

ON THE EDGE OF THE HEART OF DARKNESS

by MICHAEL LEVENSON

Until fairly recently the first word of Conrad's title established the terms of critical analysis, functioning as a signpost directing readers inward. *Heart of Darkness* served as a paradigm of the psychological novel, almost a defining instance. Its political concerns appeared as the predictably deceptive surface that one had to penetrate in order to disclose dark truths about the human personality, truths most often associated with the insights of Nietzsche and Freud. Within this conception Marlow's journey only incidentally involves movement through physical space; in essence it represents a "journey into self," an "introspective plunge," "a night journey into the unconscious."¹

The tale itself offers abundant metaphoric support for this familiar line of interpretation. Marlow is first attracted to the Congo because it stands "Dead in the center" of the map (56).² He wonders what lies behind the coast and beneath the sea; when he arrives in Africa he travels to the Central Station. It then turns out, comically, cryptically, that the center is not near enough to the core; Marlow must travel hundreds of miles farther until he reaches the Inner Station, where he meets a man whose soul "had looked within itself, and . . . had gone mad" (145). Kurtz's passage into the wilderness is described as a "fantastic invasion" (131) — a characterization that applies equally well to certain habits of the novel's critics.

In the last several years, however, a reaction has set in against the prevailing psychological approach. A number of readers have asked just what Inner Thing lurks at the mysterious center. The heart, after all, is a heart of darkness; Kurtz is "hollow at the core" (131); the Manager suggests that "Men who come out here should have no entrails" (74); and when Marlow listens to the venomous brickmaker it seems to him that "if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe" (81). Confronted with images such as these, some recent critics have argued that *Heart of Darkness* dramatizes no confronta-

1. Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 33, 39. For other psychological interpretations of the novel, see Frederic Crews, "The Power of Darkness," *Partisan Review*, 34 (Fall 1967), 507-525; Bernard Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 154-159; Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 80-81.

2. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Youth and Two Other Stories* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1933), p. 56. All references to this work will be cited by page parenthetically within the text.

tion with a psychological truth but a recognition of the futility of truth-seeking.³

In an essay called "Connaissance du Vide" Todorov claims that the tale addresses a problem of interpretation rather than action and that, having meditated on the nature of knowledge, it concludes that knowledge is unattainable. Todorov emphasizes that we know very little about Kurtz, who is eagerly anticipated and vividly remembered but scarcely ever present. Marlow seeks to interpret, to understand, to know, Kurtz, but "Que la connaissance soit impossible, que le coeur des ténèbres soit lui-même ténébreux, le texte tout entier nous le dit." Marlow journeys to the center only to discover that "le centre est vide."⁴ Perry Meisel concurs, claiming that *Heart of Darkness* enacts a "crisis in knowledge": "Rather than a psychological work, *Heart of Darkness* is a text that interrogates the epistemological status of the language in which it inheres." The conclusion of that interrogation, the real horror in the tale, is "the impossibility of disclosing a central core, an essence, even a ground to what Kurtz has done and what he is."⁵

Psychological critics identify the heart as an emotional plentitude; epistemological critics look in the same place and find an emptiness. Both schools are preoccupied with a single image, the image of the central core, and while its importance cannot be doubted, it does not exhaust the intricacy of the work. Indeed *Heart of Darkness* offers another image that is just as persistent and just as necessary to its interpretation. Early in the tale the frame narrator describes the Thames waterway as "leading to the uttermost ends of the earth" (47). When Marlow begins to speak, he describes the terminus of his journey as "the farthest point of navigation" (51). And in the description of Kurtz's final moment Marlow notes that

he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; 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. (151)

Here then is the image to which I referred: the image of the end, the limit, the threshold, the edge, the border. Alongside the metaphors of penetration and invasion, the tale offers these figures of *extension*, a reaching towards some distant point on the limit of experience. "I went a little farther," says

3. Early statements of this position appeared in J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1965), pp. 20-26; and James Guetti, *The Limits of Metaphor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 58-67. For a deconstructionist version of this approach, see Arnold Krupat, "Antonymy, Language, and Value in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *The Missouri Review*, 3(Fall 1979), 63-85.

4. Tzvetan Todorov, "Connaissance du Vide," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 11(Spring 1975), p. 152.

5. Perry Meisel, "Decentering *Heart of Darkness*," *Modern Language Studies*, 8(Fall 1978), 26, 25.

the Russian, "then still a little farther — till I had gone so far that I don't know how I'll ever get back" (126). Kurtz, who has passed "beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (144), understands the implications "only at the very last" (131). And when Marlow visits the Intended, he hears a whisper "speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness" (159).

An important instance of this figure occurs in the much-quoted passage describing Marlow's method of storytelling, where the frame narrator explains that for Marlow "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a slow glow brings out a haze" (48). In the present context this example must surely persuade us that it is insufficient to look towards the center and to ask whether it is psychologically replete or epistemologically vacuous. Too much in *Heart of Darkness* occurs at the last, over the edge, beyond the threshold, at "the end — even beyond" (143).

The two motifs which dominate the tale are more than two evocative figures; they are controlling principles of significance. Center and edge identify decisive moments in experience: confrontation with its essence or its end, accession to the innermost core or the outermost boundary. These metaphors recur with pointed emphasis throughout the modern period, but they are usually pursued independently. After all, the figures are in obvious respects antithetical, and we certainly need to ask what they are doing in the same work.

In the story's opening description the frame narrator describes the nautical demeanor of the Director of Companies and observes that "It was difficult to realize his work was not *out there* in the luminous estuary, but behind him, *within* the brooding gloom (45, my emphasis). The conjunction of the two images within a single sentence establishes their intimacy; in this first example the relations between them are perspicuous and undisturbing. "Out there" lies in one direction; "within" lies in the other. During this prologue London appears as the originating interior, "the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth" (45), a moral source from which there emanates "messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred land." The narrator invokes the English naval past which he represents as an heroic movement "from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erith" to "the uttermost ends of the earth" (47).

As soon as Marlow begins to speak he inverts this stable relation of "from" and "to." He invokes the memory of a Roman soldier in Britain: "Imagine him here — the very end of the world" (49). London, which had been the generating center, now becomes the distant frontier.⁶ Moreover,

6. In the context of arguing that *Heart of Darkness* is a "decentered" narrative Meisel refers to the movement from London to Rome to the Congo, p. 23. Said, too, invokes the concept of a shifting center defined by its "radiating significance" rather than time or geography. While this emphasis is helpful, I am arguing that it achieves its due force only when linked to the opposing topos. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 96.

the specific formulation of this point is highly disquieting. "Here" always locates an experiential center, the place one presently occupies, the standpoint from which one looks onto the universe. To speak of "here" as "the end of the world" is to confute the categories of perceptual experience, a task at which Marlow excels. Thus he represents the Congo as both the center of the earth and the farthest point of navigation. When he arrives in the very heart of darkness he finds himself "on the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy" (96). And, according to Marlow, it is when Kurtz is passing over "the threshold" that he is able "to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness" (151). In the tale's concluding image the frame narrator repeats his original spatial perception but now entangles it within the figure that he has learned from Marlow: "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky — seemed to lead one into the heart of an immense darkness" (162).

Within the uncanny geography of darkness these two antithetical images fuse into a spatial paradox. To travel to the edge is to find oneself at the heart, and to approach the center is to stand on the threshold. In *Heart of Darkness* the center lies on the circumference; the middle is on the periphery.

It is possible to situate, if not to explain, this paradox by connecting it to a particular moment in the history of the European mind. One of the unintended consequences of imperialist expansion at the end of the nineteenth century was the accumulation of anthropological insights. The search for new commodities inadvertently uncovered new cultures. Marlow travels to Africa as part of the new economic imperium, but his own deportment, as James Clifford had pointed out, is closer to the imperialist's ideological cousin, the ethnographer.⁷ He looks at the natives "as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses" (105), and he comes to a perception that contemporary ethnographers were more or less painfully sharing: namely that the "mind of man is capable of anything — because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (96).

This recognition gives us another form of our spatial conundrum. In the age of anthropology the European mind can only discover truths about its origins by going outside the limits of its culture. It can only learn all that it contains by passing beyond its own boundaries. The doctor who examines Marlow before his departure remarks that "the changes take place inside, you know.' He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there'" (58). The cryptic observation epitomizes the relations between edge and center. "Out there" changes occur "inside."

We may conclude by juxtaposing two remarks about the mind. The Russian twice says to Marlow that Kurtz has "enlarged my mind" (125,

7. James Clifford, "The Ethnographic Self: Malinowski and Conrad," Convention on "Reconstructing Individualism," Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford, 20 Feb. 1984.

140). On the other hand Marlow himself, in the comment cited above, holds that everything is *in* "the mind of man." Here is an explicitly psychological form of the two figures we have been tracing. In the first the boundaries of the mind are extended; in the second the mind contains all experience. In an important respect the psychological movement of the tale is an outward movement which displays what was already within. Marlow crosses the limits of experience only to find that there is no novelty in psychic life; there is only new acquaintance with permanent possibilities. The mind enlarges until it is wide enough to contain what it always has.

One hopes that such considerations will encourage the psychologists and the epistemologists to begin speaking to one another. For once we recognize this odd dialectic of center and edge, then it will no longer do to say that Kurtz's absence annuls his psychological pertinence. Nor will it serve to lodge Kurtz securely in Marlow's mind without acknowledging that the inner core continually flees over the horizon. "It is not my own extremity I remember best," observes Marlow, "No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through" (151).⁸ This assertion conveys all the force of that ambiguity we have traced. One's own central experience depends on the extremity of another. Kurtz may be "inconceivable," "unspeakable," and "impenetrable," but these notorious Conradian negatives have a double function; they indicate what is both epistemologically absent and psychologically present.

To the claim that *Heart of Darkness* is a journey within, we must respond that it is so only because it is also a journey without; the "introspective plunge" only becomes possible in the act of crossing a frontier. And to Todorov's claim that the novel exposes an empty center and thus the impossibility of knowledge, we need to point out that he was looking for the center in the wrong, though likely, place. Like any reasonable man he assumed that the center was in the middle, but the heart of darkness lies on the border of experience.

8. For a moral and psychological reading of this image, see Murray Kreiger, *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), p. 155.