The Writing and Unwriting of History in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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Introduction

The concept of writing and unwriting in the title of the present essay has been adopted from Virginia Woolf's short story, "An Unwritten Novel" (1920). Woolf's short story is a metafictional parable about the struggle between the narrator's desire to write and the character's resistance to be written. The narrator attempts to write a woman's history, but the attempt is thwarted by the reality of that woman's life. The character escapes the narrator's prison house of language at the last moment, and the narrator blesses the character's escape, for it is also the narrator's escape from her own self-imprisoning house of writing.

In Woolf's short story, the first-person narrator-writer finds herself face to face with a middle-aged woman in a compartment on the train bound for Eastbourne. Unlike the other passengers who got off earlier, who smoked, read, or checked a pocket book, the woman "does nothing at all" (112), and this immediately rouses the narrator's desire to write the woman's history in the belief that "Life's what you see in people's eyes" (112), and that "the eyes of others [are] our prisons; their thoughts our cages" (117). Through furtive glances over the edges of the *Times*, the narrator observes and reads the woman, and mentally begins to write her life history. The narrator gives the woman a name – Minnie Marsh, a spinster – , a human relationship – a difficult sister-in-law in Eastbourne – , a

blamable past – a sinful negligence of her baby brother – , and a punishing God – "a brute old bully" (115). The narrator's story of the woman's history goes on, "gathering richness and rotundity, destiny and tragedy" (117-18), until the narrator is heading the woman "straight for madness" (116). However, on arriving at Eastbourne, the woman is met by her son, and they walk away home together. The narrator's history of Minnie Marsh is completely unwritten, and the "poor woman" escapes from the narrator's tragic emplotment and entrapment in the unknown figure of a happy mother.

The narrator admits, and even celebrates, the unwriting of her own history of Minnie Marsh. After the defeat of her writing, the narrator feels that "life's bare as bone" (121), but the sort of life the narrator has seen in the woman and written as Minnie Marsh's history is in fact the narrator's own life and history. The narrator's attempt to write, and, by writing, to imprison the woman as a tragic figure is the narrator's unconscious or involuntary attempt at self-expression. In short, Minnie Marsh is the name not of the woman, but of the narrator. Finally, the narrator thankfully addresses the woman and her son who have unwritten the narrator's writing by saying, "it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me – adorable world!" (121). The woman has not only escaped from the narrator's imprisoning writing, but also rescued the narrator out of it.

It is important to note here that in Woolf's metafictional parable, the opposition is not between fiction and reality, writing and life, or story and history. As an art form, "An Unwritten Novel" is masterfully written, but it is written about the unwriting of a certain kind of writing. More broadly speaking, it is impossible to distinguish the form and the content of history, or history-writing and history, as the double meaning of the term *historie* as well as the practice of historiography shows. If history is a

sequence of events, the sequence is not given in events themselves, but only in the historian's writing; and, moreover, the notion of a historical event itself is often considered to be no more than an effect of the historian's choice of writing about it as such (cf. White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" in *The Content of the Form* and "The Historical Event" in *The Practical Past*[1]). That is to say, writing and reality are not opposed to each other. If reality is an effect of writing, then any writing produces its own reality. The opposition between reality and writing is in fact an opposition between two different modes of writing which both claim to be only "describing" what each calls reality. Woolf's narrator has said, "life's what you see in people's eyes." The narrator has seen life in the woman's "eyes" and written it as Minnie Marsh's life, but when the narrator comes to see she has seen her wrong, she has unwritten her writing. As far as the meaning of history / story is concerned, writing and seeing are the same act of creating reality by claiming only to "perceive" it. One may see and write wrong or right. Reality is a matter of seeing and writing either way. Hence, the real opposition is not between fiction and reality, but between truth and illusion, that is to say, between different versions of reality and its meaning created by two different modes of writing.

Marlow, the narrator of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, asks his listeners, "Do you see him [i.e. Kurtz]? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (42)[2] *Heart of Darkness* is a novel written about its narrator's continuous acts of writing and unwriting of its central character's history / story.

I. The Writing of History

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a novel written on the basis of his experience in Congo in June through December, 1890. The novel has two

non-literary pre-texts: "The Congo Diary" dated June 13 through August 1, and the "Up-River Book" dated August 3 and 4. If a novel or a written story / history is a literary text which presents a structured system of meanings developed in sequential time, the two pre-texts are both non-literary, the one being no more than a daily chronicle, and the other being no more than a technical manual.

"The Congo Diary" is a travel log, a factual record of spatial movement in time. Its principal function is to note the direction taken and the distance covered on a particular day on the itinerary. The essential form of notation would be like "Thursday, 3rd July. / … / Section of today's road. / [a drawing: section of the day's march] / General direction NNE-SSW / Distance – 15 miles." (9). The entry might be supplemented sometimes with the information on the time taken or the name of a place reached – "Today's march – 3h. / … / Arrived at Manyanga at 9h a.m." (11) –, or on the weather – "No sunshine. Gloomy cold day. Squalls" (13). Non-essential personal observations are occasionally inserted on what the traveler saw or heard: he saw "Fine effect of red hill covered in places by dark-green vegetation" (11) as well as "another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose" (9); he heard "Bird notes charming. One especially, a flute-like note" (8), as well as "shouts and drumming in distant villages" (9). He also comments on the people he met on the journey: "Prominent characteristic of the social life here: people speaking ill of each other" (7); "Made the acquaintance of Mr. Roger Casement, which I should consider as a great pleasure under any circumstances and now it becomes a positive piece of luck" (7). The principle connecting and organizing all these facts and observations of varying nature and status is that of the chronology of dates. Facts and observations are first grouped together in an entry on a particular day, and then connected with entries on other days within the chronological order of the progression of days. The chronology assumes

and depends on the presence of all consecutive days, including the missing days with no entry, for its sole and absolute organizational principle.

The "Up-River Book," on the other hand, is intended to be a practical navigation manual. It sets down a series of proper procedures to follow in an abstract time sequence in order to perform a given task successfully. In fact, the task – a safe navigation from the first point to the last – is the organizational principle of this text. The task is to be performed any day by anybody. References to specific dates, such as "3. Aug[u]st 1890" or "4th Aug" have no relevance to the Book, except for indicating the day the Book itself was commenced or the entry made, for the changing seasons may affect the general look of the river or the marks on the banks. The reference to the ship's name – "S.S. 'Roi des Belges'" – is equally irrelevant, unless the ship's size and capacities may remind the reader of a necessary readjustment in the factual details of the manual for other ships. The notations are without tense or personal pronoun. The basic formula is "As you do this, do that." The imperative mood works not with the time continuum of the past-present-future, but only with the order of before-simultaneous-after; the second-person subject "you" is a pure agent, who could be anybody, all nameless and faceless, theoretically posited by the task itself. The "general direction" in "the Congo Diary" is farther differentiated in the "Up-River Book" by more detailed cross-references among "positions" and "points" marked on the accompanying navigational charts: "Position F. ENE. Patch about ESE – Pass along sand shore not far from point ◬ steering well in. Island X on the starboard side and generally kept ahead" (17-18). The focal points of the manual naturally fall on various dangers caused by the discrepancy between appearance and reality, or visibility and invisibility. "No islands visible. Left bank island presents appearance of mainland. Bank II covered at H[igh] W[ater]" (17); "A small island app[arent]ly closes the passage. When nearing the end of X *must* keep close and steer

into the bay 8 getting the clump of trees on the port side" (18). The task demands the navigator's ability to penetrate the appearances and coverings into the reality of things, the real contours of objects on the way. Thus the abstract time of arduous procedures is coupled with the dangers of the treacherous observational space.

Neither "The Congo Diary" nor the "Up-River Book" is history *per se*. In the former nothing develops; there is only a mechanical progression of days according to the cosmic inhumane chronology, and there is no vital connection, no real sequence, among the happenings slotted into each segment of time. In the latter, the impersonal notions of task, and its concomitant duty and required ability reign supreme. There is no human but only an abstract agent, nor is there any real danger but only a possible error in the professional maritime procedure. In short, neither text presents history / story as a structured system of meanings developed in sequential time.

"The Congo Diary" and the "Up-River Book" are written into history in *Heart of Darkness*. The novelist writes a history out of the sailor's logbook and manual. The sequential time installed in history first liberates each segment of time from its anchoring in the date, which is the organizational principle of chronology, and then connects the separate segments of time internally and thematically with each other as a continuous process of development, not as a mechanical procedure for performing an abstract task. The sequential time is a linear time connecting not, say, Aug 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, but the beginning, middle, and end. The beginning, middle, and end thus connected constitute an independent and autonomous whole – a whole of a human experience – , which embodies itself as a process of development up to its completion. Thus a history of human experience fictionalizes itself by introducing a new principle of organization other than that of mere chronology, and historicizes and humanizes itself by

reorganizing the anonymous and impersonal procedure into a humanely meaningful development in time.

The history in *Heart of Darkness* is further structured – emplotted – specifically in the mode of romance. The end as a point of completion functions as a goal when seen from the point of beginning, and as a criterion by which to measure and evaluate the middle in the whole process of progress towards the end. *Heart of Darkness* suggests various ways to characterize and semanticize the beginning, middle and end, but as far as the end functions as a positive goal, the history is basically emplotted as a romance of ascent. The purposive progression in the middle could be characterized as a quest of knowledge begun in ignorance, as an adventure for experience begun in innocence, as a conquest by prowess begun in passive inertia, or as a pilgrimage towards a saint-hero begun in spiritual apathy. The basic metaphor covering all these characterizations of the movement from the beginning to the end is that of a movement from darkness towards light, from blank towards plenitude.

The characterizations and valorizations of the beginning, middle, and end are dispersed throughout the text of *Heart of Darkness* almost in a random way, and this shows that its emplotment as a romance of ascent has been gradually formulated within the text, and that the designation of one of the three plot moments automatically, if only tacitly, defines the other two.

For instance, several pages before the end of the novel, and at the moment just before Kurtz's death, the narrator Marlow defines the end of his narrative, as follows:

> 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 –. (177)

Kurtz's self-knowledge is also the object of Marlow's quest for the knowledge of human truth. As far as Kurtz is identified with humanity, especially as a quester of self-knowledge, Kurtz is a sage-saint who has lived all human "desire, temptation, and surrender," and Marlow is his faithful pilgrim-believer. Hence, Kurtz's "supreme moment of complete knowledge" is also "the culminating point" of Marlow's journey, as he says at the beginning of his narrative: "… I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap [i.e. Kurtz]. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me – and into my thoughts" (107). Kurtz's "complete knowledge" retroactively structures and completes Marlow's history of quest for that knowledge. It clarifies and defines the ultimate point of meaningfulness of Marlow's own life.

Well before actually meeting Kurtz, however, Marlow has already found that Kurtz had defined the middle of his life-history in more realistic and pragmatic terms in his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs as a representative of the European mission to civilize dark Africa. Marlow summarizes and quotes Kurtz's report: "He began with the argument that we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings – we approach them with the might as of a deity,' and so on, and so on. 'By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded,' &c., &c." (155). The repeated "so on" and "&c." may sound somewhat reserved, but the effects of Kurtz's words upon Marlow are genuine and powerful, as he acknowledges: "From that point he soared and took me with him. 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" (155). The notion of a high mission and a noble cause emplots Kurtz's life-history as a struggle for conquest, as a trial of strength for victory, as an endeavor for self-fulfillment as a true hero, leading Marlow as one of his hero-worshipping followers. And this is accomplished simply by his "power of eloquence," his words regarded as the source of Kurtz's power to emplot his own life-history as a struggle for victory as well as his power of actually achieving it. Hence, Kurtz is, above all, a hero-orator. Earlier, Marlow had heard an echo of Kurtz's "burning noble words" repeated in a prosaic banal paraphrase version when the brickmaker of the Central Station comments on Kurtz: "He is a prodigy…. He is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else. We want … for the guidance of the cause entrusted to us by Europe, so to speak, higher intelligence, wide sympathies, a singleness of purpose" (127).

As for the origin of the romantic emplotment, Marlow supplies an account of the inception of his own voyage to Africa not in terms of a purpose at the end, but in terms of an impetus for starting out at the beginning. Marlow talks about "a passion" and "a hankering" as a motive and prime mover for his journey:

> Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there…. But there was one yet – the biggest, the most blank, so to speak – that I had a hankering after. /

> …. / a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. (108)

The fact that Marlow emphasizes his own boyhood here suggests that the journey he actually takes later is his life journey from boyhood to adulthood to test his loyalty to the glorious dream of his boyhood. Marlow finds later and only gradually a concrete objective – a purpose at the end – for his journey in the figure of Kurtz the sage-hero, and this indicates that Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz is equal to his loyalty to his own boyish dream, and also that Kurtz himself when a boy must have had the similar kind of "passion" and "hankering" before he later gave his dream a concrete purpose in the form of a mission stated in his report for the International Society. The first narrator of the framing narrative in *Heart of Darkness* universalizes the daydreams of small boys into the glorious dreams of all great men – generations of explorers and empire-builders setting out from the Thames: "Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! … The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (105). The first narrator fastens together the beginning, middle and end of the romantic emplotment into a single line of history – a history of the dream of human greatness dreamt by all boys and adults everywhere upon the face of the earth. And the author Conrad himself acknowledges Marlow's boyish dream as his own and repeated it almost verbatim twice, in his *Personal Record* (1912) and in "Geography and Some Explorers" in his *Last Essays* (1926). In the former he writes, "It was in 1868, when nine years old or thereabouts, that while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting my finger on the blank space then representing the unsolved mystery of that continent, I said to

myself with absolute assurance and an amazing audacity which are no longer in my character now. / 'When I grow up I shall go *there*'" (27). In the latter, he speaks of his "early geographical enthusiasm" and writes "One day, putting my finger on a spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa, I declared that some day I would go there" (24). All these textual and contextual testimonies are significant in attesting to the essential affinity – bond and fellowship – of the author, the framing narrator, Marlow, and Kurtz, and in indicating that they all had once dreamt the same dream, a dream of a history of human greatness, a dream of witnessing the human greatness actually realized in history.

I would like to suggest here that the most powerful paradigm in nineteenth-century Europe for the writing of history as a continual process of realization of human greatness was G. W. Hegel's philosophical historiography and Thomas Carlyle's romantic historiography. The essence of human greatness was defined by Hegel as Reason or Spirit, and located by Carlyle in the figure of a hero.

In the introduction to his *Philosophy of History* (1822-25), Hegel defines the precise point of the beginning of the world history and its subsequent movements upon the world map:

> At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit…. What we properly understand by Africa [and "the African Spirit"] is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.
>
> Having eliminated this introductory element, we find ourselves for the first time on the real theatre of History. It now only remains for us to give a prefatory sketch of the Geographical basis of the Asiatic and European world. *Asia* is, characteristically, the *Orient*

> quarter of the globe – the region of origination. It is indeed a Western world for America; but as Europe presents on the whole, the centre and end of the old world, and is absolutely the *West* – so Asia is absolutely the *East*.
>
> In Asia arose the Light of Spirit, and therefore the history of the World. (99)

At the inceptive moment of world history, Africa is excluded in the name of the historically developing spirit. Only "the Light of Spirit" can announce the dawn of the world history, and Africa still slumbers motionless in the darkness of "mere nature" and animal materiality. Once awakened, "the Light of Spirit" moves from the East to the West, from the periphery to the center, from the beginning to the end, and this movement – "the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase" (99) – constitutes world history.

And at the very end of his book, in Part IV "The German World," Section III "The Modern Time," Hegel declares the end of world history, as follows:

> That the History of the World, with all the changing scenes which its annals present, is this process of development and the realization of Spirit – this is the true *Theodicœa*, the justification of God in History. Only *this* insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World – viz., that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not "without God," but is essentially His Work. (457)

This is not a God brought in at the last moment as a sort of historical *deus ex machina* among the chaos of "all the changing scenes which its annals present," but the godly in the human spirit, the sole, true creator and mover of world history, which only philosophical historiography can find, penetrating the surface of all the confused annals. God and the human spirit are one and the same in being a creative, self-realizing Idea and they

share its glory:

> Philosophy concerns itself only with the glory of the Idea mirroring itself in the History of the World. Philosophy escapes from the weary strife of passions that agitate the surface of society into the calm region of contemplation; that which interests it is the recognition of the process of development which the Idea has passed through in realizing itself – *i.e.* the Idea of Freedom, whose reality is the consciousness of Freedom and nothing short of it. (457)

With the beginning and the end of world history being thus defined, Hegel charts the middle as a dialectical movement of Spirit and the Idea of Freedom towards a complete self-realization: the objective (nature and the material) as a thesis, the subjective (spirit and the human consciousness) as an antithesis, and the subjective fully realized as the objective as a synthesis; the Asiatic despotism where only one is free as a thesis, the feudal state of strife among individual wills where some are free as an antithesis, and the modern nation-state – Hegel's own modern Germany – where all are free under the law as a synthesis.

Thomas Carlyle, on the other hand, in his short essay "On History" (1830) asserts that history is "the first distinct product of man's spiritual nature; his earliest expression of what can be called Thought. It is a looking both before and after; as, indeed, the coming Time already waits, unseen, yet definitely shaped, predetermined and inevitable, in the Time come; and only by combination of both is the meaning of either completed" (83). However, since the spiritual meaning of history is hidden under the apparently chaotic surface of historical contingencies, Carlyle calls for "historical Philosophy" to penetrate that surface to find the spiritual meaning of history and its guiding "wisdom":

> historical Philosophy has yet properly deciphered the first element of all science in this kind [i.e. "reading by Experience"]: what the aim

> and significance of that wondrous changeful Life it investigates and paints may be? Whence the course of man's destinies in this Earth originated, and whither they are tending? Or, indeed, if they have any course and tendency, are really guided forward by an unseen mysterious Wisdom, or only circle in blind mazes without recognisable guidance? (85)

The opposition between the "blind mazes" and the "mysterious Wisdom" – between chaotic contingency and purposive rationality – is reformulated, in Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), into the opposition between the outer and the inner, the body and the soul, darkness and light, the visible and the invisible, and these opposites are reconciled – synthesized and sublated – in the relationship between the hero and the hero-worshippers. Carlyle writes,

> Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thought that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. (1)

The world history is the outer material embodiment of the inner thought of great men; the soul of great men realizes itself through the body of the "general mass of men"; all what humanity has achieved in history – "universal history" – is the result of the work done by the physical laborers working in loyal worship of the spiritual models given by their leading heroes. The hero is "the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness

of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness" (2). The spiritual light of the hero's inner thought conquers the dark inertia of the material world, and creates a glorious human world through the work of his followers of his creative fiat and "faith in an Invisible, not as real only, but as the only reality" (3). Thus, Carlyle continues, the hero appears as a divinity before men in "the oldest form of Heroism" (3), and he appears as a prophet (Mahomet), poet (Dante, Shakespeare), priest (Luther and Knox), man of letters (Johnson, Rousseau, and Burns), and king (Cromwell and Napoleon) in his successively changing forms. Their qualifications as heroes consist in the fact that they all had the inner thought expressed as the word which was believed in as a spiritual light under whose guidance the general mass of men moved the world towards a new glorious historical phase.

Thus, it is clear enough, hopefully, that Conrad's attempt at writing history as romance in *Heart of Darkness* is fundamentally cognate with, if not a direct descendant from, the historiography of Hegel and Carlyle. The quest for complete self-knowledge, the boyish daydreams over glorious explorations, or the devotion to the lofty civilizing missions —— all these share the same temporal emplotment with the philosophical and romantic notions of world history as a continuous process of self-realization of the godly spirit in Western men.

II. The Unwriting of History

In *Heart of Darkness*, history is written and unwritten at the same time. The writing and unwriting of history are constantly at strife with each other. The emplotment of history as romance is threatened by the problematization and disfigurement of its ends and beginnings, and yet

the romantic emplotment survives by developing another emplotment – that of suspense and postponement. The unwriting impedes the horizontal linear progression of romantic emplotment from beginning to end by a vertical semantic split of the historical field into appearance and reality, suggesting the presence of another "real" history, and thereby indicting the apparent history as false. The strife between the writing and unwriting is sustained to the very end of the text. In fact, the text of *Heart of Darkness* is a metahistorical writing of the history of the opposition between the writing and unwriting of history.

From the extra-textual retrospective perspective, both the beginning and the end of the romantic emplotment are indicted as sinful and disfigured. In *A Personal Record*, commenting on the "absolute assurance and an amazing audacity" of his boyish days, Conrad makes clear that they are "no longer in [his] character *now*" (27; italics mine). He did accomplish his boyish ambition: "Yes, I *did* go there: there being the region of Stanley Falls which in '68 was the blankest of blank spaces on the earth's figured surface," but he quite soberly assesses his own accomplishment: his whole experience there was "as if the sin of childish audacity was to be visited on my *mature* head" (27; the second italics mine). The discrepancy between the boy's dream at the beginning and the man's reality at the end is experienced as a painful disillusionment. The same discrepancy is described in "Geography and Some Explorers" as an experience profoundly melancholic. He did find himself on "the very spot of [his] boyish boast" (25) – "a spot in the very middle of the then white heart of Africa" (24) –, but he was the only white man awake to see "everything was dark under the stars":

> A great melancholy descended on me. Yes, this was the very spot. But there was no shadowy friend to stand by my side in the night of enormous wilderness, no great haunting memory, but only the unholy recollection of a prosaic newspaper 'stunt' and the distasteful

> knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration. What an end to the idealised realities of a boy's daydreams! (25)

The boy's poetic idealization has ended in the adult's painful knowledge that the romance – the possibility of an emplotment – of a glorious history of quest for human greatness has been completely "disfigured."

The same problematization of the beginning and end of the romantic emplotment is carried out within the text of *Heart of Darkness*, not as a final judgment given at a detached authorial-narratorial critical distance, but as some momentary yet ominous suggestions and glimpses given to the first-person narrator-character, Marlow, living forward in his history of quest. They do not stop the history, they do move the history forward and continue to write the history, but as they write it, they undermine it at the same time.

Punishment of the boy's sin is metaphorically suggested as a "snake" for his foolish "hankering" in the description of the Congo River on the map he watches: "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird – a silly little bird" (108). This may be a simple and perhaps banal metaphor in an objective description of a river on the map, but it functions as an idea suggesting another history, as powerful and persistent as the boy's glorious idea for his "silly" history: "I went on along Fleet Street, but could not shake off the idea. The snake had charmed me" (108). In a similar vein, the end of the romantic emplotment is problematized early in the text, at the precise moment when the figure of Kurtz is first established an a goal of Marlow's journey in his encounter with the brickmaker. Marlow asks, "Who is this Mr. Kurtz?" and the brickmaker answers, first objectively, that he is "the

chief of the Inner Station," and then metaphorically, that he is "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress," and unintentionally adds, "and *devil* knows what else" (127; italics mine). Marlow further questions the brickmaker, asking "Who says that?" and the alleged witness undermines the authority of his own testimony, answering, "Lots of them" (127). "Light dawned upon me" (127): Marlow gains a glimpse of reality below the surface of the brickmaker's words – a mechanical rote of set phrases of a testimony supposedly based on a general opinion but in fact prepared ready-made for a specific group of listeners. Marlow correctly opines that the brickmaker speaks on a wrong supposition that Marlow is a member of "the gang of virtue" headed by Kurtz who may control the Company in the near future. Marlow has already gained a new piece of knowledge: the brickmaker criminally reads the Company's confidential correspondence, and it is his wrong interpretation of Marlow's position that has motivated him to tell Marlow who and what Kurtz is supposed to be. Marlow now sees correctly what the brickmaker is – the "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" with "nothing inside but a little dirt" (128) – , and doubts the validity of what he says about Kurtz. Thus, Kurtz as an end of Marlow's journey-history is written and unwritten at the same time.

The basic structure of Marlow's unwriting of history by means of a vertical semantic split of the horizontal progressive romantic emplotment is explained by the framing narrator when he knows he is about to hear another of Marlow's "inconclusive experiences" (107):

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made

visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (105)

Marlow's historiography – his writing and unwriting – splits history into the outside and the inside, surface and depth, appearance and reality, and dislocates the locus of meaning by putting it inside out and exploding a kernel into a misty halo. And this fundamentally problematizes, if not totally negates, the romantic emplotment *à la* Hegel and Carlyle: Hegel's vision of history as a process in which Reason, or human spirit-deity, realizes itself outward in the objective reality, and Carlyle's vision of history as a process in which the hero embodies his spirit in each historical phase through the collective work of his worshippers. The inside may have expressed itself in the outside, but the outside thus created may possibly suggest the presence of another inside, another origin. Or, the outside coupled with the inside as the latter's complete external self-realization may seem to suggest yet another inside on the verge of self-betrayal in yet another, more "misty" and dubious outside. For instance, Hegel excluded Africa at the precise moment of installment of his philosophical emplotment of world history. At the very beginning of his writing of history, Africa as a part of the real world is voided. And, it is strongly suspected that this act of voiding Africa is the very condition which enabled the inception of his philosophical historiography; Africa as an empty space – blank and white – is the very cause and effect of Hegel's *desire* to fill it in with his writing. The moment of birth of the idea of Reason, or World Spirit, as the true beginning of his philosophical historiography is secretly preceded by the moment of birth of a desire to write a world history as a pure Western theodicy. Carlyle's romanticization of hero-divinity as an inner spiritual light that is to enlighten the darkness of the material world and Marlow's "hankering" and "fascination" in his boyish glorious dreaming over the "most blank" region in the dark continent – to both can be assigned the same origin in their *desire* to write down a glorious history on a bleached

white paper, to fill in with their words the space already voided to suit that particular purpose[3].

In Marlow's history-writing, because of its split of reality between the outer and inner, surface and depth, the meanings are constantly dislocated, refracted and dispersed in an endless series of interpretations, and this introduces irony, another principle of emplotment. A tentative interpretation is ironically pitted against another opposing interpretation, and negated almost, but not quite. And yet, one is always haunted by the other. The conflict of two interpretations is sustained, now reformulated as a new task of discerning between the true and false, the authentic and the pretended, in an endless interpretive task to articulate the meaning of a silent voice.

Even prior to the beginning of his actual voyage, Marlow is baffled in the Company's office by "something ominous" (111) about a series of opposing interpretations ironically juxtaposed: "a large shining map" of Africa showing the stations where "the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer" along the river "fascinating – deadly – like a snake" (110); the two women knitting black wool who give young recruits with "foolish and cheery countenances" "the same quick glance of unconcerned wisdom," which Marlow later reinterprets by recalling it as something "uncanny and fateful" as that of the guardians of "the door of Darkness" (111); a doctor who advises Marlow to "avoid irritation more than exposure to the sun" and "before everything keep calm" while measuring his crania, asking him about madness and alienation in his family as a potential cause for "the changes [which] take place inside" the head in Africa, all "in the interests of science" (112).

Out on the sea, Marlow experiences the same split of two opposing interpretations – interpretive readings and writings – ironically juxtaposed, one canceled by the other, as an "enigma" before his eyes, "smiling,

frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out" (114). Marlow is far from solving the enigma, but rather he himself is dislocated by it and loses a sense of reality. In his utter isolation with "no point of contact" with the surrounding things and men, everything appears part of "some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister back-cloth" (114), and he feels himself kept "away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion" (114). His arduous quest for truth – his "weary pilgrimage" – gradually comes to be haunted by "hints for nightmares" (115).

The semantic split of reality by ironic juxtaposition of its two conflicting versions makes the enigma proliferate itself, refracting and displacing itself into an endless series of incomprehensibilities. One of the earliest ironic juxtapositions is a contrast between "black fellows" in a boat off the shore and a French man-of-war shelling the continent to destroy the hidden invisible "enemies." Black fellows are "natural and true" enough to want "no excuse for being there," belonging to "a world of straightforward facts," whereas the presence and actions of the white man-of-war are "incomprehensible" with "a touch of inanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight" (114, 115). The reality of the one is ironically juxtaposed to the non-reality of the other, but it is the latter's "fantastic invasion" (125) which corrodes the former's reality into an unrecognizable grotesquery. Later on land, Marlow sees six black men – chain-ganged prisoner-slaves, allegedly "criminals," working on a railway construction site, some of whom are dying like phantoms with white worsted imported from Europe round their necks. Marlow also meets there a white chief accountant devoted to having his books "in apple-pie order" and keeping up his appearances – his high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots and got-up shirt-fronts – as "achievements of character" (118, 119). The reality of

black fellows has been eroded into a mere shade of dying phantoms, while the inanity of the white man-of-war has been dressed up with the fantastic solidity and perfect order in the accountant's immaculate appearances and account books.

The images of the black and the white are each further split and waver enigmatically between ironically juxtaposed figures. Later on the river, wrapped in a white fog in which the contours of the world are dissolved except for "a misty strip of water" (143), the images of the black are split and suspended as "one of those human secrets that baffle probability" (145) between their alleged cannibalistic habits on one hand, and their actual surprising moral restraints in the face of "an inexorable physical necessity" (57) on the other, or in the case of the attack by the invisible enemies on the bank, between "a tremulous and prolonged wail of mournful fear and utter despair" of the alleged "enemies" on the bank on one hand, and the helmsman's "black death-mask" with "an inconceivably somber, brooding, and menacing expression," its "lustre of inquiring glance [fading] swiftly into vacant glassiness" (151), on the other.

As the enigmatic images of the black tragically deepen, the images of the white splinter themselves farcically, almost hilariously, thereby making the image of the absent Kurtz even more shining and dark at the same time. The figure of the brickmaker has been preceded by that of the chief accountant who had first told Marlow about Kurtz as "a first-class agent" and "a very remarkable person" (120). The district manager, a common trader, great in his littleness, only good at keeping the routine going, tells Marlow that Kurtz is "the best agent he had, an exceptional man, of the greatest importance to the Company," but a stealthy smile at the end of his speeches "make the meaning of the commonest phrase appear absolutely inscrutable" (124, 123). The manager is joined by his uncle, a white man on a donkey, heading the Eldorado Exploring Expedition,

whose talk is "the talk of sordid buccaneers" which is "reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things are wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (133). The Central Station itself is filled with "an air of plotting": "it was as unreal as everything else – as the philanthropic pretence of the whole concern, as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading-post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages" (126). All white men are split, or, to be more exact, they pride themselves in their smartness to play the game of duplicity, between show, pretense, appearance, and apparel on one hand, and the reality of their naked and sordid desire on the other.

These shameless sham heroes, however, make Kurtz with his talk about moral purpose all the more the only viable candidate for a real one for Marlow. Marlow overhears unseen the conversation between the manager and his uncle cursing "the pestiferous absurdity" of Kurtz's talk that "Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanising, improving, instructing" (135). And Marlow finds a worshipper-listener of Kurtz's talk – a Russian, son of an archpriest, who exultantly asserts that Kurtz's talk has "enlarged [his] mind" (160). But even this youth is split by the ironic discrepancy between ardently pious admiration of Kurtz's words and his looks like "a harlequin," whose clothes had been covered "with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow" (158), which inevitably recall the "large shining map" Marlow saw in the Company's office, "marked with all the colours of a rainbow" with "a vast amount of red…, a deuce of a lot of

blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch" (110).

Ironic juxtapositions of the outer and inner, surface and depth, appearance and reality only generate an endless series of dualities and duplicities in a sort of epistemological quagmire threatening the possibility of ever finding the truth and rest in peace at the end. The plausible emplotment of an ascent up towards a light of knowledge and truth is haunted by another, equally viable, emplotment of a descent down towards the knowledge and truth of absolute darkness. It is now the idea of emplotment itself – the possibility of writing of history as a certain kind of progress or another, at least in the mode of moving forward – that is questioned and tested. As Marlow testifies, "going up that river" forward with a torch of the progress of human spirit to enlighten the dark continent is "like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (136) still dormant in the darkness of matters. Moving forward is equal to moving backward; going out into the world for a realization of glorious ideals is equal to going inside the human mind for a knowledge of its innermost truth.

Faced with such a crisis of temporal emplotment itself, Marlow tries to focus exclusively on the present as an undisputable basis of reality; he makes a try at the present moment with neither past nor future, an abstracted time, to test his belief in the value of work, as Conrad did in his "Up-River Book":

> There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare to yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a

> vengeful aspect. (137)

The past dies hard, pursuing one like an incubus, but thankfully Marlow "had no time":

> I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of hidden banks; I watched for sunken stones; I was learning to clap my teeth smartly before my heart flew out, when I shaved by a fluke some infernal sly old snag that would have ripped the life out of the tin-pot steamboat and drowned all the pilgrims; I had to keep a look-out for the signs of dead wood we could cut up on the night for the next day's steaming. (137)

He comments on the therapeutic effects of the work at hand: "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. The inner truth is hidden – luckily, luckily" (137). Here Marlow finds it "lucky" to see truth itself split ironically juxtaposed within itself between the outer and the inner, surface and depth; the "overwhelming realities" of Africa may persist in crystalizing into "the reality," but it is covered over with his belief in the work at the moment. And yet he has to see the inner truth, supposedly hidden away, persist to expose his attempt to conceal it under the surface of his work ethic as "monkey tricks": "But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for – what is it? half-a-crown a tumble – " (137).

Marlow's belief in the value of work is one of the "monkey tricks" just as his listeners' belief in their work as "the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires" (105), so is the belief of the author of *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*, a Master in His Majesty's Navy, with "a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made [its] humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous

with another than a professional light," a light which Marlow finds "something unmistakably real" (141). That is the reason why the book had to be smeared symbolically with notes in cipher penciled in the margin, which Marlow finds later had been noted in the Cyrillic by the Russian harlequin (160), just as Kurtz's pamphlet for the International Society had to add a brutal note "in an unsteady hand" on the last page: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (155). The belief in work and the belief in the writing on work shared by the author of *An Inquiry* and Conrad in his "Up-River Book" have been disfigured and unwritten almost, bur still not quite yet.

The ironic juxtaposition of the outer and the inner, surface and depth, have not demolished the emplotment of romance, but only slowed it down, and, by slowing it down and suspending it, they have intensified a sense of need for it. Irony has detected the gaps between appearance and reality, clothing and body, words and motives, and indicted those gaps as duplicitous shows, pretenses, coverings, and tricks. The long process of critical exposure of various forms of shams, falsities, and prevarications has deepened Marlow's "hankering" for the real, the true, and the sincere; it has simultaneously postponed and accelerated, suspended and confirmed, the coming of Kurtz's final word in "the supreme moment of complete knowledge" at the end.

As a matter of fact, the emplotment of romance in *Heart of Darkness* comes to take the form more and more of a quest for spiritual knowledge and truth and less and less of an achievement of a physical task. The plot is structured in a series of enclosing units of listening to / speaking of the word rather than in a linear progression of actions linked together by the logic of cause and effect. It is a sort of narrative Chinese box in which Marlow's ex-fellow seamen listen to Marlow speaking of his listening to the manager and the others speaking of their listening to Kurtz speaking.[4] Kurtz's word is placed as an ultimate goal at the end to complete the

horizontal movement of the quest, and at the same time as an innermost truth to heal all the vertical semantic splits. Earlier Marlow has said to his listeners that "He [Kurtz] was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything?" (129). But Kurtz is the word, and therefore he is the story, as later Marlow comes to know:

> I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing.... The man presented himself as a voice.... The point was in his being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out preeminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words – the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (151-52)

Even Kurtz's word may not be final, his ultimate truth may still be split between light and darkness.

Kurtz's final word did come, but his ultimate speaking proves to be only yet another listening, and his innermost truth is only about the absence of any truth. At "the supreme moment of complete knowledge" Kurtz "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!'" (177-78). Whose knowledge is this, and of what? Kurtz's knowledge of "some image," "some vision," and his judgment on them as horrifying – for instance, a "symbolic" image of the natives' heads on the stakes ornamenting his house? Marlow thinks that "the knowledge came to him [Kurtz] at last – only at the very last," the knowledge that he "lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence" (164). But the knowledge has

come to him in his listening to a whisper other than his, and more fascinating: "But the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude – and the whisper proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (164-65). Kurtz's final word is about the horror of the knowledge of one's own hollowness at the core, the complete knowledge that the human mind is a void, a dark, empty reverberating chamber, silent in itself, and eagerly listening, in order to fill its own emptiness with some – any – unknown whispers, echoes, or haunting voices. Even the distinction between outside and inside, surface and depth, appearance and reality, has been collapsed. One finds oneself within a void without, because one is a void within; one is in darkness without and within, at the heart of a dark universe and in the darkness of the human heart. "There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air…. But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad" (174).

Kurtz now is "the hollow sham" of "the original Kurtz" (176), an eloquent voice as ever, but in truth no more than an empty echo box, a childish chatterbox, listening to and echoing any voices other than his own: "both the diabolic love and the unearthly hate of the mysteries it had penetrated fought for the possession of that soul satiated with primitive emotions, avid of lying fame, of sham distinction, of all the appearances of success and power" (176). Kurtz's speech even echoes the manager who had said, "Anything – anything can be done in this country" (135), and

anticipates his cousin's words that "he[Kurtz] could get himself to believe anything – anything" (181): "Sometimes he was contemptibly childish. He desired to have kings meet him at railway-stations on his return from some ghastly Nowhere, where he intended to accomplish great things. 'You show them you have in you something that is really profitable, and then there will be no limits to the recognition of your ability,' he would say. 'Of course you must take care of the motives – right motives – always'" (176). Kurtz is proven to be yet another "grimy fragment of another world, the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessings" (176-77), one of the pilgrims on their "fantastic invasion" coming in and passing away, within the immovable dark wilderness. And yet this eloquent fragment alone has summed up the whole as "the horror" at the final moment of complete knowledge and sincerity.

III. Writing Beyond the Truth of History

Thus, the writing of history as a romance of progressive self-realization of the human greatness has been unwritten by a persistent ironic undermining, and rewritten into the writing of history as a process of discovery of the horrifying truth of human existence at the core. This may still be another romance, that of the progressive achievement of the ultimate knowledge, the final truth, but the truth thus found is only about the hollowness and meaninglessness of all human existence, the futility of all human endeavors in time. The truth attained at the end of arduous historical investigations – the "summing up" of all historical studies – is a nihilistic truth that negates the very possibility of history and history-writing. Human beings can be anything, it does not matter what, because they are all nothing one way or another; they can live and write any history, it does not matter how, because they are all hollow at the core, and they all pass away in the end. This is the end reached in Marlow's narrative: the final

culminating and terminating point of the romantic historiography of Hegel and Carlyle, as it has been followed out to the very end by Marlow.

This dead point of romantic historiography is analyzed by Friedrich Nietzsche as the symptom of the fatal disease of nineteenth-century historicism. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), putting the knowledge of truth against the will to act on one hand, and against artistic representation on the other, Nietzsche comments, as follows:

> Understanding kills action, for in order to act we require the veil of illusion; such is Hamlet's doctrine…. What, both in the case of Hamlet and of Dionysiac man, overbalances any motive leading to action, is not reflection but understanding, the apprehension of truth and its terror…. The truth once seen, man is aware everywhere of the ghastly absurdity of existence, comprehends the symbolism of Ophelia's fate and the wisdom of the wood sprite Silenus: nausea invades him.
>
> Then, in this supreme jeopardy of the will, art, that sorceress expert in healing, approaches him; only she can turn his fits of nausea into imaginations with which it is possible to live. (51-2)

And he goes on to explain the artistic representation as a function of light in the ontological moral optics, as follows: "After an energetic attempt to focus on the sun, we have, by way of remedy almost, dark spots before our eyes when we turn away. Conversely, the luminous images of the Sophoclean heroes – those Apollonian masks – are the necessary productions of a deep look into the horror of nature; luminous spots, as it were, designed to cure an eye hurt by the ghastly night" (59-60). Truth sums up and transcends history, and by doing so, it destroys the possibility of history, the human will to act in time. In order to keep history moving, in order to protect the possibility of human movement forward to the future, one requires the non-truth of artistic illusion.

In *The Use and Abuse of History* (1874), Nietzsche criticizes the

tyranny of history as truth in the form of the cult of historical consciousness as being detrimental to life as growth. He emphatically says that "The unrestrained historical sense, pushed to its logical extreme, uproots the future, because it destroys illusions and robs existing things of the only atmosphere in which they can live" (42). He points out that "Every people, every man even, who would become ripe, needs such a veil of illusion, such a protecting cloud. But now men hate to become ripe, for they honor history above life. They cry in triumph that 'science is now beginning to rule life.' Possibly it might; but a life thus ruled is not of much value. It is not such true *life*, and promises much less for the future than the life that used to be guided not by science, but by instincts and powerful illusions" (44). The real driving force of history operates not retroactively from its culminating point of complete self-realization at the end, but progressively from its inceptive beginning; it is not the ultimate knowledge established as a historical law which draws all the historical process towards itself from the end, but a reckless but natural and irrepressible impulse to move out and grow at the beginning. The reign of history as truth is in fact the reign of an end – a purpose already accomplished at the end as an eternal – timeless – law, and therefore the cessation point of history leaving no room for any further movement in time.

Nietzsche's criticism of the abuse of history to the detriment of life is specifically targeted at Hegelian historicism. Hegel's view of world history as a theodicy of godly reason in man turns out to be no more than a complacent self-apotheosization of his contemporary modern Germany. Nietzsche writes, "I believe there has been no dangerous turning point in the progress of German culture in this century that has not been made more dangerous by the enormous and still living influence of this Hegelian philosophy" (51), and continues, "The belief that one is a latecomer in the world is, anyhow, harmful and degrading; but it must appear frightful and

devastating when it raises our latecomer to godhead, by a neat turn of the wheel, as the true meaning and object of all past creation, and his conscious misery is set up as the perfection of the world's history" (51-52). And Nietzsche concludes that Hegel and his modern men are all mad:

> He [the modern man as the universal historian] stands proudly on the pyramid of the world-process; and while he lays the final stone of his knowledge, he seems to cry aloud to listening Nature: 'We are at the top, we are the top; we are the completion of Nature!' / O thou too proud European of the nineteenth century, are thou not mad? Thy knowledge does not complete Nature, it only kills thine own nature! Measure the height of what thou knowest by the depths of thy power to *do*. (55-56)

Philosophical knowledge at the end of history is pitted against natural and spontaneous agency at the beginning as well as against artistic illusion of yet another new beginning of history. In human history, any end point is always a new point of beginning, at least it should be so for the living in time.

Truth kills; one needs non-truth in order to live. Such is the atmosphere of moral reflections in which Marlow finds himself after Kurtz's death and before the meeting with his Intended. "I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there? But I am of course aware that next day the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole. / And then they very nearly buried me" (178). The history as an ascent towards the complete realization of human spiritual greatness has been unwritten into the history as a descent towards the complete knowledge of human spiritual hollowness. Kurtz's history was still a romance, a negative, reversed one about the dark "adventures" of his soul, and it had reached the ultimate point of complete knowledge and final

judgment. Having reached the end point of his history, Kurtz was dead and buried. He could not have continued to live his history beyond that ultimate end point.

Marlow is "nearly buried" along with Kurtz, but is left behind: he survives, he still has to continue to live in time. He comments on his own "extremity" – his provisional, pseudo-ultimate point: "It is not my own extremity I remember best – a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things – even of this pain itself" (179). He characterizes this "greyness" as that of "tepid scepticism": "It [i.e. Kurtz's "wrestle with death"] takes place in an impalpable greyness, with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators, without clamour, without glory, without the great desire of victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere of tepid scepticism, without much belief in your own right, and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be" (178). "The evanescence of all things" inevitably leads to scepticism as to the meaning and value of anything in time, and eventually to the hollowness of the idea of history itself. The city Marlow has returned to – a city of money, cookery, beer, and dreams, with "irritating pretence" and "stupid importance" – looks "sepulchral" as ever, its only reality being that of all those citizens living their lives as destined to pass away sooner or later, and already passing away from moment to moment into nothingness. In such a world, "oblivion … is the last word of our common fate" (181), and Marlow "had some difficulty in restraining [himself] from laughing in [the citizens'] faces, so full of stupid importance" (179). This is the moment of "scepticism" for Marlow as an abandoned survivor of Kurtz's "supreme moment of complete knowledge," or nihilism as the death throes of the historical consciousness which does not allow people to live after the completion of history. Marlow says, "it was not my

strength that wanted nursing, it was my imagination that wanted soothing" (180).

And the "soothing" comes as memory, as remembered words of the beloved one's "supreme moment," for the sake of the bereft. Kurtz's Intended implores, and commands Marlow with menacing moral authority, to tell her Kurtz's last words in the name of her belief in Kurtz, his need of her, her love for him, and her need for "something – something – to – to live with"; Marlow hesitates and winces, first "with dull anger," then with "a feeling of infinite pity," with "a chill [gripping] on [his] chest," "in a fright," and finally "pulled [himself] together and spoke slowly. / 'The last word he pronounced was – your name" (185, 186). He has chosen to speak a lie.

Here Marlow is only listening to, and echoing, the voice of the Intended, and yet at the same time he chooses to speak for the sake of his own "supreme moment of complete knowledge." He hears "the echo of [Kurtz's] magnificent eloquence thrown to [him] from a soul [of the Intended] as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal" (179). Marlow has spoken of his own "destiny" to "dream the nightmare out to the end," of his own droll life from which "the most you can hope … is some knowledge of yourself" (178), and, most importantly, he had once spoken of his own voice: "Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (139-40). He had spoken of some of the potential listeners to his speech represented by his aunt and the Intended: "It's queer how out of touch with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been anything like it, and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether" (113); "They – the women I mean – are out of it – should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours gets worse" (153). And also of what deserves to be spoken: "The mind of man is capable of anything – because

everything is in it, all the past as well as the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage – who can tell? – but truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time" (139). And now at his own supreme moment of final speaking at the end of his own history of quest of self-knowledge, he faces the Intended, "one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time" (183). He is free to speak, his speech can be anything, because it is nothing and everything, in the hollowness of human history.

Marlow intentionally splits his speech between truth and illusion, or between the Dionysian and the Apollonian in Nietzsche's terms. The greyness of Marlow's scepticism is polarized between the truth of Kurtz which is "too dark altogether" (186) and the illusion of the Intended which is "too beautiful altogether" (113)[5]. Kurtz's demand for justice, and Marlow's loyalty to Kurtz's nightmare urge Marlow to speak of the abyss of Kurtz's truth. And yet, Kurtz's truth would only bury and abolish the very possibility of history itself. The faith of the Intended demands Marlow to save history, and to speak for the salvation of history and for "the salvation of another soul" (182). Marlow's speech that cannot be silenced should speak of "a deliberate belief" (139) in something – in the truth of Kurtz and the faith of the Intended – above and beyond all "the playthings of Time" (183). History has ended and is about to disappear into the truth of "the horror" in Kurtz's last word, but Marlow dares to save history by a blatant "burning" lie in his first, self-consciously chosen narratorial prevarication, his determination to maintain and exert a "deliberate belief" in, and a deliberate use of, an illusion. The illusion allows Marlow to save Kurtz's history as a romance for the Intended. More importantly, Marlow's full knowledge of the illusion as such urges him to start all over again his quest for truth from the very beginning of Kurtz's romance for the future with his sketch in oil of "a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" (127).

To adopt the final words of Conrad's short story "Youth," Marlow speaks and writes about "the romance of illusion" and "the illusion of romance" at the same time. Thus, *Heart of Darkness* as a piece of artistic writing embodies both thematically and structurally an endless cycles of writing and unwriting of human history / story.

Conclusion

In Woolf's short story, "An Unwritten Novel," the writing of history as tragedy has been unwritten by reality, and the narrator is saved by the character. Similarly, in Conrad's novella, the writing of history as romance – as a continuous process of the adventures of colonial conquests or the self-realization of a heroic human spirit – has been unwritten by the horrifying truth of the human mind. Hegel's and Carlyle's history of the godly Reason-Hero has been disfigured and unwritten into the nightmare of the hollowness of the human heart. And yet, at the last moment, the narrator saves the character, and saves the possibility of history by deliberately creating an illusory end and an illusory beginning, and thereby starting to write history again with a full knowledge and acknowledgement of that history as an illusion. Thus, *Heart of Darkness* is an endless writing of the continual writing and unwriting of human history. Against nihilism over the futility of all histories, it defends the possibility of speaking – narrating – a human history / story by installing an end and a beginning, and therewith a middle in between as an adventure of explorations of the mystery of the human heart, the riddle of human existence.

Notes

1 I would like to acknowledge my general indebtedness to Hayden White for his enlightening and stimulating writings on history and historiography. More specifically, I owe him a lot for my notion of the different organizational principles

of annals, chronicles and history, my idea of emplotment as applicable both to historiography and novel-writing, as well as my understanding of Hegel's and Nietzsche's views on history as they are expatiated in chapters 2 and 9 respectively of his *Metahistory*. Being enlightened and inspired in many critical points important to my argument, however, I consciously refrained from following the sometimes excessively intricate system of nomological taxonomy in his "poetics of history" – such as romantic, tragic, comic, and satirical modes of emplotment; formist, mechanistic, organicist, and contextualist modes of argument; anarchist, radical, conservative, and liberal modes of ideological implication; or four basic tropes – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony – of history as writing. For instance, my use of the notions of romance and irony is, I hope, easily comprehensible without referring to intricate theoretical frameworks and props supplied by White.

2 All the quotations from *Heart of Darkness* in this essay are from the Oxford edition.

3 This voiding of Africa is what Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa" (1977, 1983) accuses Conrad of doing in *Heart of Darkness*, namely, the dehumanization of the reality of Africa into a mere image, which is intended to satisfy the need of Europe to project on the other world an antithesis of its civilization. Under the transparent "trickery" and the pretenses of the high-modernist style and techniques, Achebe argues, Conrad is "a thoroughgoing ["bloody" in its original version in 1977] racist" (12) colluding with the European dehumanization of Africa, and for this reason does not deserve the name of an artist with "artistic good faith." Achebe judges Conrad as another of the long line of "jaundiced" or "blind" European racists with bad faith from Marco Polo to Arthur Rimbaud, from Schweitzer to Hitler, and hopes for the rise of new and real artists such as Gauguin, Derrain, Picasso, and Matisse, whose admiration of African masks and African art in general is revitalizing the worn-out, if not dying, European art with a new life.

I believe Achebe's criticism is severely limited by its mimetic bias both in his notions of the object and purpose of artistic representation. He suggests that real art should represent reality – "a continent of people" – as it is, and admire it as it is. This virtually means that he believes that all art should be

realist in its method of representation and should aim at moral affirmation of what is thus represented. But the object and purpose of art, its method and judgment are all up to the artists' free and variously motivated choices. For instance, the cult of African art by some European artists may only be a purely European phenomenon, with no relation to the African reality, nothing more than an occasion or excuse for expressing their discontent with their contemporary arts. Achebe concedes that "Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth" (21). However, Conrad is far from being "unaware" of what reality he is describing, and what moral judgment he should give on it. Conrad himself said in his preface to *Youth* that *Heart of Darkness* is "experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers" (xi). Conrad chose not Africa itself but the Europeans' voiding of Africa as an object of his representation, and aimed at its moral condemnation; he showed an inevitable degeneration within the European psyche itself in which its voiding of Africa inevitably leads to its self-voiding, betraying its own "hollowness at the core," as the present essay argues.

4 The image of the narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* as a Chinese box of listening and speaking has been adopted from Peter Brooks' diagram of the novel as a frame tale with "a set of nested boxes, a set of brackets within brackets" (note 8, 351). Brooks argues that Marlow preemptively unwrites "a readable report" that the chief accountant will write as part of his perfect book-keeping, and that Marlow structures his report as a detective story – a detective's quest of the culprit, a seeker's quest of the truth – which is equivalent to my notion of the emplotment of romance. However, Brooks says that Marlow's report turns out to be unreadable, because the final word – Kurtz's truth in the innermost narrative box – is absent; Kurtz's words, "The horror! The horror!" are ambiguous as "an ethical signified" and cannot fulfill as the signifier "the conditions of the wisdom-and-truth-articulating function of the end" (250). Hence, Brooks concludes, Marlow's narrative can never speak the end, nor fully exist, but it is condemned to remain inconclusive, and has to be repeated from the very beginning endlessly.

5 Feminist critics of *Heart of Darkness*, such as Nina Pelikan Strauss and Johanna M. Smith, make an issue of Marlow's sexist, as well as imperialist and racist, allotment of the truth for his male listeners on the *Nellie* on one hand, and the falsehood for his female listener, the Intended, on the other. They argue that the secret sharing among the author, the narrator, and the male critics of *Heart of Darkness* of the truth of the male enterprise of imperialism excludes the female character as well as the female readers of the novel, except when the males take advantage of the innocent female victims and delude them into keeping on believing the plausible illusions about the glories of imperialism and about the status of the novel as a high-art modernist masterpiece. The feminist critics also point out the splitting of the image of womanhood into the pure spirituality of the Intended and the pure physicality of the native queen, both too weak and unsubstantial to resist the male exploitation of the one as "too beautiful" and suppression of the other as "too dark."

The feminist readings of the novel seem to miss several important points. First, Marlow shows, even flaunts, his act of lying quite explicitly for what it is, for all the readers, female as well as male, to see, and, secondly, and more importantly, he describes, more than once in the novel, how he has been *forced* to tell the lie, to accept and corroborate the illusion sustained by women who are "out of touch with truth." Marlow feels uncomfortable with the Intended as with his aunt, who, "living right in the rush of all that humbug [about the colonizers as "something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" or "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways"], got carried off her feet," so that he "ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit" (113). The Intended has remained Kurtz's intended, not his wife, because the engagement was disapproved by her people for his "comparative poverty," if not for his being "a pauper all his life" (184). The desire to win her as a reward for his success in life is what "drove him out there" in Africa in the first place (184); he has sustained the vision of that reward by painting her as "a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" with a "sinister" effect on the face (127). The aunt has secured an appointment for Marlow for his "glorious idea" (109), and the two knitting women at the company office send out the foolish youth with "unconcerned old eyes" (111). Unlike these women, the

native woman, allegedly Kurtz's wife, is described by Marlow as a fully realized tragic figure: being an embodiment of the immense wilderness, the woman is "savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent" with "the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life" and the "tenebrous and passionate soul," and her face "had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and of dumb pain" (168); at Kurtz's departure, "the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river" (175). The native woman is true and real while the European women mystify themselves as a glamorous illusion for foolish males to pursue. An allegorical illustration in *Le Congo Illustré* 2 (1893) (Norton ed., 179) shows a white woman-goddess on a steamer boat holding up a board with the words "Le Roi Leopold II de Belgique" written by another woman-goddess to show to the crawling native men and children. The illustration is entitled "The Civilizing Mission" and certainly these two women are not weak, exploited and excluded victims of the exclusively male "civilizing mission." Rather, here is suggested strongly the possibility of female spiritual collusion with, and glorification of, the European colonialist enterprise carried out by male physical workers.

All these, it seems to me, call for a radical reappraisal of the feminist reading of *Heart of Darkness*, along the line in which Spivak in her "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" debunked the notion of feminist individualism in *Jane Eyre*.

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