A Story in Search of its Meaning: Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Yuriko Nishimura

I

One of the prerequisites for a sense of finality in a novel is to communicate its meaning fully and adequately to its readers. Furthermore, it is highly desirable that all the constituent elements in the novel be interrelated as skillfully as possible according to the law of causality and that all mysteries be disclosed and contradictions or conflicts resolved by the time it reaches the last word. In short, the novel is expected to produce its own consistent system of meanings. Modern novels are, however, deeply conscious of the impossibility of such a plausible relation of "cause and closure"[1] in the process of describing the real world in fiction. Accordingly "a certain lack of finality" can be pointed out as one of their properties. "Skillful endings," which make a novel an artistically unified and organic whole, would give readers "a sense that the text fully captures life and leaves no relevant aspect of its subject unexplored"[2] even if the endings are lacking in decisive finality. It might be said that such finality is not necessarily required for the text to accomplish an effective ending.

But once a novel begins, its readers have certain expectations about its ending as a goal which they will attain sooner or later. And at the ending, they desire a satisfying closure which throws some kind of light on the rest of text. To encourage such expectations in the readers and to fulfil them, *Heart of Darkness* tries to move toward its exclusive meaning and endeavors to complete its system of meanings or of values so that it may give the readers a

satisfying sense of finality. This paper will focus on the story's structure, and finally consider the obscure ending which has produced various interpretations.

II

Heart of Darkness has a gloomy atomosphere from the beginning in spite of the narrator's eagerness for romantic adventures. Marlow describes Brussels, where he goes for a trade contract with the Company, as follows:

> I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre.... A narrow and deserted street in deep shadow, high houses, innumerable windows with venetian blinds, a dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones, imposing carriage archways right and left, immense double doors standing ponderously ajar. I slipped through one of these cracks, went up a swept and ungarnished staircase, as arid as a desert, and opened the first door I came to. (pp. 9-10)[3]

This oft-quoted passage gives an ominous impression that Marlow is falling into some ravine, or slipping into some conspiracy, through the crack of the doors "standing ponderously ajar." Throughout the whole text, the story continues to give similar atmospheric impressions of "being drawn into darkness," which hints at what direction it will take.

Besides, there appear in Marlow's narration many subordinate characters and episodes whose seemingly casual descriptions perform very vital roles in the story. By cross-referring from one episode or one small remark to another, the story strives to communicate, at least partially, its essential meaning or the truth about the colonial activities in which Marlow begins to play a part. To cite a few instances, on his journey to Africa, he sees a French man-of-war firing into "the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water." He says: "There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (p. 14).

There follow various scenes at the Company's station which seem to reinforce this idea of the futility and corruption of the colonial society. For example:

> The thing looked as dead as the carcass of some animal. I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails.... A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on. (p. 16)

Or :

> I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine. It wasn't quarry or sandpit, anyhow. It was just a hole.... Then I nearly fell into a very narrow ravine, almost no more than a scar in the hillside. I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled in there. There wasn't one that was not broken. It was a wanton smash-up. (p. 17)

Similar graphic descriptions which suggest the corruption or inefficiency can be also found in the scenes of the further Central Station. The episode of a fire panic is very impressive. A stout man tries excitedly to put it out, carrying a pail with "a hole in the bottom" (p. 24).

As such episodes are piling up, we become gradually aware that the narrative is trying to suggest a gap between "surface truth" and "inner truth." It can be safely presumed that clues to the final meaning of the story are distributed throughout the text with a certain intention. The same can be said of many subordinate characters in the story. As a whole, white men in the novel are presented as a symbol of "inefficiency" or "pure selfishness"[4] which underlies Western European civilization.

As shown above, the direction which the story will take has

been suggested by the symbolic evocations of mood, and by close interactions between the concrete descriptions. Once the name of Kurtz is mentioned in the text, as Marlow's consciousness of Kurtz and interest in him deepen, the tension begins to increase and the focus, into which the elements of the story try to converge, seems to become more clearly defined. So, parallel to Marlow's eager search for Kurtz is the story's own search for meaning. Moreover, there is no denying that the reader finds himself drawn, involuntarily, further and further into the plot.

The structure of *Heart of Darkness* draws the reader gradually in. Of course it owes much to Marlow's narration, and especially to the enticing plot of his pursuit of Kurtz into the heart of darkness. Kurtz is designated "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else" (p. 25). In this man, supposedly of lofty principles, Marlow tries to find an answer to the "uneasiness" or "unnaturalness" which he has been instinctively feeling and which is shaking his very foundations and his sense of values. It should also be noted that the readers of the novel, as well as Marlow, feel the desire to get the answer. The following is the first narrator's words: "I listened, I listened, on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river" (p. 28). This first narrator is one of the four hearers of Marlow's narration on board the *Nellie*, and in a sense represents in the fictional world the reader of the story itself. Therefore, the effect that Marlow's narration has on him could be looked upon as a reflection of its influence on the reader. It is not only the first narrator but also the reader who feels somewhat uneasy and is on the watch for Marlow's words. It seems that the novel has a strong appeal to the reader's instinctive perception. By producing such effects, the story gradually contrives to lure both Marlow and the reader toward Kurtz and into the heart of darkness.

Marlow "penetrates deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (p. 35) to see and talk with Kurtz. Marlow's up-river journey to Kurtz is associated with the quest for "the origin" not only of space but also of time. "Going up the river," says Marlow, was like "travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world"(p. 34). Whether we see Marlow's journey as an archetypal quest—like that of Virgil's *Aeneid*[5]— or as the "confrontation of an entity within the self,"[6] it is undeniable that this story shows an intense energy in its search for a center. As Marlow goes up the river toward Kurtz, the various elements of the story come together, like small branches converging to one main stream, so as to form one exclusive meaning.

III

While the story endeavors to communicate its single exclusive meaning or its center, it contains another important feature: *Heart of Darkness* has various elements which hinder the story's process of conveying its meaning to the reader. At first, it is often the case that the development of the story is hindered for some reason. This is especially noticeable after Marlow becomes conscious of Kurtz. For instance, Marlow "had to wait in the station for ten days—an eternity" (p. 19), overlooking the grove of death, until a caravan for him arrives there. This "delay," however, proves to have an important function in the plot. Because of such "delays" Marlow has the opportunity to observe the colonial life. From his narration we consequently get more detailed descriptions about the cruelty and futility taking place under the guise of enlightenment.

The episode of the "rivets" can be seen as a typical example of the inefficiency of the colonial activities. And more important, a larger role which this episode plays is to prevent Marlow from going ahead toward Kurtz. Marlow wants to get rivets in order to repair his steamer, but in spite of everything, he is unable to get

them: "What I really wanted was rivets, by Heaven! Rivets .... Rivets I wanted" (p.28). The story as well as Marlow gradually comes to be more and more frustrated by these "delays" in the pursuit. However, it is that very frustration that produces the story's, and Marlow's, energy to surge ahead toward Kurtz or the heart of darkness. The story seems to intensify its eagerness to go ahead all the more because its advancement is obstructed. It can be said of its reader as well. He also feels drawn further into the story by the multiple postponement in getting to Kurtz. Therefore it seems to be of special importance that there is an intimate relationship between the intensity of Marlow's pursuit and the energy of the story striving to get to the heart, and that this energy is inseparably bound up with direct effects on the reading of the novel.

Furthermore, we can point to the narrator himself, as the most important elements which hinder the story's efforts to communicate its meaning. In spite of his eagerness of pursuit, Marlow's narration is full of a sense of resignation as to the communicative ability of words: "No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of this existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence" (p. 28). As seen in this quotation, Marlow recognizes the impossible limitations of the act of talking while he is actually narrating the story. So it is inevitable that his words should often be obscure. It is said of his mode of story telling that its meaning is "not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze"(p.5). According to Ian Watt, Marlow's tale is typically "centrifugal" and "its function is merely to make the reader go outside it in search of a circumambient universe of meaning."[7] To sum up, the story itself, as we have seen, seeks to construct the "centripetal" structure so that it may draw the reader to the central core of meaning. Marlow's narration, however, has the "centifugal" nature which

makes the reader go outside.

The ambiguity or unclearness in Marlow's narration seems to be partly due to his function in the story. Marlow is at the same time a character in the story and its narrator. In this respect, he differs fundamentally from the omniscient narrator. To use Wayne C. Booth's classification, it can be said that he is an"unreliable narrator." The narrator relives what he has gone through with his audience on board, that is, with the reader, and endeavors to capture its meaning all over again. Consequently Marlow's narration, which has such a dual function, sometimes deviates from the system of meanings that the story seeks to produce. For instance, a very important episode, which gives us a glimpse of the essence of Kurtz, is narrated by Marlow as follows:

> 'How did that ivory come all this way?' growled the elder man, who seemed very vexed. The other explained that it had come with a fleet of canoes in charge of an English half-caste clerk Kurtz had with him; that Kurtz had apparently intended to return himself, the station being by that time bare of goods and stores, but after coming three hundred miles, had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers, leaving the half-caste to continue down the river with the ivory.... *As for me, I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time.* It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home—perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. *Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake.* (p. 32, italics mine)

Marlow overhears this from whispering between the manager and his uncle. As he himself says, this scene conjures up Kurtz's essence visually. Therefore this episode could normally help give the reader some important clues to the meaning of the story.

However, Marlow puts in a conjecture which deviates from the story's system of meaning even while the story itself is getting toward its heart. The sentence in question is "Perhaps he was just simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake." His narration could be compared to the "blinding sunlight," often referred to in the text: "A blinding sunlight drowned all this at times in a sudden recrudescence of glare" (p. 15). While the sunlight normally throws light on the objects, it occasionally conceals them with its glare. Similarly, it can be said that although Marlow's narration normally performs the important role of throwing light on the story and clarifying its meaning, at times it conceals the story's meaning like the blinding sunlight.

Finally, the man whom the narrator pursues so eagerly is decribed only vaguely in the text. This man, Kurtz, seems to symbolize the darkness. And the meaning which the story is searching for is to be found in the heart of the darkness. Therefore, it should be the real aim of the story to describe Kurtz. But the information we are given about him is very fragmentary:

> They both agreed it was frightful, then made several bizarre remarks: 'Make rain and fine weather—one man—the Council —by the nose'—bits of absurd sentences that got the better of my drowsiness, so that I had pretty near the whole of my wits about me . . . (p. 31)
>
> The two below me moved away then a few paces, and strolled back and forth at some little distance. I heard: 'Military post—doctor—two hundred miles—quite alone now—unavoidable delays—nine months—no news—strange rumours.' (p. 32)

Marlow gathers from these snatches of conversation between the manager and his uncle that they are talking about Kurtz. But these disjointed words and phrases, like some sort of riddle, do not satisfy Marlow nor the reader, both of whom are anxious to know more about Kurtz. Such vagueness irritates us, and yet, at the same time, draws us further into the plot just as a detective

story entices the reader towards the ending. So this lack of information, as well as the pattern of "delays" argued above has a positive effect on the reader. But even when the story draws to a close, the words which Kurtz utters are still fragmentary and incomplete. His last words are "The horror! The horror!"(p. 75).

Thus while *Heart of Darkness* contains the "centripetal" structure struggling to arrive at one exclusive meaning, it has various factors which submerge that structure and make the narrative obscure. Such factors can be found in the plot, Marlow as a narrator, and the characterization of Kurtz. Because of these elements the more the story tries to search for its meaning, the more its darkness seems to deepen. It should not be ignored, however, that this obscurity is produced through the very process of the story's attemting to express the inexpressible. And what is more, as we have seen, the increasing unlikelihood of the story having a definite meaning or coherence seems ironically to attract the reader more toward the center of the story. In short, the tension between the eagerness to get toward the meaning and the impossibilities of doing so produces the "centripetal" energy. And this energy urges the story forward, and also the reader looks forward to the coming ending in search of the clue to the story's meaning.

IV

In a sense, this story might be regarded as an allegory of the relation between reality and fiction. It seems that one of the aims which we desire to achieve in fiction is to have its description of reality complete, in other words, to enclose reality or "the infinite" with fiction or "the finite."[8] In *Heart of Darkness*, as already pointed out, the meaning is seen to exist outside the story like a haze or a misty halo; that is to say, the infinite meaning envelops the finite story. So the "centripetal" structure, which the finite story produces to search for the infinite meaning, might be said to

stand for the intention of completing the description of reality in fiction. On the other hand, we may say that the various factors which hinder that structure represent the impossibility of the above-mentioned process of enclosing "infinite reality" with "finite fiction." The story, evolving around Marlow's pursuit of Kurtz, seems to suggest the discord between fiction and reality, and therefore the desire of fiction to capture real life in itself.

A finality or closure, inevitably imposed on fiction, will surely be the most important among the impossible problems met in the process of describing reality in fiction. It is no new observation that modern writers have intended to break with such plausible finality so that their works may fully capture real life. The obscure ending of *Heart of Darkness* also has become the object of much criticism. And yet this obscurity seems to be caused by necessity rather than by intention on the author's part. It could be seen as the result of the novel's search for its true meaning.

Toward the end of his journey, Marlow finally meets Kurtz and hears his voice for which he has been longing. However, it cannot be said that what the encounter means is fully conveyed to the reader. The frustration experienced in the pursuit seems to remain at this stage. After Marlow's return to Europe, the information about Kurtz is still given to us by several men who visit the narrator. The story still continues its own quest; Kurtz's cousin talks about Kurtz's vast musical ability, and the journalist recounts that Kurtz had unlimited political capabilities. And then the last scene follows. Marlow's interview with Kurtz's "Intended" occurs in the gathering dusk. She asks Marlow for "Kurtz's last word—to live with." And he lies: "The last word he pronounced was—your name"(p. 79).

It can generally be said that the ending of a novel is given a privileged posion in the text. The reader expects it to offer some clues that may make him satisfied, for it exerts considerable power to convey the story's meaning. But this closing scene turns

out to be the most decisive factor in obscuring the story's meaning. Marlow's lie shakes the whole system of values which the story has so far constructed.

The scene always leads us to ask a question: Why did he tell the lie to her and what does it mean? It has been variously answered in the light of the story's theme. However, considering the points made above, the obscure ending seems to be an inevitable consequence produced through the structure of the story. From the first, the text has been urged forward by the "centripetal" energy which involves contradictions. The energy cannnot find its destination to reach. Nevertheless, the story has to make itself end because a closure not found in real life must inevitably be imposed on fiction. Ultimately, the impossibilities of arriving at the meaning seem to produce the "fictitious finality" in the book. And yet the "ficitious finality" differs essentially from that which the text of *Heart of Darkness* has aimed to reach since the beginning. The story has desired to achieve a finality by communicating its meaning or some truth.

V

This paper has argued that *Heart of Darkness* has many contradicions as far as its meaning is concerned. The story endeavors to establish one exclusive meaning and to convey it to the reader so as to provide him with a satisfying sense of finality. However, as we have seen, the more it seeks to do so, the more its darkness seems to deepen. It has also been pointed out that the text is full of a resigned attitude toward the efficacy of communication. Moreover it seems that this conflict between the aim of the story and its obstructions also exists in the author himself. We feel that Conrad was intuitively aware of the impossiblities of communicating fully the meaning of life through literature, while at the same time having faith in the "moral efficacy"[9] of such communication.

Though Conrad provides us with very little critical guidance, he writes, in his letter to Barnett Clark, about his aesthetic principles in the following words: "a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character."[10] And elsewhere, he admires a "certain lack of finality" that Henry James produces in his works because it reflects real life :

> ... it is obvious that a solution by rejection must always present *a certain lack of finality*, especially startling when contrasted with the usual methods of solution by rewards and punishments, by crowned love, by fortune, by a broken leg or a sudden death. Why the reading public which, as a body, has never laid upon a story-teller the command to be an artist, should demand from him this sham of Divine Omnipotence, is utterly incomprehensible.... His [James'] books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final. (italics mine)[11]

Though the two remarks above were written after the completion of *Heart of Darkness*, it seems clear that Conrad's vision was penetrating enough to be suspicious of plausible finality. His comments may be read as justifications of the incompleteness or obscurity of the story's closure. However, one senses throughtout the story an eagerness to arrive at one exclusive meaning and to communicate it to the reader. Furthermore, it should be noted that, in the middle of the above appreciation on James, there appear the following contradictory sentences: "But so it is; and these solutions are legistimate inasmuch as they satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn, with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth."[12]

It seems that Conrad was still searching for the finality "for

which our hearts yearn," while at same time intuitively aware of the impossibility of ever finding it in his fiction. we may say that the story's "centripetal" energy, produced by the tension betweeen these conflicting aspects, is the translation of Conrad's inner urge, an urge to convey to his readers one exclusive meaning and, thereby, a sense of finality. Thus, in *Heart of Darkness*, the author, the reader and the story itself search for its meaning.

NOTES

1) See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 15.

2) See Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981), pp. 4-6. "Effective closure," she writes, "cannot be assured solely by the unity or consistency of beginning, middle, and end. Nor need effective closure difinitively announced that the work has ended or reslove all the novel's aesthetic and thematic elements." And also, "The test [for effectiveness of closure] is the honesty and the appropriateness of the ending's relationship to beginning and middle, not the degree of finality or resolution achieved by the ending."

3) Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p. 79. All subsequent references are to this edition.

4) Conrad says about the idea of *Heart of Darkness* as follows: "The criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness when tackling the civilizing work in Africa is a justifiable idea." See Allan Ingram, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and* The Shadow-Line (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1986), pp. 47-48.

5) Lilian Feder, "Marlow's Descent Into Hell," *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium*, ed. R.W. Stallman (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1960), pp. 162-170.

6) Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambrige: Harvard UP, 1958), P. 39.

7) Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 180.

8) "More generally," writes Watt, "we surely sense in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad's supreme effort to reveal, in Baudelaire's phrase about Delacroix, 'the infinite in the finite.' This intention is suggested in Conrad's title." See *ibid.*, p. 199.

9) See Seymour Gross, "A Further Note on the Function of the Frame in 'Heart of Darkness'," Stallman ed., *op. cit.*, p. 184.
10) Allan Ingram, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 89.
11) Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1949), pp. 18-19.
12) Alan Friedman points out Conrad's conflicting impulses in the phrases quoted here. See Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), p. 76.