TRANSLATING THE OTHER: MARLOW'S DISCOURSE BETWEEN IMPERIAL RHETORIC AND PRIMARY ORALITY

ANA CRISTINA BĂNICERU
West University of Timişoara

Abstract: *The present paper attempts to see what determines Marlow's difficulty to turn his Congolese experience into language. Therefore, I argue that Marlow's storytelling collapses because at the core of his discourse there is the unknown semantic universe of the other. In the "heart of darkness", on the banks of the Congo River, there stands an unknown language, the language of the natives which is known only by Kurtz. Thus it becomes impossible for Marlow to translate it and incorporate it in his story.*
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1. Introduction

Apparently, in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad recreates the archetypal storytelling scene; the storyteller is surrounded by his listeners and the time is "ripe" for telling stories full of adventures. However, at a closer inspection, both speaker and listener are isolated from each other, and the act of storytelling is a solitary performance. Marlow seems to be more concerned with finding the right words, which could help him voice his unique experience, while his listeners, especially the first narrator, fall in the same linguistic trap as they "listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word" (Conrad 1995:55). Although he is a wanderer, an adventurer, Marlow returns home with an incommunicable experience. From the very beginning, he is torn between his urge to share this experience and his inability to voice it, between his powerful storytelling drive and his linguistic struggle.

One can speculate that what Marlow experienced in Congo belongs to the realm of the unnameable, thus falling outside language. Therefore, many readings of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* have dealt extensively with Marlow's linguistic crisis (Brooks (1984), Miller (1985) and Mulhern (2006)). Their interpretations most often, but not exclusively, dwell on the linguistic implications of Marlow's philosophical speculations, namely that language fails to describe and translate experience. Thus "the unnameable", with which Marlow confronts himself, is given existentialist, but vague dimensions. Conrad's favourite storyteller, according to these readings, becomes a prisoner of linguistic surfaces. On the other hand, Goonetilleke (2003:42) argues that "language represents not a failed attempt to capture experience but rather an effort to suggest an experience for which normal language is inadequate". Therefore, Marlow's linguistic crisis is a direct result of both his unusual African experience and of his need to cover an experiential,

cultural and linguistic void. In this context, a better variant for the word "void" could be the more philosophically charged term "absence". The above-mentioned word "unnameable" is a partial equivalent of "absence".

Instances of conspicuous absence are numerous in *Heart of Darkness*. Most of the time, they seem to polarise around two focal points: the empty imperialist rhetoric and the unknown semantic world of the native Africans. Marlow, the storyteller, has to find ways to narrate and incorporate them in his narrative. If the African discourse is perceived as "savage discord", as meaningless noise, the imperialist discourse is seen as excessive oratory or empty, propagandistic discourse.

2. The Rhetoric of the Empire

At the beginning of the novella, the first narrator's extended monologue seems to prepare the readers for the story of Britain's great imperial expansion. This is a tale which everybody on the board of Nellie seems to be expecting; an epic narrative of a glorious past about "the great knights-errant of the sea" and "all the men of whom the nation is proud" (Conrad 1995:32). The Thames seems the perfect place to start a sea story since it bears the memory of the "great spirit of the past":

> And indeed nothing is easier for a man who has, as the phrase goes, 'followed the sea' with reverence and affection, that to evoke the great spirit of the past upon the lower reaches of the Thames. The tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, *crowded with memories of men and ships* it had borne to the rest of home or to the battles of the sea. It had known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin*, knights all, titled and untitled—the great knights-errant of the sea.* (Conrad 1995:32, my emphasis)

Thus, the unnamed narrator establishes a connection between those who "followed the sea", a community to which he himself belongs, and the great narratives of the empire. The rhetoric of the Empire is skilfully exposed as a farce due to the fact that the first narrator's discourse is based entirely on memories. I am referring here to a collective memory that creates and propagates myths: "the tidal current runs to and fro in its unceasing service, crowded with memories of men and ships". In order to deconstruct the unnamed narrator's story of progress and civilisation, Marlow, from the very beginning, announces a different narrative, which is set in contrast to the "possible" story initiated by the first narrator. "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 1995:33). Although the first narrator did not voice his thoughts out loud, Marlow seems to start a dialogue with him, as they both mention the Knights:

> Light came out of this river since—*you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds.* We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday. Imagine the feelings of a commander of a fine—what d'ye call 'em?—trireme in the Mediterranean, ordered suddenly to the north; run overland across the Gauls in a hurry; put in charge of one of these craft the legionaries—a wonderful lot of handy men they must have been, too—used to build, apparently by the hundred, in a month or two, if we may believe what we read. (Conrad 1995:33, my emphasis)

Marlow invites his listeners to embark on a different time travel, further back in time, when Great Britain was not a powerful empire, but an unknown territory to be conquered by the emissaries of The Roman Empire. Hence, he describes a place endowed with all the

characteristics of Otherness: "the very end of the world" in "the midst of the incomprehensible" where the "mysterious life of the wilderness ... stirs ... in the hearts of the wild men" and death skulks in the air. Marlow exposes the falsity of the imperialistic discourse by stating that the now colonisers used to be the colonised Other, meaning savage and impenetrable. This depiction actually parallels the description Marlow will give to another encounter, that between Western Europe, this time represented by the Belgium Empire, and Africa, though nowhere is there any direct reference to either Africa or Belgium.

Marlow goes even further and questions the written word which is in fact at the very foundation of empire and civilisation. As shown by Levi-Strauss (1976:392) and Jack Goody (2000:163), the written word is an indispensable instrument for propagating the imperialist ideology. At one point in the novella, when Marlow finds the Russian's book entitled *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, the written word and the book are associated with solid ground and familiarity. "I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship" (Conrad 1995:66). The written book apparently stands for the concrete world of facts; in its fixity, it seemingly embodies constancy and stability. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there stands Kurtz's report.

> It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. Seventeen pages of close writing he had found time for! ...The peroration was magnificent, though difficult to remember, you know. It gave me the notion of an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence. It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words. There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page... "Exterminate all the brutes". (Conrad 1995:77)

The report is the perfect embodiment of the narrative of empire; it is eloquent, pompous, myth-making, but empty. It is also the paradoxical combination between the so-called noble ideas, which redeemed the process of colonisation, and utter cruelty. The same insanity and absurdity, which characterise all Marlow's encounters with the instruments of imperialist power, are to be found in the pages of Kurtz's report. If the myth-making discourse of the unnamed narrator is actually present in the novella, Kurtz's report appears as 'absence' in Marlow's story. All we have, in fact, is Marlow's own vague commentaries on it. Even though he considers the report "magnificent" and "vibrating with eloquence", he deems it "too high-strung" and "difficult to remember".

3. The Discourse of the Other

Parallel to and seemingly in opposition to the narrative of civilisation, there is the world of *primary orality*, the world Marlow finds on the banks of the Congo River. Ong (2002:6) defines primary orality as the orality "untouched by literacy", hence not influenced by writing and print. J. Hoogestraat (1998:51) argues that Ong's category of primary orality can be seen as a way of recreating the language and culture of those whose language was assimilated or has not survived because of the colonial oppression. However, reimagining and recreating primary orality can be considered an idealistic enterprise, since according to Tyler (1987:98), a purely oral culture survives only as an absence in the written record of an ethnographer. To him, the Ongian primary orality and Derridean "absence", which Derrida defines in *Of Grammatology* (1976), are almost identical: "[the] oral voice of natives becomes the absent centre around which the text revolves and without which it would not exist" (Tyler 1987:98). The language of the natives becomes another void around which Marlow constructs his story.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow discovers a world of powerful, incomprehensive sounds; a world which communicates differently and appears too intense for him. This is the realm of excessive aurality which Ong (2002:44, 45) describes as combative, prone to physical and verbal aggression.

> Before it stopped running with a muffled rattle, *a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation*, soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. *A complaining clamour*, modulated in *savage discords*, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don't know how it struck the others: to me it seemed *as though the mist itself had screamed*, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a *hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking*, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to *the nearly as appalling and excessive silence*. (Conrad 1995:67, my emphasis)

Words like "complaining clamour", "savage discords", "tumultuous and mournful uproar", "intolerably excessive shrieking" denote a word exclusively dominated by sound. To Marlow, there is honesty in the "the passionate uproar" (Conrad 1995:63) and a "dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it", which even the now "civilised" people could have comprehended in "the night of first ages" (Conrad 1995:64). Certainly, Marlow romanticises the natives when he sees them as belonging "to the beginnings of time" (Conrad 1995:49).

The auditory construction of the above quoted scenes accommodates the interest modernist writers develop for the complexity of sounds, what Cuddy-Keane calls "modernist soundscapes" (2008:382). *Heart of Darkness* is haunted by powerful sounds, from Marlow's voice to the clamorous world of the natives and to Kurtz's lingering cry. Powerful sounds and obsessive voices are evoked with an almost maniacal obsession. But excessive sound is synonymous with the collapse of language or its descent into meaninglessness or madness. As Marlow tries to incorporate the others' discourses especially Kurtz's into his own storytelling, he is confronted with the impossibility to render them into meaningful words. Thus, his storytelling becomes an agonising search for the right word.

The "dim suspicion" that the natives' boisterous discourse might have meaning frightens Marlow. Kristeva's description of *abjection* seems to perfectly illustrate the storyteller's controversial attitude towards the African people. According to her (1982:6), the abject is both "unapproachable and intimate". The world of the natives is remote yet close, strange yet familiar, and its familiarity seems more disturbing than its outlandish characteristics: "what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yourself – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad 1995:64). What upsets and creates abjection is "[the] in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982:4). This mixture and continuous oscillation between the familiar and the outlandish could also render the discourse of alterity impossible to translate. Marlow has at his disposal the necessary linguistic tools to describe his Congolese experience, he might guess at the signification of the noise of the drums played by the natives, yet he fails to do so.

Griffith (1995:31) writes about the psychological tension triggered by utter displacement and the contact with the so-called "primitive" cultures. This is the drama of cross-cultural contacts, which could ultimately foster anxiety syndromes. In *Heart of Darkness* we can talk about Marlow's interpretative anxiety when it comes to incorporating in his story a reality "that lies beyond its own epistemologically constrained field of vision" (Parry 2005:50). Marlow's reinterpretation or fictionalisation of Africa resembles what Christopher Miller (1986:14) calls the "Africanist discourse", a narrative re-creation and re-imagination of a phantasmagoric and

quasi-mythological Africa, a mixture between realism and allegory. The surreal description of the African landscape is a common symptom of cultural dislocation.

> Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you— smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, 'Come and find out.' (Conrad 1995:40-41)

The Africa Marlow describes is full of signs he cannot decipher. He confesses that he fails to interpret the meaning of "the roll of the drums" (Conrad 1995:62); he also did not know whether the "prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us" (64). The landscape is also full of confusing signs that point to what Marlow calls "overwhelming realities". Thus, he has to "keep guessing at the channel", "to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks" and "to keep a lookout for the signs of dead wood" (Conrad 1995:62). He did not know "whether the stillness on the face of the immensity .... [was] meant as an appeal or as a menace" (Conrad 1995:54). As he himself confesses "[when] you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades", when the deciphering of signs becomes central, when the storyteller becomes a prisoner of language, what we call reality is lost.

Marlow's trip upriver becomes a linguistic quest, a continuous search for meaning and a necessity to appropriate the unknown and to convert it into meaningful signs. But as the African landscape impedes the smooth progression of the steamboat, so does Africa "resist Marlow's narrative invasions" (Parry 2005:49). As Marlow and his crew penetrate "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (Conrad 1995:63), this new semantic universe refuses to unravel its mysteries. The world of the natives is assimilated to a "black and incomprehensible frenzy" (Conrad 1995:63). The adjective "incomprehensible" and Marlow's immediate confession that "we were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings" (Conrad 1995:63) point to the failure of conceptual language to articulate an "inner truth" the narrator is constantly searching for. "Frenzy", the same as "savage discord", suggests the same excessive aurality that seems to characterise the world of primary orality, or better said how a literate person perceives it.

For Marlow the language of the natives is assimilated to mere "jabber", it is "silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense" (Conrad 1995:76). Hence, it is incomprehensible, primitive and absurd. One cannot fail to notice the ever-present cliché of the unintelligibility of the natives, a trope most often encountered in Victorian fiction and not only. As Parry (2005:49) argues, Marlow's story makes reference "to another semantic universe that its own discourse cannot decipher". Therefore, when Marlow fails to understand the natives' language and cultural codes, he transfers all meaning to the surrounding landscape.

Oral-aural cultures, characterised by what Ong (2002) termed auditory syntheses are cultures that foster various anxieties, cultures prone to animism (the belief that non-human entities have a spirit). When Marlow transfers meaning to the landscape, he becomes liable to the same animism, also coupled with a heightened anxiety:

> The woods were unmoved, *like a mask—heavy, like the closed door of a prison*—they looked with their air of *hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence*. (Conrad 1995:85, my emphasis)

Thus nature, though it promises to reveal "hidden knowledge", becomes incomprehensible, refusing all interpretation or translation. Access to the "heart of darkness" is denied to the European intruder.

4. Kurtz – Between Cultural Immersion and Displacement

The point of convergence between the two cultures, European and African, is represented by Kurtz. He is an example of what Griffith (1995:49) calls "cultural immersion" since, to use a Victorian trope, Kurtz went native and "surrendered" himself to the culture and customs of the Other. But Kurtz, the same as Marlow, underwent first cultural displacement and then, unlike Marlow, he completely gave up his so-called "civilised" customs. Kurtz is the character who dared to step "over the edge, while I [Marlow] had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot" (Conrad 1995:98).

Consequently, Kurtz becomes the meeting point of these two types of discourse: the empty imperialist rhetoric, best represented by his report, and the unknown semantic world of the natives, which he alone can understand. But who is actually Kurtz? He is a character *in absentia*, defined almost entirely by his own absence in the text. Therefore, he is just another void or absence around which Marlow constructs his narrative. When Marlow hears of Kurtz, he remarks that "somehow it didn't bring image with it – no more than if I had been told an angel or fiend was in there" (Conrad 1995:54). "Kurtz was just a word for me," Marlow says, adding that "I did not see the man in the name any more than you do" (Conrad 1995:55), stressing the fact that to him Kurtz was linguistically constructed, thus immaterial and prone to lies.

As stated before, quoting Kristeva (1982:4), the in-between, the ambiguous and that which disturbs identity by not respecting borders create abjection. Kurtz is at the same time a man of the Empire and the leader of the natives. This intermediate position is what fascinates and repels Marlow. Thus Kurtz is "a remarkable man", but "hollow at the core" and "an atrocious phantom". To Marlow, Kurtz's cultural immersion is the equivalent of the ego giving up "its image in order to contemplate itself in the other" (Kristeva 1982:9). In his case, the *I* does not disappear, but finds "in that sublime alienation [the Other], a forfeited existence" (Kristeva 1982:9). At a closer look, he may be considered another example of the quasi-medical and philosophical term Degeneration: Kurtz gives up his European persona to become one of the natives. But his renouncement is only partial; he indulges into "the unspeakable rites" performed for him by the natives, but his discourse still retains the pomposity of imperialistic propaganda, the report being a case in point.

5. Integrating the Discourse of the Other – A Challenge?

Marlow's difficulty to integrate the two types of conflicting discourses in his narrative – the discourse of alterity and the mock rhetoric of the Empire, both embodied in Kurtz – translates itself into an excessive rhetoric. His story becomes punctuated with a plethora of negative or indefinite adjectives. F.R. Leavis (1955:177) highlights the self-effacing, ambiguous tendencies of Marlow's story, noticeable in the "overworked vocabulary" and the "adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery". One of the adjectives most often linked to his interpretive anxiety is "impossible". It is used ten times in the novella, most often in connection with Kurtz and the rites performed by the natives in his honour. It also appears in one of the most quoted passages from *Heart of Darkness*: "[no], it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence...It is impossible" (Conrad 1995:55). This quote represents one of the deepest musings on the failure of language to describe reality. The word impossible is accompanied by its many synonyms: "improbable", "inexplicable", "inconceivable", "insoluble", etc.

Another negative adjective used in the novella in key moments is "unspeakable". First it is used when Marlow tries to describe the rites in which Kurtz takes part. The second time Marlow uses it is to convey the state of utter confusion and mystification he experiences when trying to understand Kurtz's relationship with the natives.

> I had turned to the wilderness really, not to Mr. Kurtz, who, I was ready to admit, was as good as buried. And for a moment it seemed to me as if I also were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets. (Conrad 1995:90)

This word is more intimately linked with storytelling since it implies the impossibility and, maybe, the unwillingness to verbalise one's story. It is the equivalent of silence. More than impossibility, it suggests prohibition and self-censorship. Marlow does not want and cannot describe the rites.

"Unspeakable" could also be assimilated to what Freud (1998:154) terms *the uncanny*, which is the opposite of "familiar", "native", and "belonging to the home". Marlow avoids describing to his listeners what he exactly saw or experienced in the Congolese jungle, instead he punctuates his discourse with negative, though extremely vague adjectives, all denoting a transgressive tale: "terrifying", "ominous", "abject", "vile", "oppressive", "merciless", "callous", "monstrous", "intolerable" and adverbs like "brutally", "beastly" (repeated twice, one after another). Like any other storyteller, Marlow fears rejection and censorship, therefore he will avoid any stories that depart from acceptable community standards; stories that fall into what Norrick (2007:135) calls "the dark side of tellability". Even though the "unspeakable rites" might stand for the clichéd image the Victorians had about 'primitive' peoples, they should never be overtly mentioned, but just alluded to.

The difficulty to turn Marlow's "exotic" experience into a story becomes also evident in his overuse of the language of approximation, exemplified by the conjunctions "as if", "as though", the preposition "like" and the verb "seem": "[it] was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmare" (Conrad 1995:42); "[the] best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth (Conrad 1995:40); "as if Nature herself had tried to ward off the intruders" (Conrad 1995:42); "[it] seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream" (Conrad 1995:55). This language of approximation suggests the narrator's attempt at appropriating the 'unfamiliar' and at integrating it in his own discourse.

Marlow's anxiety as a storyteller is permanently linked to the fear that his inability to incorporate and translate this epistemologically different world might alienate the audience. His concern for the efficacy of his storytelling is reflected in the many questions that saturate his narrative. "Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (Conrad 1995:55); "[how] shall I define it?" (Conrad 1995:92); "[what] were we who had strayed in here? Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us?...What was in there?" (Conrad 1995:54). Paradoxically, these queries are not supposed to establish a connection with the audience as a way of recreating the participatory nature of storytelling. They are not markers of conversational storytelling and they do not encourage dialogue with the audience. On the contrary, since Marlow waits for no answer, they are part of his soliloquy, of his 'exterior' monologue. This extensive dialogue with the self betrays a storyteller who still tries to understand his experience.

When language fails, silence takes over. Marlow's narrative is permeated by dashes and suspension points, all marking moments of profound silence in the act of storytelling. Thus silence becomes a key word, almost synonymous with absence, lack of reaction and defeat in the

face of the unknown semantic world of the Other. Although this should be an interactive storytelling scene, both the storyteller and the listeners are absent: the audience rarely reacts to the story and the story seems "to shape itself without human lips" (Conrad 1995:55).

6. Conclusion

In *Heart of Darkness*, the storyteller is confronted with the world of the Other. Marlow, the European sailor, travels to Africa to discover a world that lies beyond his cognitive horizon. This almost surreal encounter escapes representation, and the agile storyteller is faced with the limits of language. Also, in the Congolese jungle, Marlow is faced with the false ideology that supports imperial expansion. These two types of discourse are different, but they have something in common, they both appear as "absences" in Marlow's tale. The semantic world of the native Africans is incomprehensible for Marlow, and is incorporated in his story as excessive, but meaningless noise. The imperialist grandiloquent propaganda, though characterized by an overabundant rhetoric, is nonetheless empty and hollow like its prophets. These two antagonistic types of discourse are embodied in the character of Kurtz, a clear example of both cultural immersion and displacement: he is both a man of the empire and the indisputable leader of the natives.

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Notes on the author

Ana Cristina BĂNICERU is Junior Lecturer at the English Department, West University of Timişoara. Her broader research interests cover Narratology, British literature and Academic Writing. She has recently completed her doctoral thesis on the recovery of oral storytelling techniques in L. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, J. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and S. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. She is also part of an international SCOPES project: Literacy Development in the Humanities (LIDHUM).