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Author(s): Roger D. Spegele

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## ***Fiction as Political Theory: Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'***

ROGER D. SPEGELE\*

I

Do novelists have something to say about politics? By raising the question in such a starkly rhetorical way it is tempting to respond, 'Yes, of course, novelists (at least some of them) do have something to say on a wide variety of subjects which traditionally fall under the rubric of political thought'. One could quickly give examples: Tolstoy's devastating critique of military leadership in *War and Peace*, George Orwell's penetrating analysis of the reality of totalitarianism in *1984* and Jean Paul Sartre's portrait of a whole society in a state of imminent collapse in *Le Sursis*. With a little time for reflection it would surely not be difficult to expand this list to several hundred titles.<sup>1</sup> But if the novelist is credited with having political thoughts or ideas it is rather odd to find so little systematic analysis and interpretation of those ideas by political scientists.<sup>2</sup> Why is this the case? For some political scientists perhaps the reason lies in their explicit acceptance of models of explanation which approximate those of the physical sciences. They wish to constrict their range of inquiry into politics in the interest of developing better models for explaining and predicting political phenomena. There is no need to quarrel with this perfectly sound approach, except where it leads its proponents into a dogmatic rejection of other modes of inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

It is the purpose of this essay to show how one great novelist illuminates our understanding of political life and action and this will be accomplished, if indeed it is, by a rather intense and systematic examination of Joseph Conrad's story 'Heart of Darkness'. Why study Joseph Conrad's political thought? Surely there are other writers who have written illuminating and penetrating political fiction: Dostoyevski, Camus, Stendahl, Silone and Robert Penn Warren are pertinent examples. Perhaps the most important reason for choosing to examine Conrad's work is the range, depth and complexity of his political vision. For him politics was not simply a matter of institutions, elections or political parties; rather, politics as described in his novels must be placed in the wider framework of human conflict and co-operation. Unlike many contemporary novelists who use political themes in their work, Conrad's writings are not didactic or propagandistic.

\* Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.

<sup>1</sup> For examples of the quantity and range of interest exhibited by 'political' novelists see the excellent recent anthology by Philip Green and Michael Walzer, eds., *The Political Imagination in Literature* (New York: The Free Press, 1969) or the somewhat less satisfactory selection in Henry M. Holland, Jr., ed., *Politics Through Literature* (Englewood Cliffs N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Some recent exceptions are Fred H. Willhoite, *Beyond Nihilism: Albert Camus's Contribution to Political Thought* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) and David Wilkinson, *Malraux: An Essay in Political Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> I have speculated on this question in my essay 'Fiction and Political Theory', *Social Research*, 38 (1971), 108-38.

One does not find him preaching or prophesying the future but probing and questioning the limits of political action. Conrad saw, one could say, political struggles, crises and instability as part of a deeper problem concerning human nature and knowledge. He is, then, a genuinely 'philosophical' political novelist.

The range of Conrad's political reflections is particularly impressive, for there can be found in his work consideration of both modern and ancient themes of political thought. Of the modern themes Conrad frequently speculated upon what is one of the key issues of our time: scepticism. Since Conrad had accepted its main tenets he understood the force and power of the sceptical attitude. And yet he saw also how stultifying and detrimental this doctrine was in terms of man's everyday practical needs. Many of Conrad's novels and stories can be seen, therefore, as efforts to come to grips with the sceptic's world view: *Nostromo*, *Lord Jim*, and 'The Planter of Malata' are deep excursions into this realm. Other themes that reflect Conrad's modernity are strikingly similar to existentialist themes: man's progressive psychological alienation from his fellow man (*Under Western Eyes*); nihilism and the need for salutary illusions (*Victory* and 'The Secret Sharer'); terrorism and the middle-class regime (*The Secret Agent*); the wages of imperialism and colonialism (*Almayer's Folly*, 'An Outpost of Progress', and 'Heart of Darkness'). It is Conrad's handling of these ideas which supports Muriel Bradbrook's terse observation: 'Whatever else in Conrad has dated, his politics are contemporary.'<sup>4</sup>

But though Conrad persistently dealt with themes pertinent to the political concepts of the twentieth century, his interest in traditional, pre-nineteenth century ideas did not thereby diminish. Like Aristotle, Hobbes and Rousseau, Conrad considered the relationship between human nature and politics ('Falk', 'Heart of Darkness' and 'Il Conde'). Like Plato, he raised the question of what the requirements would be for a just and genuine community (*The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*). And like Burke, he thought deeply about the role of tradition in human societies (*The Shadow Line* and *The Rover*). Thus Conrad's political vision, far more than that of other novelists combines reflection about old and new, ancient and modern ideas. Given the current uncertainty about the values and practices of our present societies, Conrad's wide-ranging thought is especially apposite. Attending to his thought may provide us a starting point for re-evaluating and re-formulating fundamental questions about our own and other societies. If we are very attentive we might approximate Bertrand Russell's experience when he first met Conrad: 'We talked with continually increasing intimacy. We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire.'<sup>5</sup>

One last point should be raised in this introductory section: is there a particular method one uses in analyzing Conrad's (or anyone else's) literary work? One of Wittgenstein's aphorisms is appropriate here: 'There is not a philosophical method though there are indeed methods, like different therapies.'<sup>6</sup> One

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Eloise Knapp Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Portraits From Memory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 51.

method to use in reasoning about literature, as Wittgenstein is reported to have said, involves 'descriptions designed to show what the point of a work is'.<sup>7</sup> It is, of course, quite true that this 'point' cannot be exhaustively stated since it would be alien to the novelist's purposes if there were simple rules which allowed the novelist to construct works which could be unambiguously correlated with meaning. But while novels are inherently ambiguous we cannot plausibly allow a relation of total fortuitousness to hold between intention and result. If such were the case novels would be unintelligible. But novels are intelligible to those who know the language. Consequently we must assume that there is a link between the novelist's activity and the reader's reaction. Since the novelist may be purposely ambiguous this link will never be complete and there will, therefore, always be more in a particular work than any reader understands. But paradoxically, it may also be true that the reader will understand more than the artist really intends and this is why a reader of literature must continually ask 'What does the novelist really mean?' The answer to this question will not be some final and definitive pattern that can be interpreted in only one way but rather plausible inferences from the pattern of the novel.

One thing seems clear: novelists do employ language directly, and if we wish to understand what the point of a work is, we must look at the author's language. This need not necessarily entail elaborate etymological forays but it does mean the reader has to be alert to recurring word patterns, to the manipulation of symbols, to an author's use of irony and ambiguity. From this point of view there are no good substitutes for 'total immersion' in the author's work and close textual analysis as approaches to literature.

## II

'Heart of Darkness' is frequently interpreted as an anti-imperialistic tract, a kind of literary counterpart to Kipling's poem 'Gunga Din'. Such an interpretation, as readers of Conrad's letters and other fiction (especially *Nostromo*) will know, is not obviously wrong. Conrad did intend to expose, to unmask, the hypocrisy and barbarism of European imperialism and colonialism in Central Africa. But it is somewhat misleading and altogether too limiting to see 'Heart of Darkness' as an unveiling of the exploitation and oppression of a commercial and industrial society on a helpless, primitive community. This would make Conrad into an ideologue when, in fact, Conrad persistently denounced ideological thinking.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Paraphrased in G. E. Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lectures, 1930-33', *Philosophical Papers* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1959), p. 209.

<sup>8</sup> In the Preface to *Under Western Eyes* Conrad denounced autocracy as 'complete moral anarchism' while revolutionary utopianism was 'no less imbecile'. Even more revealing is this remark from his letters: 'Everyone must walk in the light of his own heart's gospel. No man's light is good to any of his fellows. That's my creed from beginning to end. That's my view of life - a view that rejects all formulas, dogmas and principles of other people's making. These are only a web of illusions. We are too varied. Another man's truth is only a dismal lie to me'. G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), Vol. 1, p. 184. Note also: 'My misfortune is that I can't swallow any formula and am wearing the aspect of enemy to all mankind'. *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924*, Edward Garnett, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), p. 265.

As to the 'Heart of Darkness' one of Conrad's letters to his friend Cunningham-Graham should give one pause:

I am simply in the seventh heaven to find you like the 'Heart of Darkness' so far. You bless me indeed. Mind you don't curse me by and by for the very same thing. There are two more instalments in which the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that you – even you! – may miss it.<sup>9</sup>

and again:

. . . and also you must remember that I don't start with *an abstract notion* [italics mine]. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced. So far the note struck chimes in with your convictions – *mais après?* There is an *après*.<sup>10</sup>

Precisely, there is something more here than a tract for the times and it is to this something that this essay is directed.

As noted above, Conrad was a sceptic and one important dimension of 'Heart of Darkness' (and frequently ignored in interpretations of it) involves his attempt to come to grips with the problem of knowledge and scepticism. In dealing with this problem, Conrad confronts a perplexing dilemma. As a sceptic he believes his experiences are essentially private, subjective and fallible. On the other hand, his aim is to communicate his experiences to the reader, to make him understand what Conrad has understood, to make others feel and see what Conrad has felt and seen.<sup>11</sup> But how can one know and convey to others what is private, subjective and fallible? Conrad suggests in the 'Heart of Darkness' that under certain conditions and to certain people one can communicate one's experiences through symbol, metaphor, analogy and imagery; one can indirectly portray his experiences through art. Still, Conrad never underestimates the obstacles to knowledge and communication.<sup>12</sup> Consider in this connection Marlow's relationship to his listeners on board the *Nellie*. Here the possibility of communicating what may be a dream is presented as connected with two difficulties: the speaker and his listeners. Can Marlow convey his experience so that the Accountant, the Lawyer, the Director of Companies and the First Narrator can grasp its significance? Part of the difficulty can be attributed to the heavy burden which Marlow places on himself as story-teller. 'To him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Aubry, *Conrad: Life and Letters*, p. 268.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-Aubry, *Conrad: Life and Letters*, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> See Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus': A Tale of the Sea* (London: J. M. Dent, 1946), Preface.

<sup>12</sup> Conrad never accepted the exaggerated opinion of his contemporaries regarding art's value. For example, in one essay, he wrote: 'It is natural that the novelist should doubt his ability to cope with his task. He imagines it more gigantic than it is. And yet literary creation being only one of the legitimate forms of human activity has no value but on the condition of not excluding the fullest recognition of all the more distinct forms of action. This condition is sometimes forgotten by the man of letters, who often, especially in his youth, is inclined to lay a claim of exclusive superiority for his own amongst all the other tasks of the human mind. The mass of verse and prose may glimmer here and there with the glow of a divine spark, but in the sum of human effort it has no special importance.' Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: J. M. Dent, 1946), p. 7.

kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.<sup>13</sup> He perceives the obstacles that hinder enveloping the tale, of making *public* what is essentially *private* without reducing the experience to a simple point or moral. In fact, Marlow doubts his own success; for some one-third of the way through 'his tale' he queries his auditors: 'Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream sensation. . .'<sup>14</sup> Marlow answers his own question despairingly: 'No, it is impossible, it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone. . .'<sup>15</sup>

The problem goes further than the private nature of one's truth, however; there is also a question of the listeners' attitudes, their willingness to reflect and open themselves up to Marlow's experience and to perceive its true significance. And in fact, Marlow's auditors do not seem willing to suspend disbelief.<sup>16</sup> Apparently to be prepared to understand, to receive knowledge, requires at a minimum the ability to abstract oneself from the conventions of one's own community, to make a distinction between *what is* and *what could be*. Communication requires, as a necessary (though by no means a sufficient) condition, a sort of empathy between the speaker and the listeners. What else is needed? To understand his tale, Marlow says, one can be neither a fool nor an angel. Though fools (by definition) are incapable of understanding, it is a startling notion that angels cannot grasp the truth either. In Marlow's view, however, 'angels' are too far removed from the concrete, the tangible, from the dark underside of daily life:

You may be such a thunderingly exalted creature as to be altogether deaf and blind to anything but heavenly sights and sounds. Then the earth for you is only a standing place – and whether to be like this is your loss or your gain I won't pretend to say. But most of us are neither one [fool] nor the other [angel]. The earth for us is a place to live in, where we must put up with sights, with sounds, with smells, too, by Jove! – breathe the dead hippo, so to speak, and not be contaminated.<sup>17</sup>

Fools, angels and those who are unprepared to question the assumptions on which society is based may not be ready to understand the truth about themselves and their social institutions, but since most of us are not in these categories, we are in principle capable of reflection and understanding. Just as Marlow had got a 'glimpse' of the truth about Kurtz through a flash of insight, so too, Marlow now suggests, the average man can learn what Marlow had glimpsed without having to go through the gruesome experience which Kurtz and Marlow 'have lived through'. In fact, the reader is led to believe that, while three of Marlow's listeners are intermittently hostile and somnolent, one listener, the First Narrator, is changed by Marlow's tale. Marlow was transformed directly by his

<sup>13</sup> Conrad, *Youth and Other Stories* (London: J. M. Dent, 1964), p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, pp. 94 and 114.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 117.

personal experience with Kurtz; before his encounter with Kurtz he had been romantic, unreflective and uninterested in man's fate. But as he tells his tale he exemplifies reflectiveness and asceticism as he assumes 'the pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus-flower'.<sup>18</sup> The First Narrator (and presumably the twice removed reader of Conrad's tale), though he has only listened to Marlow, though his journey is only symbolic, has been transformed, too. Knowledge and the communication of what is apparently intensely private and personal is possible after all.

In this story Conrad has developed an ingenious device. As a sceptic he could be accused of inconsistency (or perhaps self-contradiction) if he attempted to communicate his own experience in the Congo directly to the reader. Instead, he created Marlow to serve as his agent and through whom he can explore with his readers some unsalutary aspects of human nature without implying that he (Conrad) has penetrated the mysteries of the universe and achieved true knowledge. Since it is Marlow who is 'enveloping' the tale, Conrad is not affirming the truth of his teaching; he is committing himself only to the view that the quest for truth is a common quest; a quest which takes place through the communication between Marlow, the First Narrator and his readers. Thus, Conrad avoids making assertions about political life which may be false for, strictly speaking, he is not asserting anything at all. He is simply asking the reader to arouse himself from his slumber, to join Marlow in his search for truth, even though he may never obtain it. After all, Marlow is only human, and, as such, his teaching may be in error. In this sense Marlow is to Conrad as Socrates is to Plato. But it won't do to exaggerate the analogy. Marlow is not Socrates; he does not search for the Essence or the Forms of things, and he does not proceed dialectically. Marlow proceeds existentially, whereby he narrates his own transformation from a naive youth to a meditating Buddha-like teacher of human nature.

But if Marlow is a teacher, one who has himself experienced a transformation as a result of his journey into the heart of darkness, what is the content of his teaching? The quick answer is politics: the hopes, the fears and the dilemmas of political choice. More precisely Marlow teaches the following: (1) Politics emerges from the tension between one's ideals, of what *ought* to be, and reality, of what *is*. There is always a gap between man's professed aims, purposes and goals and his ability to achieve them. Why? The unstated, but clearly implied answer, is that man's nature – his passions, his greed, his desire to dominate – prevent him from achieving what he may think he wants. (2) Political society, as a consequence of man's nature, requires restraint. It requires conventions, rules, regulations and a loyal devotion to one's work, skill or craft. Hence, there is a dilemma: the restraints which are necessary because of man's vanity and greed foreclose the possibility of human self-realization. Moreover, it is problematical whether the traditional restraints of work and adherence to conventions will be adequate to meet a new and frightful danger to the body politic: the secular revolutionary chiliast. (3) Marlow's tale describes a situation in which Kurtz's followers give him a charismatic response. They follow him not out of fear alone but primarily

<sup>18</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 54.

out of love, passionate devotion and enthusiasm. Kurtz's charisma is thus seen as a new threat to man's attainment of genuine community, a threat which makes the traditional defenses against tyranny and demagogy, as embodied in a protestant ethic, quite inadequate. (4) Since there is no defense against charisma, Marlow believes it necessary to suppress the 'awful truth'; a 'noble lie' is necessary. It is here that conservative politics comes to the fore. Since politics requires that truth be suppressed, it entails constant concession, compromise and bargaining with one's values. The Just City is impossible to achieve.

To understand this teaching fully, one has to observe Marlow's experiences, and his reflections on them, within the context of the tale. A group of men – the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, the First Narrator and Marlow are mentioned – are sitting on the becalmed ship *Nellie* anchored in the Thames estuary. They are witnessing, according to the First Narrator, a scene of incredible cheerlessness.

Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

And at last, in its curved and imperceptible fall, the sun sank low and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death by the touch of that gloom brooding over a crowd of men.<sup>19</sup>

But then the First Narrator evokes the ancient spirit of the Thames which is the spirit of 'the great knights-errant of the sea'.<sup>20</sup> The Thames had given, we are told, great and useful service to the needs of men and the needs of a great nation. The Thames is a symbol of heroic deeds of England's past. But this heroic image cannot long be sustained for it is the nature of practical activity that usefulness cannot be completely dissociated from violence and savagery. The First Narrator has to give way to Marlow who remarks quietly: 'And this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth'.<sup>21</sup> Marlow begins his first theme, the key thrust of which shows that the most prominent features of man's nature – his vanity, greed, lust for domination – are permanent and cannot be eradicated by humanitarian activity. He describes, for example, the Roman beginnings of English civilization as a period when selflessness or idealism were nonexistent. The Roman's colonizing efforts were in the main violent and brutal; however, as conquerors they did not try to justify their acts as the necessary preconditions for bringing civilization and progress to the world. Acts of violence were perpetrated purely in the pursuit of selfish ends.

They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more. . . They were conquerors, and for that you want brute force – nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind . . .<sup>22</sup>

The Romans acted 'without thinking about it'. But should they have thought about it? Marlow suggests that when men are faced with a 'state of nature', a

<sup>19</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 50.

condition where civilized political institutions do not yet exist, one has to make concessions to human nature. After all, the Roman soldiers were confronted with 'precious little to eat fit for a civilized man . . . cold, fog, tempests, diseases, exile and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush'.<sup>23</sup> Their savage and brutal actions were required by the conditions in which they were compelled to live. They lived in darkness and their violence was 'very proper for those who tackle a darkness'.<sup>24</sup>

If the Roman conquerors acted badly they were at least forthright. In the nineteenth-century style of 'conquering', however, the victors attempt to justify their acts of violence, their atrocities, in the name of some future Good – in the name of Progress and Civilization. Marlow has to learn these things through experience, for he describes his initial attitude toward Africa as romantic and 'sentimental'. Even though in manhood his romantic dreams have dissipated through his contact with the harsh realities of life, his boyhood feelings of adventure about Africa remain intact. What attracted him, he confesses, was the idea of losing himself in 'all the glories of exploration'. Through his aunt's contacts with high officials in a trading company, Marlow is able to secure an appointment as skipper of a river steamboat. On hearing that his predecessor, Fresleven, had been killed in a scuffle with some natives, he only became 'more anxious to go'. Only later, after being stripped of all romantic illusion, is Marlow prepared to believe the 'absurd' episode of how Fresleven went berserk about some deception of a village chieftain involving two black hens and hammered the chief to death with a stick, the chief's son killing him in turn.

It didn't surprise me in the least to hear this and at the same time to be told that Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs. No doubt he was; but he had been a couple of years already out there engaged in the noble cause, you know, and he probably felt the need at least of asserting his self-respect in some way.<sup>25</sup>

Marlow's romanticism is, however, somewhat shaken when he goes to the city of the Whited Sepulchre (Brussels)<sup>26</sup> and encounters a variety of bizarre individuals connected with the Company's civilizing work: his employer, who asks only about his French, the two knitting phantoms, a clerk who quotes Plato. Especially disturbing is his interview with the Company's physician:

'I always ask leave, in the interest of science, to measure the crania of those going out there', he said. 'And when they come back too?' I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked, 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know'. He smiled, as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous, interesting, too'. He gave me a searching glance, and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked in a matter-of-fact tone.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 49.      <sup>24</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 50.      <sup>25</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> The irony here is obvious: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness'. Matt. 23:27.

<sup>27</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 58.

With his romanticism shaken but still intact he begins his journey on the coast of Africa where he quickly comes to observe the inconsistency between the ideal and the real. He sees a French gunboat firing shells blindly into the continent at invisible 'enemies', the detonation of explosives on a cliff which 'was not in the way of anything', and black men chained together as 'criminals'. He wanders into a grave where worn-out natives are sent to die, thus discovering another aspect of the 'civilizing work' of the white colonists. In the midst of this barbarism, Marlow meets with the Company's chief accountant, an unbelievable vision of orderliness. Impervious to the brutality that surrounds him he adheres to rigidly conventional (European) standards of etiquette and attire without recognizing their incongruity. He also meets the manager for the district station, a man of 'no learning and no intelligence' who 'inspired uneasiness'; the bricklayer, a '*papier-maché* Mephistopheles'; members of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, 'reckless without courage'. These experiences lead Marlow to see more clearly the true character of the 'civilizing work'.

The colonists' actions are prompted by greed and corruption; their expressed mission is an absurdity. The humanitarians, the civilizers of the blacks, have become instead tormentors and enslavers. Even the words they use – 'enemies', 'criminals', 'civilizing work' – are distorted beyond recognition. They are far worse than the Romans who had come to conquer Britain centuries ago. For the atrocities committed by the Romans were comparable to unintended casualties necessarily incurred 'in the midst of the incomprehensible':<sup>28</sup> understandable, though unjustifiable. But the nineteenth-century imperialists are deluded by their own vision of an humanitarian ideal which leads, paradoxically, to acts far more ruthless than those committed by Romans. For once vague, humanitarian ideals are set up, they offer justification for man's brutal actions; men's animal nature is denied and the restraints of society are not operative. Idealism, therefore, does not raise man's morality; it lowers it.

By this time Marlow is ready to see whether Kurtz, about whom he has heard so much, is different. Marlow is 'curious to know whether this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort, would climb to the top after all and how he would set about his work when there'.<sup>29</sup>

After spending several months at the district manager's station doing repairs on the steamer he is to pilot, Marlow, along with the district manager, sets out to see Kurtz up river at the central station. But Marlow is not yet fully prepared for his meeting with Kurtz. Marlow must first discover what lies at the foundation of political and social existence. It is only by viewing instinctual man that one can properly be said to understand how idealism fails to provide an adequate foundation for political life. Marlow's journey, an arduous one, therefore, strips away the cloak of time and reveals the pre-political sources of 'civilization'. In Marlow's words:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings . . . You lost your way on that

<sup>28</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 88.

river as you would in a desert . . . till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off forever from everything you had known once – somewhere – far away – in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one . . . but it came back in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered among 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.<sup>30</sup>

But what about man's place in this state of nature? He watches the natives on the shore and observes:

The men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of the noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you – you so remote from the night of first ages – could comprehend. . . Let the fool gape and shudder – the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff – with his own inborn strength.<sup>31</sup>

It is unmistakably clear to Marlow that the foundations of civil society are the instincts and passions of men. However much time and custom cloak them, they remain at the root of political and social institutions. Man can survive these passions not by denying their existence or their efficacy, but in facing up to them squarely with his 'inborn strength'. If he does not, he is in danger of deluding himself into believing that he can shape his social and political institutions as he sees fit according to a set of disembodied principles or abstractions. The human condition requires men to rely upon something less fragile than 'fine sentiments'.

But where the laws and external checks of society do not exist or are not operating, how can the force of man's passions be restrained? Marlow finds this restraining force in devotion to work.<sup>32</sup> He observes the practical application of this concept in the native fireman on board the steamer: 'He ought to have been clapping his hands and stamping his feet on the bank, instead of which he was hard at work, a thrall to strange witchcraft, full of improving knowledge.'<sup>33</sup> The fireman has learned not only the rudimentary principle of boilers, but the restraints under which men live in the civilized world. Even the starving crewmen-cannibals, who still belong to the beginnings of time and who have no inherited experience, have learned restraint through work:

<sup>30</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, pp. 92–3.

<sup>31</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, pp. 96–7.

<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Conrad defends work, skill or craft on the grounds that it reduces the need for an 'outward cohesive force of compulsion of discipline'. Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 183. Freedom is, for Conrad, more likely where people share a common identification in a demanding occupation. See, in particular, 'Initiation' in *Mirror of the Sea*, pp. 136–348; and 'Well Done', and 'Tradition' in *Notes on Life and Letters*.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 97.

Yes; I looked at them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity. Restraint! What possible restraint? Was it superstition, disgust, patience, fear – or some kind of primitive honour? . . . I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battle field. But there was the fact facing me . . .<sup>34</sup>

Marlow comes across an old seaman's guidebook, *An Inquiry Into Some Points of Seamanship*, in an abandoned hut. Even though the matter 'looked dreary reading' Marlow finds it a very 'enthraling book'.<sup>35</sup> At one glance Marlow 'could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work'.<sup>36</sup> The book and the devotion to a skill it implies helps Marlow to keep a hold on reality.

But there is something more in work than its restraining power and its ability to give one a sense of reality. Work protects man from the 'longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate'.<sup>37</sup> In recognizing that man needs to be 'protected' from his passions, there is not only a re-emphasis on man's animal nature, but a testimony to the lonely terror of man's lot. Marlow is compelled to recognize the need for something more than work and the sacrifices work entails. If man is to protect himself from solitude, loneliness and despair, he needs to have faith in something, some sense of purpose and commitment. But herein lies a dilemma: if man puts his faith in some ephemeral humanitarian ideal, it may lead to a system of oppression, violence and brutality.

Having survived an eventful journey up river of shoals in shallow water, hungry-eyed crewmen-cannibals, and Kurtz's spear-throwing natives, Marlow arrives safely at the central station. While the district manager visits the 'gifted' Kurtz in his hut, Marlow talks with a harlequin-dressed Russian sailor, one of Kurtz's most fervent admirers. Marlow learns from him that Kurtz had not fulfilled his humanitarian goals but had got the natives to follow him in raiding native villages for ivory. How, Marlow wishes to know, did Kurtz manage to get the natives to follow him? Kurtz's sailor-admirer answers: "'They adored him'", he said. The tone of these words was so extraordinary that I looked at him searchingly. It was curious to see this mingled eagerness and reluctance to speak of Kurtz. The man filled his life, occupied his thoughts, swayed his emotions.<sup>38</sup> Marlow learns that this innocent Russian sailor whom 'glamour urged on' had risked his life to stay near Kurtz, the source of his inspiration. Thus when Kurtz had ordered him to give over his ivory and leave the country, the sailor-admirer complied with the

<sup>34</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 105. Cf. Hobbes: 'The final cause, end, or design of men, who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others, in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from the condition of war, which is necessarily consequent . . . to the natural passions of men.' *Leviathan*, Michael Oakeshott, ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> 'What saves us is efficiency – the devotion to efficiency'. Conrad, *Youth*, p. 50.

<sup>38</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 128.

first command but did not clear out. He is passionately devoted to Kurtz. "I tell you," he cried, "this man has enlarged my mind."<sup>39</sup> Marlow is now thoroughly confused about Kurtz. On the one hand, Kurtz is an incredible egocentric whose intelligence is 'concentrated . . . upon himself with horrible intensity'. He is a megalomaniac in whom vanity and the lust for power are closely intertwined. We learn that he sees financial success as the means to satisfy his ambitions; he has come to Africa to make a fortune in the ivory trade. '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.'<sup>40</sup> He became obsessed with the accumulation of ivory, exploiting the natives to scour the countryside to further his ambition. His 'method' of putting down recalcitrants was to have their heads cut off and, dried and shrunk, placed on stakes around his house as a reminder to *les autres*. And his report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs ended with the advice, 'Exterminate all the brutes!'

But this is not the whole story; Kurtz is neither an ordinary man nor a simple impostor. He is a 'remarkable man', someone with 'incredible gifts', a painter, 'a great musician'. And Marlow is not wholly ironic when he says of Kurtz:

He won't be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour; he could also fill the small souls of the pilgrims with bitter misgivings: he had one devoted friend at least, and he had conquered one soul in the world that was neither rudimentary nor tainted with self-seeking.<sup>41</sup>

Of all the gifts this charismatic leader of 'universal genius' possesses, the one arousing the most enthusiasm is his mastery of the art of rhetoric, 'the gift of expressions, 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'.<sup>42</sup> It does not matter what he says, as long as his speech is vibrating with eloquence, as long as it conveys 'candour' and 'convictions'.

This combination of Kurtz's rhetorical skills and his enormous vanity enables him to present himself as the embodiment of hope and the salvation of mankind. His vocation ought to 'have been politics on the popular side . . . He electrified large meetings . . . he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything. He would have been a splendid leader of an extreme party . . . Any party'.<sup>43</sup> In the politics of extremism the primary task is to provide faith for the emotional outlets of individuals who desire a complete transformation of the world. The emotional state of such individuals may have found an occasional outlet in violent but undirected activity. What they need is someone like Kurtz who can articulate, explain, and most important, justify their vague longings for radical

<sup>39</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 119.

<sup>42</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, pp. 113-14.

<sup>43</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 154.

change. Kurtz's speeches may be absurd, but this is of no importance as long as men believe them to be true. The energy developed by the cravings for change is strengthened and, at the same time, given direction and continuity through his rhetoric.

The relationship between Kurtz and his followers is that of master and disciples. To the natives who obey his whim and caprice, Kurtz becomes a kind of saviour who, on the basis of his own missionary zeal, commands their fanatical allegiance to his ideals. He is revered by them; they do not follow him out of fear or material inducement, but out of love, passionate devotion and enthusiasm. This appeal extends beyond the power to manipulate the tribe of an alien culture; 'he drew men towards him by what was best in them . . . It is the gift of the great'.<sup>44</sup>

Kurtz, then, is not motivated solely by financial gain. He is a secular revolutionary chiliast<sup>45</sup> who offers men the chance for self-fulfillment, a chance to escape from the dreary routine or the restrictions and exactions of tribal society. He aspires to persuade and to translate into action the conviction that people ought to act in the interest of their higher selves. And his aims are not confined to Africa; Kurtz intends to spread his ideas to the centers of European civilization: 'I'll carry out my ideas yet - I will return [to Europe] . . . I will return'.<sup>46</sup> But European civilization (symbolized as the 'City of the Whited Sepulchre') goes about its business in the assurance of perfect safety; 'in the face of danger it is unable to comprehend'.<sup>47</sup> It does not understand the danger of Kurtz's attempt to bridge the gap between what ought to be and what is, the danger of Kurtz's demagogic monologues on love, justice and the conduct of life. The City's vulnerability lies in the 'toleration of strength [that] exists, infamous and irremediable, at the bottom of all hearts, in all societies, wherever men congregate'.<sup>48</sup>

Despite his revolutionizing efforts, despite the fact that he is on the threshold of great things, despite his charismatic personality, Kurtz fails. The new modes and orders which he attempts to create are incompatible with the permanent features of human nature. His failure lies in his effort to exempt himself from human nature, those 'forgotten and brutal instincts', which entrap him in an orgy of violence. Kurtz, who exploited the natives and made them his willing prisoners, himself becomes a prisoner and victim of the crimes he perpetrated. By the time Marlow meets him in his hut, Kurtz is dying. To the district manager Kurtz had come to grief because his method was unsound; his aim of accumulating as much ivory as possible was basically sound. But Marlow sees Kurtz as someone who had something to say, who, in contrast to the manager and his crowd of greedy plunderers, had at least explored all human possibilities. For although Kurtz was a plunderer himself he had given his victims, his followers, something in return: a 'deliberate belief'. Moreover, before his death Kurtz recognizes what the district manager would be incapable of recognizing: Kurtz sees his own

<sup>44</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 159.

<sup>45</sup> For a fascinating study of the personality trait and several historical examples from the Middle Ages, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (Fairlawn, New Jersey: Essential Books, 1957).

<sup>46</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 152.

<sup>48</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 127.

depravity, his moral and intellectual failure, crying, 'The horror!' This last cry, Marlow notes, is 'an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions'.<sup>49</sup> It is an affirmation that accepts the limitations and imperfections of human existence.

Marlow is now faced with the dilemma posed by Kurtz's 'moral victory'. He knows that Kurtz's lifetime denial of man's passions led him to commit 'unspeakable rites' in the name of an humanitarian ideal, but he also realizes that to concentrate solely on man's fallen nature forecloses the possibility of human self-realization, of joy and happiness. Man cannot live without a purpose, without a horizon, without a 'deliberate belief'. This dilemma is dramatized when Marlow returns to the European 'City of the Whited Sepulchre' and, after recovering from a long and severe illness, visits Kurtz's Intended at her home.<sup>50</sup> She symbolizes man's faith, his inspiring vision of a beautiful world. In her Kurtz had someone who was 'without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself'.<sup>51</sup> Her features conveyed 'the delicate shade of truthfulness',<sup>52</sup> and she 'had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering'.<sup>53</sup> She represents all that is good and noble in the City. She believes Kurtz had died in pursuit of his humanitarian aims. To tell her the truth about Kurtz, in whom she had complete faith, would symbolically diminish man's hope and sense of purpose; to undermine the faith of those who believe in humanitarian ideals would only serve to enhance the life-destroying power of the gross commercial and materialistic elements of the City. Faced with these alternatives, Marlow chooses hope over truth; he lies to Kurtz's Intended, 'before the faith that was in her, before the great and saving illusion that shone with an unearthly glow in the darkness'.<sup>54</sup> He refuses to reveal 'the colossal scale of his [Kurtz's] vile desires, the meanness, the torment, the tempestuous anguish of his soul'.<sup>55</sup>

Marlow has 'remained loyal to Kurtz to the last',<sup>56</sup> not to the 'flabby pretending, weak-eyed' and insidious Kurtz, but the Kurtz who held out hope for an improvement in man's condition. In siding with hope, Marlow rejects the self-seeking colonists as well as the petty elements of the City. He chooses one sort of nightmare over another; his choice is between the need to believe in something and the possibility of that belief becoming transformed into an instrument for man's personal power. His decision to lie, therefore, is a political act on the highest level, an act of expediency designed to serve a higher purpose. Though the humanitarian ideal is extravagant and, if translated into action, counter-productive

<sup>49</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> Conrad suggests the decisive importance of the ending in a letter to his publisher: 'In the light of the final incident, the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into place – acquire its value and significance ... The last pages of the 'Heart of Darkness' where the interview of the man and the girl locks in – as it were – the whole 30,000 words of narrative description into the one suggestive view of a whole phase of life and makes of that story something quite on another plane than an anecdote of a man who went mad in the centre of Africa.' *Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum*, William Blackburn, ed. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 154.

<sup>51</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 155.

<sup>52</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 154.

<sup>53</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 159.

<sup>55</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 156.

<sup>56</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 151.

as well, a false belief in it is far more salutary than the true belief that the City's foundations are rooted in man's vanity, selfishness and brutality. Marlow sees more clearly that truth and politics are incommensurable; his lie, his desperate act of political expediency, is an existential demonstration of the tragedy of politics: the good of the community requires the suppression of the truth of its origins.

Though politics make Marlow's lying necessary, he views his act as odious:

It seemed to me that the house could collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head. But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle. Would they have fallen, I wonder, if I had rendered Kurtz that justice which was his due? Hadn't he said he wanted only justice? But I couldn't. I could not tell her. It would have been too dark – too dark altogether. . .<sup>57</sup>

Since he cannot accept his own lie and the expediency which it demonstrates, he proves himself no longer fit for the necessary actions of political life. Hence, there is the pessimistic final scene where Marlow is seen sitting apart, 'indistinct and silent and in the pose of a meditating Buddha'.<sup>58</sup> Marlow has become depoliticized.

The 'Heart of Darkness' demonstrates the truly complicated and subtle character of Conrad's political thought. Its character is clearly compatible with Hobbes' political teaching. For Conrad, like Hobbes, has a dim view of human nature and, again like Hobbes, emphasizes the thin line separating political society from the 'state of nature'. Conrad, however, in admitting the imperious character of man's instinctual needs, recognizes man's desire to improve his condition, a desire which Hobbes' *Leviathan* would crush in the interest of peace and harmony. Man requires the possibility of choice, even if the choice is between nightmares. Marlow lies to protect that choice.

Does Conrad propose a cure for loneliness and suffering, the tensions and tribulations of modern society? He does not. While he did see some merit in an emphasis on work, skill, loyalty and tradition, he clearly recognized the insufficiency of these virtues. He proposed no formula for man's happiness and no blueprints for his political institutions.<sup>59</sup> Clearly, then, Conrad's scepticism and pessimism do not lead to authoritarianism; they lead only to a deepening of our awareness of political society as a realm of conflict, instability and disorder, and to a recognition of the danger from those who claim a permanent cure for these ills.

### III

It is appropriate to summarize what emerges from Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' interpreted as an excursion into political theory. In this story Conrad is telling his readers some unwelcome truths. He is telling them, first of all, that man's craving

<sup>57</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 162.

<sup>58</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 162.

<sup>59</sup> 'Political institutions, whether conceived by the wisdom of the few or the ignorance of the many, are incapable of securing the happiness of mankind.' Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 33.

for finality and certitude, his efforts to find a philosopher's stone to unlock the mysteries of the universe, subvert human happiness.<sup>60</sup> The meaning of the universe and human life is never clarified; it is an 'impenetrable darkness', an image which serves as a leitmotif in the 'Heart of Darkness'. Only on rare occasions does one get a glimpse of the truth and this truth is not an 'inner' truth or essence but a surface truth.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Conrad's intention should be construed as an attempt to 'cure' men of the belief that any profound sort of truth is discoverable or even necessary. Rather, what man needs is to re-educate himself to those banal and ordinary truths which give life meaning and value. Marlow expresses this idea succinctly in formulating his approach to life's meaning: 'To him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside.'<sup>62</sup> Failure to recognize the surface character of truths leads men to delude themselves into believing in their own profundity. Kurtz, for example, believes himself to be asserting deep and profound truths when in actuality he is only mouthing empty phrases. The effects of his 'monologues' are nevertheless pernicious. Men's craving for some profound truth makes them susceptible to Kurtz's rhetoric. Even the most decent representative of mankind, symbolized by Kurtz's Intended, is 'taken in' by Kurtz's claim to know the secret workings of the universe. Other characters in the story are infected with the craving too. Kurtz's sailor friend, the bizarre physician and Marlow himself are all deeply intent upon knowing the inner truth and reality. Conrad implies that wisdom requires men to settle for a condition where they no longer need an explanation; this is what Marlow means when he announces: 'One gets sometimes such a flash of insight. The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach, and beyond my power of meddling.'<sup>63</sup> Once men understand the futility of their effort to find a deep and comprehensive meaning in life they will become more content with the world as it is and draw closer to the joys of the concrete and tangible.

But Conrad also points up the disparity between man's inclination to find the true significance in things and the few glimpses of wisdom he manages to acquire. This creates still another difficulty: ideology and ideological thinking. If knowledge is necessarily limited and fallible and yet men continue to strive for 'essential' knowledge, then they will be inclined to reach out for doctrines that promise a comprehensive understanding. Such doctrines, postulating abstract ideas, not only fail to take account of the richness and diversity of human life, but have decidedly bad consequences. In the 'Heart of Darkness', the ideology of humanitarianism provides an unlimited opportunity for the exercise of pure selfishness. The vague and insubstantial character of the postulated ends make it possible to justify virtually anything as a means. Hence, Conrad portrays the officials who

<sup>60</sup> As he put it in one of his letters truth is 'une ombre sinistre et fuyante dont il est impossible de fixer l'image'.

<sup>61</sup> Conrad once declared to a friend: 'Je ne veux pas aller au fond. Je veux considérer la réalité comme une chose rude et rugueuse sur laquelle je promène mes doigts—rien de plus.' Quoted in Bernard C. Meyer, *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 100.

work at the various outposts as predatory adventurers who justify their unlimited acquisitiveness on the grounds of progress and civilization. Ideologies in this sense are bogus rationalizations which provide smokescreens for the fulfillment of man's passions, and in the worst instances men are 'taken in' by the ideologies and come to believe in them with a sense of total commitment. Kurtz, for example, is a passionate believer in his 'ideas', and he communicates his passion of commitment to the multitudes who in their self-doubt, fear and anxiety follow those who appear to have an inspired and total vision.

Still another problem which Conrad wishes to bring to our attention is the extent to which men are guided by their passions. Although Conrad eschews expressing this as a universal law, he does consistently remind us that men are instinctual animals. Kurtz's fanatical egoism, therefore, is simply a more extreme version of what exists within all men. This is one of those surface-truths which Marlow uncovers on his journey up the river to 'the centre of the earth'. The episode in the boat, when Marlow realizes how hungry his crewmen-cannibals are, reveals the imperious character of man's passions. For the natives, and for all men, hunger, like other passions, compels men to disregard principles or other abstract standards of justice. 'No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out . . . disgust simply does not exist, and as to superstitions, beliefs and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze.'<sup>64</sup>

Conrad has used this story to depict man's craving for inner truth, his susceptibility to ideology and his self-regarding instincts. In so doing he has given the reader an opportunity to reconsider and re-evaluate his attitudes and actions. But Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' implies some partial remedies as well. Though he does not propose a 'cure' for the malignancy of ideology, the character of Marlow implies at least a partial remedy. Thus, Marlow is perhaps a model of the individual who has obtained self-mastery and self-command, but who is yet 'worldly wise'. In the face of ideological thinking, he acquires the strength to resist its appeal by making a conscious decision not to drift submissively with the tides of his environment. By acknowledging the limits of reason and rationality, one may, like Marlow, refrain from imposing some abstract meaning on one's life and on others.

But if Marlow has self-mastery and self-command to resist the blandishments of ideology he has achieved this not simply through contemplation of the 'truth' but through the more concrete means of devotion to work. Work is to be understood, in contradistinction to ideals, eloquent words and sentimental pretenses. It is a defense against the human condition because it shows 'the power of devotion not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business'.<sup>65</sup> Work, though often prosaic and banal, reinforces one's sense of reality. It is not that work in itself is desirable, but as Marlow puts it: 'I don't like work – no man does – but I like what is in work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know.'<sup>66</sup>

Whatever the virtues of work (and there are many) Conrad suggests in this story that men require something more than this, some sense of genuine purpose;

<sup>64</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 117.

<sup>66</sup> Conrad, *Youth*, p. 85.

'some kind of belief is very necessary'.<sup>67</sup> Complete scepticism sees life as an absurdity without purpose and hope; it paralyzes human activity. On the other hand, one who is not sceptical may become victimized either by greedy egotists as represented by the manager and his assistant, or by the vast and demagogic schemes of a Kurtz. Conrad's remedy for his dilemma is the fabrication of salutary illusions. These illusions, though superficially resembling ideologies, are for Conrad quite distinct. They are not abstract expressions of a universal value, dogmatic and totalistic. On the contrary, they are life-enhancing illusions which admit the diverse character of human motives and goals. After Marlow shows us the harsh realities of this life he is compelled to admit the necessity for such illusions, even if they risk the possibility of terrifying evils. When forced to choose between the rapacious colonists and the monstrous Kurtz, Marlow chooses the latter. To the humanitarian world, as symbolized by Kurtz's Intended, Kurtz is a heroic, moral idealist. Life, Conrad implies, cannot be lived without the hopes engendered by illusions.

This, then, is Conrad's political teaching as it emerges from the 'Heart of Darkness'. It is a coherent and systematic teaching, the purpose of which is to provide a pragmatic 'philosophy of life',<sup>68</sup> some rules of thumb designed as coherent guides to men who are faced with political societies that are characterized by conflict, instability and disorder. And though it would be misleading to label this guide as authoritarian, it is surely fair to characterize it as socially conservative. It is sceptical toward those who, on the basis of abstract principles, propose permanent cures for human unhappiness. It acknowledges the deceptive character of man's projects for radical improvement and the unintended and pernicious consequences of man's most idealistic objectives. At the same time it recognizes that in practical life we cannot be content with negativism. Since we must sometimes act, the best course of conduct, according to Conrad, is to conform to the habituary and customary principles provided by tradition. Only then can we maintain a community of sovereign individuals, capable of making complex moral and political decisions.

#### IV

In the opening section of this essay the question was raised whether novelists have something to say about politics. It was concluded, somewhat hastily, that at least some novelists do, and that what they say should not be excluded from the province of political science simply because it does not fit well into preconceived models of social science favored by some political theorists and philosophers of science. This notion needs some elaboration and clarification if it is to sharpen our understanding of the contribution of the novelist to politics.

First of all some comparisons must be made. The novel as a narrative of human actions, thoughts and feelings is neither a collection of data useful to the political scientist nor an expression of laws and human behavior. Nevertheless, the novelist

<sup>67</sup> Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> I have borrowed this term from John Plamenatz. See his *Man and Society*, 2 Vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), especially pp. xv-xvi of Vol. I.

and social scientist do have in common their effort to build models to apprehend a portion of human experience. Both the social scientist's model and the novelist's model are idealizations, abstractions from the real world, analogs of something which is genuinely 'out there' in reality. As such both share the advantage and disadvantage of model building: their models both illuminate and distort reality. They illuminate by providing a context for discovering patterns and relationships which affect human behavior; they distort by emphasizing certain features over others, by investigating *a* and not *b*. But while this sharing should not be dismissed, it should not be exaggerated either. The political scientist, one must admit, views his models as heuristic devices for the eventual stating of testable hypotheses with the expectation of explaining the causes of human behavior. The novelist's models have a different objective. They are designed not to explain the causes of human behavior but to explain the motives, purposes and intentions of plausibly drawn characters in social and political contexts.<sup>69</sup> The novelist's models are interpretative maps or pictures which, though they do not state propositions that can be true or false, guide us and call attention to the range and subtlety of human activity. The aim of these models is to make us see ourselves and our society more vividly and clearly than we normally do; they accomplish this, when successful, by drawing comparisons (sometimes implicitly) between one sort of personality type and another, between one set of societal norms and another. In making these comparisons the novelist is not simply describing the world as an impassive observer of the human drama, but interpreting it as well. His fictive model allows him to conjecture and criticize the effects of certain character-types on certain values, and the effects of certain norms on particular character-types. With his model, he can examine and assess the character of an established political order or some hypothetical and possible social orders. Virtually every aspect of the complicated struggle between the individual and his institutions is open to his imaginative inquiry; he needs only an appropriate model to convince us that his descriptive portrayals are plausibly related to the real world.

In general, then, the explanatory model of the novelist does not conform to the causal model of explanation admired by some philosophers of science.<sup>70</sup> To insist that there is only one adequate model for the study of social and political phenomena, however, is simply another form of that search for certainty that has plagued philosophers for centuries; the search is fruitless and counter-productive. Political scientists should be willing to accept the idea that human activity can be viewed in more than one way, comprehended with more than one theory, interpreted by more than one explanatory model. The novelist provides simply another way of seeing things, and it is, one could argue, dogmatic political science that does not have room for the felicitous combination of common sense and artistic insight which the novelist has to offer.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of the difference between causal and motive explanations see A. R. Louch, *Explanation and Human Action* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), esp. chap. 6.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, May Brodbeck, 'Explanation, Prediction and Imperfect Knowledge', in May Brodbeck, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968).