

"Nothing like the image and horror of it": *King Lear* and *Heart of Darkness*

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Abstract

There are several allusions to *King Lear* at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, suggesting that Joseph Conrad might have had Shakespeare in mind during the composition of his novella. Both texts are concerned with the difficulty of producing meaning in the face of unspeakable horrors, and the problems involved in constructing an intelligible or meaningful "report." *Heart of Darkness* thus emerges as a sophisticated and skeptical "reading" of Shakespeare's tragedy: both texts reveal narrative to be a kind of confidence trick, while at the same time demonstrating the power of narrative and our need for coherent ends.

In *Unreliable Memoirs* (1981), the first volume of his autobiography, the Australian critic and broadcaster Clive James recalls the death of his grandfather and the experience of seeing his dead body: "I was encouraged to take a look at the corpse — a wise decision, since it immediately became clear to me that there are more terrible things than dying a natural death. The old man merely looked as if he had been bored out of existence. Perhaps I got it all wrong then and have still got it all wrong now. Perhaps he died in a redemptive ecstasy after being vouchsafed a revelation of the ineffable. But I doubt it. I think he just croaked" (James 1981, 24). Here, James offers a detached and gently humorous account of the death of his grandparent, an old man who may have died after a divine revelation, or, more likely, simply passed away. But the passage is also suggestive inasmuch as it highlights the ambiguity of death, while the humor of the passage depends upon the fact that James — both the child who saw his grandfather's corpse and the adult who writes about the experience — may have been mistaken about his interpretation.¹ Certainly, the old man "looked as if he had been bored out of existence," but James admits that this is only one interpretation: "Perhaps I got it all wrong then and have still got it wrong now." There is, however, no way of knowing for sure, for James's grandfather is — for obvious reasons — no longer in a position to resolve these ambiguities. Reading James's suggestion that his grandfather may (or may not) have died in a "redemptive ecstasy," we might also recall the death of another

old man: King Lear. It is unclear, however, whether this moment constitutes a conscious allusion to the end of Shakespeare's tragedy, an unconscious echo, or simply an intriguing coincidence. Nevertheless, this connection remains available to the reader, and — given the extraordinary power and pervasiveness of Shakespeare's afterlife — it is perhaps inevitable that some readers will recollect *King Lear* when reading this passage. But does the possibility that this connection exists only in the minds of certain readers, rather than the mind of the author, make it any less meaningful? Attempting to establish a Shakespearean connection with this passage thus highlights the extent to which reading certain literary texts — like interpreting someone's death — can be a process of both constructing and imposing meaning.

The ending of *King Lear*, and the ambiguous end of the play's main character, has certainly proved a matter of interpretation and debate. For several critics in the first half of the twentieth century, most notoriously A. C. Bradley, Lear does indeed die in a "redemptive ecstasy": he dies of joy, believing Cordelia still to be alive.² Yet some critics have suggested that Lear dies of grief, or in painful agony, and others that Lear's death is too ambiguous for us to come to any definite conclusion about it. Is it possible that Lear dies meaninglessly — or, to use James's formulation, "just croak[s]"? In this essay, I want to approach these questions via Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, another text that is preoccupied with death, storytelling, and interpretation, and that at several moments seems to echo *King Lear*. I argue that the narrative indeterminacy that recent critics have located in Conrad's novella might be linked to, or even indebted to, Shakespeare's tragedy. The essay thus raises a series of wider questions concerning Shakespearean influence. Given that *King Lear* and *Heart of Darkness* are so concerned with the problems of interpretation and the construction of meaning, is it necessary — or even desirable — to "prove" the existence of a direct link between them? To what extent is it valid to consider the possibility of "unconscious" echoes and allusions, whether in literary or critical writings? Does it depend upon the model of intertextuality one uses? The present essay does not claim, then, that Shakespeare's tragedy is an indisputable source of *Heart of Darkness*, but rather that there are several striking correspondences between the two texts, and that Shakespeare's tragedy is just as preoccupied with — and troubled by — the question of narrative as Conrad's novella.

I

Several critics have noted Joseph Conrad's interest in Shakespeare, an interest that Conrad clearly inherited from his father, Apollo Korzeniowski. Apollo published an essay entitled "Studies on the Dramatic Element in the Works of Shakespeare" in 1868, and translated five of Shakespeare's plays — *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, and

Much Ado About Nothing — into Polish (see Karl 1979, 66-68). It was no coincidence, then, that Shakespeare became the first English writer that Conrad ever read. Conrad recalls the experience in *A Personal Record*, during what can only be described as a period of almost Hamletian mourning: "My first introduction to English literature [was] the 'Two Gentlemen of Verona,' and in the very MS of my father's translation. It was during our exile in Russia, and it must have been less than a year after my mother's death, because I remember myself in the black blouse with a white border of my heavy mourning" (quoted in Batchelor 1994, 6). Later, in England, Conrad carried a single volume edition of the plays around with him, and recounts reading it in Falmouth "at odd moments of the day, to the noisy accompaniment of caulkers' mallets driving oakum into the deck seams of a ship in a dry dock."³ Given this immersion in Shakespeare's works, it was perhaps inevitable that they would find their way into Conrad's own writings. As Frederick Karl has noted, "Shakespeare appears in numerous verbal guises throughout Conrad's vocabulary, associations, and rhythms" (Karl 1979, 67-68). And John Batchelor goes further in describing this intertextual relationship, suggesting that "in much of his work . . . Conrad displays a desire to do homage to Shakespeare" (Batchelor 1994, 6). Of all English writers, then, Shakespeare seems to have had the greatest influence on Conrad, while Conrad's writings often point to Shakespeare's cultural significance and value. In *Lord Jim*, for example, Jim — not unlike Conrad himself, perhaps — carries a copy of Shakespeare to Patusan with him; and at one point in the novel Marlow offers to have "a Shakespearian talk" with Jim (Conrad 1986, 237). Thus Conrad's characters seem to have felt the influence of Shakespeare as well.

More generally, several of Conrad's works have been read as responses to Shakespeare's plays, in particular Shakespeare's tragedies. Various critics have argued for a significant link between *Lord Jim* and *Hamlet*; while *The End of the Tether* recollects *King Lear*, inasmuch as it recounts the story of Captain Whalley, an old and distinguished seaman, who conceals his blindness to keep working in order to sustain his estranged daughter in Australia.⁴ As John Lyon has written, "much of the starkness and power of *The End of the Tether* stems from its portrayal of Whalley as a reticent, restrained and — admittedly — simplified *King Lear*."⁵ But if *The End of the Tether* can be read as a simplification of *King Lear*, I want to suggest that *Heart of Darkness* — which was originally published in book form together with *Youth* and *The End of the Tether* in 1902 — represents a far more complex response to *King Lear*. For while *The End of the Tether* shares an obvious resemblance with *King Lear* in terms of its plot and main character, the relationship that *Heart of Darkness* has with *King Lear* is both more intricate and more submerged.⁶ Indeed, to think of *Lear* simply as a "source" for *Heart of Darkness* may be to employ a somewhat

narrow model of intertextuality, and perhaps this is especially the case where Shakespearean influence is concerned. We might, then, conceive of this relationship in Bloomian terms, with Conrad grappling, perhaps anxiously, with a powerful Shakespearean precursor; but we might also conceive of this relationship in Barthesian terms, with *King Lear* one of many "off-stage voices" that we might be tempted to hear in Conrad's text (see Barthes 1990, 21).⁷ As Barthes writes: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources,' the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas" (Barthes 1977, 160, italics in original).

This is not to say, however, that there is no textual evidence to support claims for a link between these two texts. For there is an allusion to *King Lear* at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, suggesting that Shakespeare's tragedy may have been in Conrad's mind when he wrote his novella. When Marlow encounters Kurtz's Intended, he tells her the story of Kurtz's demise and offers her his reassurance that Kurtz's words will survive:

"His words will remain," I said.

"And his example," she whispered to herself. "Men looked up to him, — his goodness shone in every act. His example —"

"True," I said; "his example too. Yes, his example. I forgot that."

"But I do not. I cannot — I cannot believe — not yet. I cannot believe that I shall never see him again, that nobody will see him again, never, never, never." (Conrad 1995, 146)

The Intended's "never, never, never" echoes the final scene of *King Lear*, and Lear's cry over the body of the dead Cordelia:⁸

LEAR

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life?

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,

Never, never, never, never, never. (*King Lear*, 5.3.281-84)

Lear's cry of "Never, never, never, never, never" represents his attempt both to articulate his grief and to express the utter finality of Cordelia's death; yet the very repetitiveness of Lear's utterance simultaneously enacts the futility and redundancy of this attempt.⁹ For our purposes, however, what

is striking is Conrad's apparent recollection and appropriation of this moment of Shakespeare's tragedy. Repeating the word "never" in the context of a loved one's death cannot help but make us think of Lear's powerful — and powerfully canonical — cry.¹⁰ *King Lear* thus begins to look like a terrible and powerful intertext lurking behind Conrad's novella. At this moment, Shakespeare's bleakest tragedy — which ends with an aged father attempting to express his grief at the death of his beloved daughter — comes to the surface, as a young woman attempts to express her grief at her beloved's death. Yet this allusion, as I have suggested above, points to a complicated and covert relationship between *King Lear* and *Heart of Darkness*. For both texts not only explore the failure of language, but also offer a skeptical critique of narrative and the act of storytelling, and our attempts to attach meanings to unspeakable — or untellable — events. Indeed, when we turn to critical readings that have approached either *Lear* or *Heart of Darkness* from this perspective, the relationship between the two texts becomes still more entangled and complex.

II

Heart of Darkness tells the story of Marlow's journey up the Congo to find the famed and enigmatic Mr. Kurtz. But of course, *Heart of Darkness* is also *about* Marlow's attempt to tell this story and employs a framing device that represents Marlow's act of storytelling on board the *Nellie*, a boat on the Thames, recounting his tale to a select audience, including the anonymous narrator of *Heart of Darkness*. Several recent critics have explored the tale's status as an "unreadable report" and have emphasised its self-consciousness and skepticism regarding the organizing features of conventional narrative.¹¹ These critics note that Marlow's narrative breaks down at several key moments and argue that his attempts to imbue his tale with a clear and definitive "meaning" fail to convince. Peter Brooks, in what is perhaps the most influential of these critical accounts, has written the following about the limits of language and its inability to represent unspeakable horrors: "Marlow continually seems to promise a penetration into the heart of darkness, along with a concurrent recognition that he is confined to the 'surface truth.' There is no reconciliation of this standoff, but there may be the suggestion that language, as interlocutory and thus as social system, simply can have no dealings with an ineffable. For language, nothing will come of nothing" (Brooks 1984, 252). Intriguingly, Brooks's essay — like the text he is discussing — echoes *King Lear*. As Lear says in the first scene of the play, following Cordelia's refusal to express her love for him: "Nothing will come of nothing" (*King Lear*, 1.1.90).¹² Brooks is discussing the fact that Marlow has to keep talking, despite the fact that the events he describes are terrible or — paradoxically — inexpressible. Yet of course, this paradox is also a central feature of

Shakespearean tragedy, and *King Lear* in particular. The play repeatedly asks whether it is possible to turn terrible events into language successfully; and whether we can ever "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.300). It seems appropriate, then, that Brooks's discussion of the limits of language should recall the language of Shakespeare. But perhaps this echo is even more apt than Brooks realizes, given the allusion to *King Lear* in *Heart of Darkness* that we have noted above. Indeed, Brooks seems once again to allude to Shakespeare's tragedy towards the end of his essay: "In the lack of finality of *the promised end*, Marlow must continue to attach his story to Kurtz's, since to detach it would be to admit that his narrative on board the *Nellie* is radically unmotivated, arbitrary, perhaps meaningless" (Brooks 1984, 254, italics added).

In these two apparent echoes of *Lear*, then, Brooks may be consciously hinting at a significant relationship between the two texts and suggesting that both are concerned with the problems of expressing the inexpressible and the flouting of narrative conventions. But another possibility is that the allusion to *King Lear* in *Heart of Darkness* — and their shared concerns — led Brooks to make an unconscious link between the two texts. One might object, of course, that to suggest that these intertextual links may be unconscious on the part of the critic as well as the author might be somewhat tenuous. And yet, the fact that one can locate a vein of Shakespearean discourse within Brooks's account of *Heart of Darkness* seems particularly suggestive. For it reveals the extent to which Shakespeare's "afterlife" is not only confined to literary texts, but also encompasses *critical* texts. Yet it also suggests that the indeterminacy and ambiguity that Brooks locates in Conrad's novella can also be found in his own essay.

What is even more striking, perhaps, is that James L. Calderwood — in an essay on the limits of language and narrative in *King Lear* — makes an explicit comparison with *Heart of Darkness*: "Like the Fool, [Edgar] cannot accompany Lear into what Conrad calls the heart of darkness, though like Marlow he can return to tell us about it in words we know are incommensurate to their subject" (Calderwood 1986, 11). Certainly the characters of *King Lear*, especially Edgar, often attempt to impose a narrative structure upon the play's events and attach meanings to them. As Graham Bradshaw has written, Edgar "is both a participant in a stubbornly unconventional 'tragedy,' and a surrogate critic or commentator, who is continually struggling to make sense of, or impose sense on, arbitrary and contingent horrors" (Bradshaw 1987, 88). Yet what Calderwood suggests, in his brief, but provocative reference to *Heart of Darkness* is that Marlow's attempts to convert his experiences into a coherent narrative correspond to Edgar's role in *King Lear* as the play's principal "reporter." Like Edgar, we might say, Marlow continually struggles to impose sense on "arbitrary and contingent horrors." Here, then, we have a critic of Shakespeare's play referring to *Heart of Darkness*, and a critic of Conrad's novella echoing *King Lear*. But what

do these undeveloped connections that these critics have made tell us about the two texts and their relationship? We might suggest that the fact that both texts are so ambiguous and unsettling leads critics (including myself perhaps) to turn to other narratives in order to make sense of them. Ironically, however, as though aware of the futility of the attempt, we can only turn to narratives that are themselves ambiguous and unsettling. In other words, critics — like the characters — attempt to make sense of what happens in both texts through stories, while simultaneously implying that this attempt to construct meaning may itself be arbitrary.

III

If we turn now to *Heart of Darkness* itself, we find that the text continually explores Marlow's desire to find meaning, and his attempts to reconcile Kurtz's great reputation with the strangeness of their encounter. For example, when Marlow finally meets Kurtz, the "magnificent eloquence" (Conrad 1995, 121) that Marlow has heard so much about fails to materialize. Marlow seems to think that Kurtz will *talk* well at the end of his journey, and that there will be a transference of meaning and wisdom. But all Marlow gets is ambiguity: "He kept on looking out past me with fiery, longing eyes, with a mingled expression of wistfulness and hate. He made no answer, but I saw a smile, a smile of indefinable meaning, appear on his colourless lips that a moment after twitched convulsively" (134). Kurtz does not answer Marlow at this point and remains hard to interpret, with his "mingled expression of wistfulness and hate" and his smile of "indefinable meaning." Marlow might be forgiven for thinking that Kurtz's words will clear up these ambiguities; yet even when Kurtz *does* speak, Marlow is not sure what he has heard, or what it means:

He was lying on his back with closed eyes, and I withdrew quietly, but I heard him mutter, "Live rightly, die, die . . ." I listened. There was nothing more. Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article? He had been writing for the papers and meant to do so again, "for the furthering of my ideas. It's a duty." (136)

Kurtz's utterance ("Live rightly, die, die . . .") sounds like the abortive beginning of a pithy phrase that might serve as someone's last words. Indeed, we might be forgiven for trying to imagine what the whole utterance might have been — perhaps something along the lines of "Live rightly, die well."¹³ However, the final part of the phrase fails to materialize. Marlow admits that he is not sure what the origin or significance of what Kurtz says might be: "Was he rehearsing some speech in his sleep, or was it a fragment of a phrase from some newspaper article?" Given that the phrase

might be a half-remembered quotation, perhaps it might be misguided even to attempt to make a coherent phrase out of this fragment. Yet it is hard for us, as readers and critics, to avoid trying to find significance in Kurtz's last words. In the context of the present discussion, when Marlow reports Kurtz saying that "I am lying here in the dark waiting for death" (136), it is tempting to hear another echo of *King Lear*. Do we think here of Gloucester? Or Lear's "while we / Unburdened crawl towards death" (*King Lear*, 1.1.40-41)? In this way, *Heart of Darkness* seems concerned to explore the act of interpretation itself, and, in particular, the need to imbue death with import and significance. For rather than finding Kurtz's final moments disturbing, Marlow seems fascinated by the very proliferation of meanings that he finds:

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn't touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror — of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath — "The horror! The horror!" (136-37)

The more Marlow considers Kurtz's "ivory face," the greater number of possible expressions and emotions he seems to find in it: a combination or succession of pride, power, terror, and despair. Marlow observes that Kurtz may have "live[d] his life again [. . .] during that supreme moment of complete knowledge," but this possibility is phrased as a speculative question. Kurtz's final utterance, despite Marlow's protestations, remains pointedly unclear and disturbing. According to Marlow, Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!" is a response to some image, or some vision — but do we even know if this is the case? Could Kurtz merely be quoting another fragment? Certainly Kurtz's phrase suggests that he has seen some sort of horrifying image, but that he cannot find the words adequately to represent it. It is impossible for us to say precisely what it is that Kurtz sees, or thinks he sees, but certainly the ambiguity of this phrase complicates Marlow's attempt to retell this part of his tale. Indeed, the fact that Kurtz's words are reported by Marlow and then reported to us by the anonymous narrator of *Heart of Darkness* creates a further distance between us and the horrifying image that Kurtz struggles to describe.

We might also note that this passage, too, seems to contain another echo of Shakespeare's tragedy. In the second scene of *King Lear*, the deceitful and ambitious Edmund informs Edgar that he has offended their father and should avoid his sight: "Brother, I advise you to the best. I am no honest man if there be any good meaning toward you. I have told you what I have seen and

heard but faintly, nothing like the image and horror of it. Pray you, away" (*King Lear*, 1.2.161-65). Edmund has attempted to convey his experience of the event — "what I have seen and heard" — but he has only done so "faintly"; it is merely a retelling of the "actual" events. Edmund admits that his verbal description is inadequate, and does not have the visual immediacy — and the aural distinctiveness — of the thing itself; it is "nothing like the image and horror of it." Edmund's words "image" and "horror" are repeated in the exchange between Kent and Edgar in the play's final scene: "Is this the promised end? [. . .] Or image of that horror?" (5.3.238-39). Edgar's description, then, not only anticipates the final scene's tragic tableau, but also relates to Shakespeare's attempts to create a horrifying picture through language.¹⁴ Yet these words also appear in Marlow's description of Kurtz's end: "He cried in a whisper at some *image*, at some vision, — he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath — "The *horror!* The *horror!*" (Conrad 1995, 136-37, italics added). The close proximity of these words thus recalls these two moments from *Lear*, linking Edmund's description of his father's anger with Kurtz's terrifyingly ambiguous last words. It is worth emphasising, however, that the horrifying picture that Edmund describes never existed. By admitting the insubstantiality of his account, Edmund distracts Edgar from the possibility that there were no "actual events" in the first place. Thus, *King Lear* alerts us to the duplicity and *unreliability* of narrative. Yet the fact that Edmund's description anticipates the language of the final scene of the play might tempt us to draw a parallel between Edmund's artistry and that of the playwright. This suggests that Shakespeare's art is also a kind of confidence trick, or illusion. Like Conrad, perhaps, Shakespeare deliberately avoids attempting to represent the most disturbing moments in his text and leaves gaps for us to imagine a horrifying image that can never be shown. We might say that what is at the heart of *King Lear* — and at the heart of *Heart of Darkness* — is unsayable, or untellable.

IV

When we come to examine the endings of the two texts, however, we find that neither Marlow nor Edgar can resist tying up their respective acts of storytelling with comforting and conventional endings. In the final scene of *King Lear*, Edgar provides a highly self-conscious and rhetorical account of his father's death. Albany invites Edgar to give a narrative account of what has taken place — "Where have you hid yourself? / How have you known the miseries of your father?" (*King Lear*, 5.3.171-72) — and Edgar is all too happy to oblige: "By nursing them, my lord. List a brief tale, / And when 'tis told, O that my heart would burst!" (5.3.173-74). Edgar promises that his tale will be "brief," and yet, according to Albany at least, it goes on for far too long. Furthermore,

Edgar's narration appears to be intended to elicit such an emotional response and designed to justify his role in the play, as he evades all of the difficult questions that critics have asked about him:

The bloody proclamation to escape
 That followed me so near — O, our lives' sweetness,
 That we the pain of death would hourly die
 Rather than die at once! — taught me to shift
 Into a madman's rags, t'assume a semblance
 That very dogs disdain'd; and in this habit
 Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
 Their precious stones new-lost; became his guide,
 Led him, begged for him, saved him from despair;
 Never — O fault! — revealed myself unto him
 Until some half hour past, when I was armed. (5.3.175-85)

Edgar's aside ("That we the pain of death would hourly die / Rather than die at once"), which appears near the start of his account, seems designed to guide his listeners' response. But do we submit to his rhetorical performance, or do we want to resist and ask questions? Did Edgar really save his father from despair? After all, in the previous scene Gloucester had resisted Edgar's moralizing sentiments, commenting that they are only one way of interpreting the play's events: "And that's true, too" (5.2.11). Edgar's "O fault!" sounds like an admission of guilt, giving his tale the tone of a confession. In the Quarto text, however, Edgar says "O father!" a slightly more neutral statement that does not draw as much attention to his moral defects.¹⁵ Yet while the Folio text might alert us to Edgar's shortcomings more explicitly, in neither text does Edgar explain why he did not reveal himself to his father sooner. As Harry Berger, Jr. has commented, Edgar's tale "drastically foreshortens his performance on the heath, edits out all his darker moments, and stresses his devoted tendance" (Berger 1997, 64). Disturbingly, there is also the implication that Edgar only revealed himself to his father when he was sure of his own safety, "when [he] was armed" (5.3.185). Edgar then attempts to explain how and why his father died:

I asked his blessing, and from first to last
 Told him our pilgrimage; but his flawed heart —
 Alack, too weak the conflict to support —
 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
 Burst smilingly. (5.3.187-91)

This is a highly self-reflexive piece of Edgar's narrative, a story about the power of storytelling. Edgar tells his father the story of their trials, revealing to him — finally — who he is; but the imparting of this knowledge, in the form of a narrative account, breaks Gloucester's heart. Edgar interprets Gloucester's death in a relatively positive light, stating first that he was suspended between joy and grief, but then that his heart "[b]urst smilingly." But do we believe this interpretation? After all, we know that Edgar has constructed artful, but deceptive narratives before, not least in his vivid, yet entirely fictitious description of Dover cliff. Moreover, in act 4, Edgar expresses a healthy degree of skepticism regarding the ability of narrative to convey the play's most tragic events: "I would not take this from report; it is, / And my heart breaks at it" (4.5.137-38). Here, however, he seems perfectly happy to offer an optimistic, even redemptive reading of his father's death, and one that seems to conceal as much as it discloses.

Similarly, in *Heart of Darkness*, we find that Marlow interprets Kurtz's death in a positive and optimistic light. Marlow attempts to describe the significance of Kurtz's final words, and suggests that they represent a profound assessment of his life: "This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it" (Conrad 1995, 138). Nonetheless, Marlow — not unlike Edgar in his description of Gloucester's death — implicitly admits the ambiguity of Kurtz's death, stating that the utterance represented a "strange commingling of desire and hate" (138). We might suggest that Marlow implies that Kurtz's death was, in fact, suspended between two (or more) readings. Yet Marlow goes on to read Kurtz's final words as a kind of triumph:

perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry — much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! (138)

It is far from clear, however, how this affirmative interpretation of Kurtz's "summing-up" — in which Marlow is at pains to emphasize that these were more than merely words of "careless contempt" — relates to Kurtz's deeply ambiguous utterance. Marlow tries to suggest that Kurtz's death represented a moment of wisdom, truth, and sincerity, even describing it as a "moral victory"; yet the rhetorical tone of this passage might suggest that, like Edgar, Marlow is protesting too much, and that he may well have doubts about his own interpretation of the death that he describes.

When Marlow finally encounters Kurtz's Intended, he cannot bring himself to repeat Kurtz's final words, and finds that he has to lie to her: "The last word he pronounced was — your

name" (Conrad 1995, 147). This is, of course, precisely what the Intended wants to hear: "I knew it — I was sure" (147), she says. Marlow cannot tell the truth about Kurtz's death because it would be troubling, ambiguous, or devoid of meaning. In other words, the story that Marlow *does* tell about Kurtz's death is merely a story — it is a lie; a fiction. *Heart of Darkness* thus asks whether it is possible to convert death into something tellable without making it into a fiction, or a lie. As Peter Brooks comments, "To present 'the horror!' as articulation of that wisdom lying in wait at the end of the tale, at journey's end and life's end, is to make a mockery of storytelling and ethics, or to gull one's listeners — as Marlow seems to realize when he finds that he cannot repeat Kurtz's last words to the Intended, but must rather cover them up by a conventional ending" (Brooks 1984, 250). But once again, this seems particularly relevant to the ending of *King Lear* and to our interpretation of the deaths of Lear and Gloucester. We might ask, then, whether we can be sure that Edgar's account of Gloucester's death is not as deceitful as the account of Kurtz's death that Marlow offers to the Intended. Does Shakespeare's tragedy "make a mockery of storytelling and ethics" in a similar way, or even gull its listeners?

The death of *King Lear* offers yet another perspective on these issues. The conclusion of Shakespeare's tragedy — with the deaths of Lear and Cordelia — is notoriously unbearable, and this is perhaps related to our expectations of a conventional ending.¹⁶ Yet there is also an implicit contrast between Edgar's narrative account of his experiences, and the raw, unexplained sight of Lear and the dead Cordelia.¹⁷ The scene's power owes much to our inability to understand what is going on, and there are several references in these final moments of the play to "uninterpreted seeing" (Calderwood 1986, 16). Towards the close of the Folio text of the play, Lear tells the onlookers to "look," but we are unable to "see" or understand because we are not told what we are supposed to be looking for. Indeed, it is not clear whether Lear thinks Cordelia to be dead or alive. One moment he states that "She's gone for ever. / I know when one is dead and when one lives. / She's dead as earth" (*King Lear*, 5.3.234-36), but then asks for a looking glass: "If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then she lives" (5.3.237-38). This uncertainty as to whether Cordelia is dead thus belies Lear's earlier declaration that he knows "when one is dead and when one lives" (5.3.258). Consequently it is extremely difficult to know how to interpret Lear's dying moments, even more so given the disparity between the two texts of the play. Here is Lear's death as it appears in the Folio text:

[to Kent] Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips.
Look there, look there. *He dies.* (5.3.285-87)

What is Lear looking at? And what is the meaning of what he sees? A. C. Bradley writes that "it seems almost beyond question that any actor is false to the text who does not attempt to express, in Lear's last accents and gestures and look, an unbearable *joy*" (Bradley 1991, 269, emphasis in original). But it is not clear to which text Bradley is attempting to be true. In the Quarto text, Lear remains alive long enough to deliver the line, "Break, heart, I prithee break" (*The History of King Lear*, sc. 24, l. 306), suggesting that he dies in a state of grief. However, in the Folio, this line is spoken by Kent, and Lear's last line before the stage direction "*He dies*" is "Look there, look there" (5.3.287). Thus, Lear's death in the Folio is more ambiguous, and it is even possible that Lear dies in the same manner as Gloucester, "Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief" (5.3.190). In the Folio text, the two lines before Lear's death might be of despair and not joy, and they could be read as conforming to the previous pattern of Lear's veering from certainty to possibility, and *not* knowing when one is dead and when one lives. Alternatively, the Folio text could suggest that Lear does now know the difference between life and death, with the additional "no" in "No, no, no life?" (5.3.281), and the additional two "nevers" in "Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.284), suggesting the certainty of death. Indeed, the ambiguity of Lear's death retrospectively implies that Edgar's narrative account of Gloucester's death might be suspect. For if Gloucester's death was anything like that of Lear, or indeed Kurtz, then for Edgar to say that his father died betwixt "joy and grief" comes to sound like a rather dubious interpretation, not an accurate and objective account of the event. Perhaps any account of a man's death remains an interpretation.

To conclude, then, both *King Lear* and *Heart of Darkness* offer incisive critiques of the act of storytelling, and both implicitly question our attempts to find meanings in — or attach meanings to — a person's death. Thus the narrative indeterminacy and skepticism that recent critics have identified in Conrad's novella is not something that appears abruptly with the advent of modernism, but is rather a phenomenon that can be traced back to Shakespearean tragedy. Conrad's novella, with its emphasis upon duplicity and uncertainty, prompts us to reconsider the representation of storytelling in *King Lear* and to question the attempts of readers and critics to construct coherent or comforting interpretations out of Lear's death.¹⁸ Whether or not the verbal correspondences that I have noted constitute conscious echoes of *King Lear*, this literary relationship highlights the extent to which Shakespeare presents us with a deeply skeptical and ambivalent account of art and narrative. And rather than trying to prove the existence of a direct or unequivocal intertextual relation between *Lear* and *Heart of Darkness*, we might suggest that Shakespeare has fashioned an eloquent language of negation and negativity that later writers are unconsciously fluent in, whether they realize it or not. Yet, as we have seen, it is also critics who have found themselves caught

up in this intertextual web. Indeed, considering the possibility of this literary relationship prompts us to reflect upon our own status as interpreters of both texts, which both explore and expose our desire for interpretive closure and for coherent (and conventional) endings. On the one hand, *Lear* and *Heart of Darkness* suggest that narrative is a form of deception, a lie that we know is not really there, while, on the other, both texts demonstrate the need for the comfort and sense-making power of storytelling. We know that narratives are an illusion in that they exist only in language, but we still need to invest in and attach value to them. In this way, both *King Lear* and *Heart of Darkness* explore the difficulty of making sense of the ambiguous "image[s]" and "horror[s]" with which they present us.

Notes

1. For some suggestive reflections on the relationship between death and storytelling, see Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Storyteller" (Benjamin 1970). Benjamin comments that "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell" (93).
2. In his Arden 2 edition of *King Lear* (Muir 1972), Kenneth Muir has the following note to 5.3.309, by way of explaining Lear's death: "Lear dies of joy, believing Cordelia to be alive (Bradley)." This suggests something of the authority that Bradley's account of the play had amongst editors and critics in the first half of the twentieth century. For a judicious account of the play's critical reception, see Foakes 1993, 45-77; and for a recent collection of essays on the topic of "*King Lear* and Its Afterlife," see Holland 2003.
3. Quoted in Karl 1979, 67. Conrad goes on to note the ways in which his experience of Shakespeare's works was bound up with his experience of death: "Books are an integral part of one's life and my Shakespearean associations are with that first year of our bereavement, the last I spent with my father in exile [. . .], and with the year of hard gales, the year in which I came nearest to death by sea" (Conrad 1925, 73).
4. On the relationship between *Lord Jim* and *Hamlet*, see Batchelor 1988; Hay 1992; and Batchelor 1992. For other considerations of Conrad's indebtedness to Shakespeare, see, for example, Lodge 1964; Gillan 1976, 41-141; Felperin 1978; Moore 1991; and Paccaud-Huguet 1996.
5. John Lyon, Introduction to Conrad 1995, xiii-xiv. All quotations from *Heart of Darkness* will be taken from this edition. J. H. Stape also makes a connection between *The End of the Tether* and *King Lear*, although he seems to forget that in Shakespeare's play, it is Gloucester rather than Lear who loses his sight: "Whalley and Lear share a physical blindness that symbolizes a self-absorption and self-deception so complete that they literally shut out the surrounding world" (Stape 2000, 346).

6. Adam Gillan offers a brief treatment of this relationship in Gillan 1976, 123-41, commenting that "the imaginative tapestry of this short novel parallels the linguistic and the philosophical revelations of Shakespeare's great tragedy" (127). However, his approach is markedly different from that of the present essay, suggesting rather optimistically that "[Lear's] followers, like the loyal Marlow, know the truth and must speak it before each story is brought to an end" (134).
7. Harold Bloom's theory of literary influence is set out in Bloom 1973. In recent years, Bloom has increasingly emphasised Shakespeare's cultural and canonical centrality. For example, in *The Western Canon* Bloom has argued that "we cannot rid ourselves of Shakespeare, or of the Canon that he centers. Shakespeare, as we like to forget, largely invented us; if you add the rest of the Canon, then Shakespeare and the Canon wholly invented us" (Bloom 1994, 40).
8. Quotations from Shakespeare's works are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (edited by Wells and Taylor 1986). *King Lear* is quoted from the Folio version, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, unless otherwise stated.
9. Anne Barton comments that "Lear's five-times-repeated 'Never' in the last scene is like an assault on the irrevocable nature of death, an assault in which the word itself seems to crack and bend under the strain," in "Shakespeare and the Limits of Language" (Barton 1971, 26).
10. R. A. Foakes describes it as "perhaps the most extraordinary blank verse line in English poetry" in his Arden 3 edition of *King Lear* (Foakes 1997, note to 5.3.307).
11. See, for example, Stewart 1980; Brooks 1984; Stewart 1984, especially 146-52; Todorov 1989; and Greaney 2002, especially 57-76.
12. The idea recurs throughout the play: in 1.4, the Fool asks Lear, "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" (*King Lear*, 1.4.129-30), and Lear tells the fool that "Nothing can be made out of nothing" (1.4.131), echoing his comments in the opening scene.
13. Garrett Stewart points out that Conrad's original manuscript read "Live rightly, die, die nobly" (Stewart 1980, 148).
14. Often in his tragedies Shakespeare gestures towards an unseen, terrifying image that is never actually shown to us, but which is all the more disturbing for that. For example, Macbeth asks what the "horrid image" is which "doth unfix [his] hair, / And make [his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs / Against the use of nature?" (*Macbeth*, 1.3.134-36). However, it is unclear precisely what this terrifying mental image — which Macbeth does not describe in his self-report — might be. Similarly, Old Hamlet's ghost says that he could tell Hamlet a tale "whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood, / Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres, / Thy knotted and combinèd locks to part, / And each particular hair to stand on end / Like quills upon the fretful porcupine" (*Hamlet*, 1.5.15-20). Once again, this

description of its effects is an admission that the thing the Ghost describes cannot be shown: it can only be gestured at.

15. See *The History of King Lear*, scene 24, l. 189. See also Foakes's note to 5.3.191 (Foakes 1997).
16. While Shakespeare does not allow the play to end like an old tale, the Restoration redaction by Nahum Tate, which was acted for 150 years afterwards, does indeed have a happy, storybook ending. Tate's version, *The History of King Lear* (1681), can be read in Clarke 1997. Clarke comments that "where Shakespeare's play is open, ambiguous, multi-faceted, Tate's operates to restrict meanings and render the rough places plain" (lxviii). Norman Rabkin writes that "Shakespeare's tragedies define the genre for us; whatever successes his redactors achieved they achieved by making the plays into something other than tragedy, something more reducible to rational explanation" (Rabkin 1981, 114).
17. James Calderwood writes that "Lear's dying moments [. . .] are harrowing to an audience in part because they are presented as immediate, uninterpreted experience. We must make of them what we can. But Gloucester's death comes to us more comfortably because its rawness has been filtered, ordered, and endowed with meaning by Edgar's long report of it" (Calderwood 1986, 10).
18. Conrad read Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1914, pronouncing it "very good" (Letter to Richard Curle, 30 March 1914, in Karl and Davies 1983—, 5:369). Yet we might see *Heart of Darkness* as offering an earlier, more skeptical account of *King Lear* than the one that Bradley's study contains.

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