrit incantation ॐ (*Auṁ/Ouṁ/Oṁ*). Jeane Noordhoff Olson comments, "The sound of the echo […] as Forster transliterates it is not quite the three-syllable mantra—'a-u-m-' or 'o-u-m'—often chanted in Hindu worship […] Indeed, Forster's interpretation seems a deliberate devaluation of that holy sound, a primal scream that only confirms the absence of any kind of god or spiritual comfort for Mrs. Moore" (163). Where ॐ (*Auṁ/Ouṁ/Oṁ*) refers to an immutable, encompassing all-ness, "ou-boum" seems ostensibly to refer to a maw, an imminent nothingness, the sound of an event horizon. Mrs. Moore emerges from the confrontation with this imminence with a sense of spiritual evisceration. Syed Anwarul Huq observes that "the monotonous echo is taken by Mrs. Moore to be a devaluation of life and her own beliefs in Christianity. In India, her relationship to her Christian God has altered in a manner that has traded presence for absence" (36).

I contend that what Mrs. Moore and Marlow encounter is not an ancient indifference to European reason, but rather an unspecific, unassimilable *infiniteness*, a loss of individual identity and subjectivity which neither is able to withstand. Forster confers almost supernatural powers to the echo, as evidenced in the language he uses to describe its effect on Mrs. Moore:

> The echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life. Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." If one had spoken vileness in that place, or quoted lofty poetry, the comment would have been the same—"ou-bourn." If one had spoken with the tongues of angels and pleaded for all the unhappiness and misunderstanding in the world, past, present, and to come, for all the misery men must undergo whatever their opinion and position, and however much they dodge or bluff—it would amount to the same, the serpent would descend and return to the ceiling. (139)

The recurring image Forster uses to describe the echo is the last one in this passage, a kind of devouring serpent that indiscriminately swallows all intonation and intention, rendering them indistinguishable. Elsewhere, Forster uses "worm" instead of serpent (137, 196), perhaps meaning to invoke both the primitive *and* the supernatural, the "wyrm" of various European/Norse traditions. The serpent/worm feeds on sounds, subsuming them into itself, but in doing so it does not destroy sounds but rather envelopes and composes them, into a kind of infinite chorus: "if several people talk at once, an overlapping howling noise begins, echoes generate echoes, and the cave is stuffed with a snake composed of small snakes, which writhe independently" (137). The resulting ou-boum is thus *both* all sounds and no sound, ॐ (*Aum̐/Oum̐/Om̐*) and nothingness, echo and silence.

The serpent, of course, is a multifaceted symbol. Forster does make a passing but significant allusion to Genesis, to a kind of primeval malevolence that speaks through the echo: "What had spoken to [Mrs. Moore] in that scoured-out cavity of the granite? What dwelt in the first of the caves? Something very old and very small. Before time, it was before space also. Something snub-nosed, incapable of generosity—the undying worm itself" (196). The Satanic reference in this passage and Mrs. Moore's subsequent loss of faith after coming in contact with an enduring, ancient power—in a British colony at that—are tempting to interpret as a parable, perhaps an allegory for European Great War disillusionment. It also, again, opens *Passage* up to Orientalist understandings, in much the same way as "horror" can be read as an expression of being overcome by the impermeability of the Old World. I believe, however, that the serpent, like the echo it produces, is a more complex symbol, an indirect refrain of Conrad's primal darkness in which unseen struggles occur.

The dual nature of the Marabar serpent, its ability to contain within itself inherent contradictions, anarchic noises, and disharmonious voices and to assimilate them into a greater, self-sustaining whole is at least as reminiscent of the ouroboros, the pan-cultural mythological serpent eating its own tail as a symbol of both infinite

cyclicality and of the 'completeness' and self-sustenance of the universe,[4] as it is of the snake of Genesis.[5] The ouroboros is suggested both by the "snakes within snakes" description, and by the "undying worm," which both swallows sound and produces echo in a feedback loop—the cycle of birth and death and rebirth.

This evocation can be seen as a bridge between Conrad and Forster. *Heart of Darkness* too, in one instance, invokes a snake to anthropomorphize its central conduit. In his recollections, Marlow at one point describes himself as a child, again fantasizing over his maps, seeing a serpentine Congo River beckoning to him: "a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land […] it fascinated me as a snake would a bird—a silly little bird […] The snake had charmed me" (16). The latter half of this passage reads like a direct allusion to the snake of Genesis, while the first half, the snake that coils over land, is reminiscent of ouroboros. Like Forster's snake that swallows all utterances, Conrad's depiction of the Congo River as a snake represents a great maw, a returning of things to their original, formless state within the body of the snake.[6] This is not, critically, interchangeable with the imagined darkness of some distant, Oriental world; it is, rather, the preternatural gloom that contains infinities, a universal soup from which nothing is excluded or distinct.

Is this the "horror," then; the experience of the self being first unmade and then assimilated into the darkness, into the body of the serpent? The primordial darkness here also echoes Genesis 1:2, "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep," a place not of bodies interacting, but rather of space *before* individuation, a metaphysical abyss opened up by the very encounter with otherness disembodied where otherness itself is the original adversary. Carl Jung wrote of the ouroboros as a symbol of the unconscious and unresolved struggle between the self, with its own internal contradictions, and its symbolic "shadow," a resolution or synthesis of the self and the not-self:

> In the age-old image of the uroboros lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process […] [t]he uroboros is a dramatic symbol for the integration and assimilation of the opposite, i.e., of the shadow. This 'feed-back' process is at the same time a symbol of immortality, since it is said of the uroboros that he slays himself and brings himself to life, fertilizes himself and gives birth to himself. He symbolizes the One, who proceeds from the clash of opposites, and he therefore constitutes the secret of the prima materia which, as a projection, unquestionably stems from man's unconscious. (Jung 365)

Forster's undying worm appears to take after many of these characteristics. To return to the distinction between *Auṁ* and "ou-boum" for a moment, the worm as ouroboros suggests that the difference between the two sounds is akin to the difference between the Sanskrit *Ātman* and *Anātman*, literally 'self'/ 'soul' and 'non-self.' Where *Auṁ* evokes the Hindu concept of *Ātman*, the individual manifestation of universal Brahma consciousness of which the self is an expression, "ou-boum" can be under-

stood as the *Anātman*, the opposite, an indication of the Buddhist concept of the non-self/non-distinction of the self—more succinctly, a resonating of an emptiness rather than a presence. In this sense, "ou-boum" is the inverse of *Aum̐*, not the sound of the self realizing its place in a transcendent 'all,' but rather an evacuation of self and an assimilation into a consuming emptiness, or darkness,[7] as in a "snake composed of small snakes." This is the emptiness that Marlow and Mrs. Moore encounter in the darkness, not merely the fear of the alien or inhuman other, but rather the abyss of "ou-boum," the dissolution—phenomenological and metaphysical—of the separateness of the self and the other.

Like Marlow and Kurtz's conversations, Mrs. Moore's exposure to the *il y a* occurs in an utter darkness that erases identity and form, self and other. As well as evoking darkness as the material of the *il y a*, Levinas also associates it with a kind of heavy silence or, more accurately, a pregnant, primigenial white noise or "rustling" that both contains and nulls all other sound. The 'allness' that the *il y a* represents is analogous, for Levinas, to a "rumbling silence, something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the silence were a noise […] a noise returning after every negation of this noise" (*Ethics* 48-49). Compare this, for instance, to the way Marlow describes Kurtz's voice during their encounter: "far off and yet loud, like a hail through a speaking-trumpet" (79). More notably, when Marlow finally meets Kurtz's fiancée and she asks him about Kurtz's last words, Conrad, three times in one sentence, uses the word "whisper," a disembodied echo of Kurtz's terrible realization: "[t]he dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind" (93). Marlow, hearing the universe itself "rustling," cannot bring himself to utter the words.

The similarity of this rustling or whisper to Forster's *ou-boum* is intriguing; like the whisper, the sound that traumatizes Mrs. Moore is both featureless, "entirely devoid of distinction" (137), and impenetrable in its meaninglessness: "whatever is said, the same monotonous noise replies" (137). One might imagine this noise, as a helpful if inexact comparison, as akin to the cosmic microwave background radiation left over from the early universe, a constant hiss beneath all other sound or a canvas upon which all sound exists. In this primeval world, Levinas concludes, the rustling becomes audible again: "the whole is open upon us […] Darkness does not only modify their contours for vision; it reduces them to undetermined, anonymous being, which sweats in them […] The rustling of the *there is* is horror" (*Existence* 59-60). If this rustling, the *ou-boum*, is the sound of the abyss of the *il y a*, darkness is its corresponding visage, and the other is the bearer of its terrible message. As Michael Fagenblat has put it, "it is the transcendence of the anonymous and/or the divine that is the real and non-ethical source of (ethical) subjectivity" (299).

The frightening possibility that permeates Marlow's encounter with the jungle and Mrs. Moore's with the cave is not the darkness that swallows light, but rather the more primal terror evoked by *il y a*; not death, but the loss of selfhood, of distinctness

and freedom from the immanent, anonymous *there is*. The jungle's impenetrability incites in Marlow, as in Kurtz, the horror of his own vanishing subjectivity, its fragility; as Levinas deems it, the "horror […] which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'" (*Existence* 60).

The menacing jungle, and the gloom of the cave system, each seem to manifest the night of Levinas's metaphor, finding particular resonance in actual or metaphorical darkness. That darkness, rather than obscuring what is real or the absence of light, seems instead to disclose what is most intimate, as if belying the artificial separations of the day. Kurtz's horror and Forster's *ou-boum* are both utterances indicating the imminence of the *il y a*; as if echoing The Word, each contains within it both the prelingual and the non-lingual. As the axis on which each novel pivots, each seems to open into an abyss with neither language nor individuation, a primeval place that bears a deep and substantive resemblance to the *il y a*.

Viewed through this prism, the figures of Kurtz and Mrs. Moore seem to converge; each approaches the corners of realization unawares, and each realization is too much to be borne or even looked upon directly, dislocating and overwhelming their subjectivities. Crucially, each character's crisis occurs through confrontation or conversation with the other, literally and symbolically. This last commonality makes an intertextual reading of the novels—as Levinasian encounters with otherness—especially useful, as each character seems to stagger between ethical responsibility towards the other and the consuming *il y a*. The defining moment for each character is a version of the same unnamed, and unnameable, realization: the vertigo of experiencing oneself consumed, falling into the abyss.

Notes

1. See Adam Hochschild's extensive exploration, in the "Meeting Mr. Kurtz" chapter from his book *King Leopold's Ghost*, of Conrad's excursion on the Congo River and its many parallels to Marlow's journey.

2. Edward Said's reading, in which he notes the tension between the novel's imperialist "aesthetics" and Conrad's "self-conscious" and ambivalent posture towards imperialism, is most notable.

3. Though it stubbornly evades language, the *il y a* may perhaps be imagined as a depersonalized allness, a Tao-like fabric of all being, alternatively everything and nothingness, distinct but not unrelated to Martin Heidegger's *Dasein* (Being-in-the-world).

4. The Norse sea serpent Jörmungandr, for example, encircles the earth gripping its own tail and, by releasing it, will begin Ragnarök—the cataclysmic death of the present world.

5. One might find closer Biblical parallels to the "wyrm" toward which Forster may be pointing in the great sea serpents that either precipitated Creation or else threatened humankind and the Created world with a collapse back into (often diluvial) chaos. The Book of Job includes a "Leviathan," possibly a rendering of the earlier Canaanite *Lotan* or the Babylonian *Tiamat*, the primordial god of chaos. The sea dragon/serpent *Rahab* referenced in Isaiah 51 and recurring frequently in the Psalms is likely to be of particular interest, possibly representing Egypt during the exodus and/or the primeval serpent vanquished by Yahweh to bring forth the universe from its chaotic preform (see Job 26:12,

"He stirreth up the sea with His power, and by His understanding He smiteth through Rahab").

6. In psychoanalytic terms, this return to an "undifferentiated" state also reminds us of Julia Kristeva's distinction between the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* stages in early childhood. The latter, Kristeva's term for the state of consciousness before it recognizes itself as a singular "speaking subject" through the repressive intervention of identity, language, and socialization, is associated not coincidentally with instinct rather than reason, and with a sort of prelingual indistinctness of subjectivity.

7. That these two principles resemble each other in their opposition to each other is of course, not coincidental, and may indeed be the underlying point.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1977, pp. 782-94.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness & Tales of Unrest*. 1897-99. Arcturus Publishing, 2010.

---. "To Helen Watson." 27 Jan. 1897. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume I: 1861-1897*, edited by Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies, Cambridge UP, 1983, p. 334.

---. *Youth/Heart of Darkness/The End of the Tether*. 1917. Penguin Books, 1995.

Fagenblat, Michael. "Back to the Other Levinas: Reflections Prompted by Alain P. Toumayan's *Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of Difference in Blanchot and Levinas*." *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique*, vol. 10, 2005, pp. 298–313.

Forster, E.M. *A Passage to India*. 1924. Penguin Classics, 2005.

Guerard, Albert J. "The Journey Within." *Heart of Darkness Fourth Critical Edition*, edited by Paul B. Armstrong, W.W. Norton & Co., 2006, pp. 326-35.

Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

Huq, Syed A. "Forster's Vision of the Marabar Caves." *Stamford Journal of English*, vol. 4, 2008, pp. 30-40.

Jung, Carl G. "Rex and Regina." *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung Volume 14: Mysterium Coniunctionis 2nd Edition*. Translated by Richard F.C. Hull, Princeton UP, 1977, pp. 258-381.

Junyk, Ihor. "Beyond the Dialectic: Conrad, Levinas, and the Scene of Recognition." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2008, pp. 140-59.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1969. Edited by Leon S. Roudiez, translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1980.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillipe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne UP, 1985.

---. *Existence and Existents*. 1947. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978.

---. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne UP, 1961.

Olson, Jeane N. *E.M. Forster's Spiritual Journey in His Life and Works*. Self-published, 2016.

Sarker, Sunil K. *E.M. Forster's* A Passage to India. Atlantic Publishers, 2007.

Said, Edward. "Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*." *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, 1994, pp. 19-30.

Watt, Ian P. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. U of California P, 1979.