Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*
A Critical and Contextual Discussion

Cedric Watts

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To
T. H. Watts (1897-1964) and M. A. Watts (1897-1965)

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Preface to the Second Edition

> We think our *Fathers* Fools, so *wise* we grow;
> Our *wiser Sons*, no doubt, will think *us* so."
> (Alexander Pope: 'An Essay on Criticism'.)

I WROTE this book in 1971. Eventually, it was published in 1977 by Mursia International of Milan, the proprietor being a devoted Conradian. (During that six-year interval, I sent a few details to Ugo Mursia's office for addition to the volume.) The editors of the Conrad Studies series, published by Rodopi, have now honoured my book by deeming it worthy of a second materialisation; and I thank all those involved in the matter, particularly that patient and dextrous literary obstetrician, Professor Allan H. Simmons.

I first read *Heart of Darkness* in 1961, during my final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Bewildered by the tale, I realised that I would need to read it again and again if I hoped to comprehend it adequately. In 1965, I became a lecturer at the University of Sussex, and *Heart of Darkness* was a recommended text for two courses that I taught. The best way to learn is to teach, and, after discussing the work with students, I became persuaded that there would be some value in a critical book devoted solely to this very complex novella. Perennially, I was interested in the notion of janiformity (or radical paradoxicality), and it seemed to me that this notion would provide a practical basis for an analysis of the work. "Janiformity" may have been my coinage, but the principle was not original: I cited William Empson and quoted part of Albert J. Guerard's list of Conradian paradoxes. A related interest of mine was the ability of texts to change considerably between the first reading and subsequent readings: naturally, ironies and covert plots which hide during the first reading gradually emerge later. The book therefore provided some janiform interpretations; and Janus is a crafty usher to Proteus.

Sussex University was offering what it deemed "a new map of learning", which emphasised contextual and interdisciplinary approaches. Hence, partly, the sub-title that I chose: *A Critical and Contextual Discussion.* Professor David Daiches once asked me what I thought of the interdisciplinary approach, and I replied that I had difficulty in imagining what any other approach to literature might be. Words change their

meanings in course of time. One of our initial responses to a literary work is to note or estimate its date; and we do so in order to locate the text within the appropriate semantic, cultural and historical settings, thus permitting apt comprehension and evaluation. Hence the ensuing range of analyses.

When re-reading my book recently, knowing that it would be resurrected, I expected to be embarrassed, and duly was. I contemplated ruefully its failings. Since 1971 there have been so many advances in Conradian scholarship and criticism – and so many cultural changes. Naturally, therefore, the book will, in various respects, have become an antiquated document, for time (rendering masterpieces mellow and commentaries callow) has exposed prejudices and omissions of which, then, I was unaware, or which I perhaps sensed but did not sufficiently register. Those faults may nevertheless bear some literary-historical interest. The emphasis on the fluctuating, evolving and diversifying experience of reading *Heart of Darkness* retains merit. However great the temptation, I have made no changes to the substance of the original edition. Even two small factual errors survive, to gratify the vigilant reader's self-esteem. Re-writing history destroys its lessons. Warts and all, the 1977 wording remains unaltered; and, as time modifies critically the words' meanings, the warts wax.

For the record, I'll list a few of the antiquated or regrettable features.

1. In matters of gender and ethnicity, the terminology is often out of date and sometimes deplorable. But we may then infer that today's terms will lose their virtue in the cultural rough-and-tumble.
2. Issues later raised by Chinua Achebe, Elaine Showalter, Terry Eagleton and other commentators are partly but insufficiently anticipated. Similarly, the discussion obviously lacks areas of sophistication that later critical and theoretical developments might have prompted. Conrad, however, remarked: "Theory is a cold and lying tombstone of departed truth"; and Edward Said, many years later, declared: "It is the critic's job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests." I prefer to consider that the most fruitful theories are implicit in the best creative works.
3. Some relevant allusions are not discussed. Here is a sample. At the tale's opening, the ominous sunset upon London mocks the slogan of those times, "The British Empire is the empire on which the sun never sets". Marlow's "the dark places of the earth" echoes Psalm 74:20, which declares that "the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of

cruelty". Like H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, Conrad's text variously recalls Genesis 15:12, where we are told, of Abram, "an horror of great darkness fell upon him".

On the other hand, to make some amends, in various writings since 1977 I have been able to continue the discussion. The continuation can be found in *A Preface to Conrad* (1982, 1993) and *The Deceptive Text* (1984), in my editions of *Heart of Darkness* for Everyman Dent Orion and for Oxford University Press (which display the differences between the 1899 and 1902 texts), in a chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad* (1996), and in various essays. The phrase "*usque ad finem*" comes to mind, although inflected ironically. I do not wish my self-critical comments here to deter the prospective reader, so I had better offer the reassurance (distastefully immodest though it be) that some reviewers liked the original book, saying: "criticism of the highest order", "excellent" (*Joseph Conrad Today*), "an important book" (*Conradiana*), and "splendid" (*Critical Quarterly*). The reader will soon perceive that the discussion defines concepts and procedures which are applicable to a very wide range of works.

The first edition, type-set by hand, was printed very accurately by Cambridge University Press's printing house. Time's airbrush has browned the thick paper, but that wording remains congenially legible. Although I have industriously checked the proofs of the present edition, human fallibility and current technical procedures may sprinkle the new text with typographical errors. If so, poetic justice will prevail, for, in the past, I carped at little textual lapses in Conrad's writings.

I conclude by saying that my commentary on *Heart of Darkness* was, from the outset, in large measure "a labour of love". Because I admired this novella, one of my motives was a wish to understand it better and to help people to appreciate it. I thought then that it was the best of Conrad's shorter works; standing alongside *Nostromo*, the best of his longer works. Conrad once said that his affection for Dickens' *Bleak House* was so great that its very weaknesses had become more precious to him than the strengths of other writers' works. That's how I feel now about *Heart of Darkness*. The decades since my book appeared have increased my enthusiasm for Conrad's astonishing novella, written so eloquently in his third language. If my reprinted commentary were to persuade some people to look anew at *Heart of Darkness*, that would be sufficient vindication.

Cedric Watts
September, 2011

Acknowledgements to the First Edition

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1

INTRODUCTION

TO BEGIN with an immediate declaration of interest: *Heart of Darkness* is the best short novel I know, and in my opinion it is the finest and richest of Conrad's works. The tale is exciting and profound, lucid and bewildering; it is highly compressed, rich in texture and implication; it has a recessive adroitness, constantly ambushing the conceptualising reader; and thematically it has a remarkable range of reference to problems of politics and psychology, morality and religion, social order and evolution. In embodying a critical summary of some important nineteenth-century preoccupations, Conrad has critically anticipated some equally important twentieth-century preoccupations. Furthermore, *Heart of Darkness* can be related to a diversity of "traditions", generic and technical, including political satire, traveller's tale, psychological odyssey, meditated autobiography, and isolation fable; while to those readers who seek prophecies, it speaks eloquently of the brutalities and follies of subsequent history.

It has long been recognised as one of Conrad's major works, and has evoked a wealth of exegetic writing; but there are good grounds for believing that it deserves a fuller survey than it has yet received from any one critic. Probably the most influential essay has been that of F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition*,[1] but, as was later argued by A. J. Guerard,[2] Leavis under-estimated the importance of Marlow's presence as narrator: a fact with complicated and extensive critical consequences. Guerard, in turn, discussed imaginatively the narrative texture and the rôle of Marlow, but may have taxed the reader's credulity with his psycho-analytic theory of the "night journey", according to which Kurtz is "a part of" Marlow. Stanton de Voren Hoffman[3] struggled to elucidate the implications of the tale's peculiar atmosphere of "lugubrious drollery"; yet, by regarding such drollery as "a dodge", he was led to postulate a thoroughly evasive rather than incisive work. And in *Poets of Reality*,[4] J. Hillis Miller offered so vehement a tribute to Conrad's nihilism that his ingenuity was strenuously exercised by the fact that Conrad had put pen to paper at all. Therefore I am greatly indebted to these commentators (and to several others who will be cited) for provocation as well as for

information, because I felt that there remained a need for a more extensive and detailed critical study: one which fully accepted that the matters presented by the tale are, in their embodiment, of such complexity that a discussion confined to a single essay or chapter constantly runs the risk of sacrificing some truth for the sake of polemical force, or of sacrificing some sensitivity in the interests of economy. And in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, the temptations to make such sacrifices are more seductive and dangerous than in the case of most works of fiction, the prime reason being the tentacular and paradoxical qualities of the work.

I have used the word "tentacular" because interpreting the tale is in some ways like wrestling with an octopus; we extricate ourselves from one entanglement only to be re-entangled in our new position: so there are curious parallels between events within the fictional realm and events in the realm of reader-response. The enigma of Kurtz entangles Marlow and ourselves. And in this respect Conrad is working towards the methods of Kafka and Beckett. A writer, one of whose motives is to give validity to an "absurdist" view of man's experience (which for part of the time, intermittently, is one of Conrad's motives), has to overcome the objection of the naïve realist who, like Dr. Johnson kicking the stone to refute Berkeley, says: "You can say what you like about life's absurdity, but that's *your* problem: your experience has too little in common with mine." Kafka and Beckett undermine this standpoint by ensuring that the reader undergoes an ordeal that parallels the ordeal of the fictional protagonists. The frustrations of K. in seeking to gain access to the elusive Castle are paralleled by the frustrations of the reader in seeking to define the meaning of "the Castle"; and the meaning of "Godot" tantalises the expectant reader as Godot tantalises Estragon and Vladimir. Both writers seduce us into attempting to allocate specific meanings to the Castle and Godot; and they thwart us by finally permitting only the general meaning, namely: the category of ultimate meaning-givers – a category that may have no content. Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* anticipates *The Castle* and *Waiting for Godot* not simply by his pervasive evocation of futile or inherently frustrating activity, but particularly by tempting us to give a specific definition of Kurtz's nature, a definition which other factors in the presentation of Kurtz then contradict; and at the same time, by his use of the oblique narrative, Conrad works towards the open or non-finite form which was developed by Kafka and Beckett to the ultimate of the laconic stage-direction in Beckett's *Play*: "*Repeat play.*" So *Heart of Darkness* is tentacular

in the sense that the principles of embodiment enable its scepticism to reach so deeply and clingingly into the recesses of our responses. And if it be objected that I seem to be already in danger of overlooking the features which obviously differentiate the work from such later absurdist writing – features like the sardonic condemnation of particular activities in the Belgian Congo at a particular time, inducing compassionate indignation on behalf of the exploited race – then I gladly reply: "Yes, and this objection also makes my point: for precisely in thus gripping us whatever our main orientations may be, and in thus entangling negation and affirmation, the work again displays its tentacular nature."

Between the tentacular quality and the paradoxicality of the work there is no clear demarcation. The tutelary deity of the tale is the god Janus. Problems are paradoxically presented, and their apparent solutions are in turn paradoxically undercut. Consider the array of ostensible paradoxes that a first reading may yield:

> It is better to be very bad than moderately bad, and it may even be better to be intensely bad than to be ordinarily respectable: we have a very good man's word for it.
> Morality is a sham; without it, human beings become sham humans.
> Awareness is better than unawareness: we may become aware that it is better to be unaware.
> Civilisation is more savage than savagery; it is a hypocritical veneer – and a precious achievement to be guarded.
> Society saves us from corruption; society is corrupt and corrupts.
> Imperialism is sometimes redeemed by an idea at the back of it, but imperialism, irredeemably, is theft.
> Beliefs offer salvation when principles fail, but beliefs are as fallible as principles.
> Brotherhood transcends racial differences; but "we live, as we dream – alone".

Repeatedly this pyrrhonistic tale appears to display some of the "major inward conflicts" deduced by Professor Guerard from his survey of Conrad's short novels and non-fictional writing:

> A declared fear of the corrosive and faith-destroying intellect – doubled by a profound and ironic skepticism; .....
> A declared distrust of generous idealism – doubled by a strong idealism; .....
> A declared fidelity to law as above the individual – doubled by a strong sense of fidelity to the individual, with betrayal of the

> individual the most deeply felt of all crimes;
>
> Briefly: a deep commitment to order in society and in the self – doubled by incorrigible sympathy for the outlaw, whether existing in society or the self.[5]

Conrad himself said: "Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning";[6] and it has long been recognised that the circumstances of Conrad's early life predisposed him to become eventually the writer who characteristically sees familiar situations, arguments, attitudes and personalities from radically contrasting viewpoints. Loyalty could entail betrayal; responsibility could appear as escapism; solidarity could entail subversion. As a Polish patriot at the time of Russian domination of Eastern Poland, Conrad's father was at once a man of loyalty (to his heritage) and a subversive (in the eyes of the authorities). Fidelity to the ideal of Polish freedom brought Apollo Korzeniowski to servitude and shortened the lives of himself and his wife. The repressiveness of the Russian and Prussian régimes in Poland conditioned in Conrad a life-long awareness of the iniquities implicit in the imposition of rule on weaker nations by the more powerful; yet the very strength of the Prussian and Russian overlords (not to mention the Austrian) alerted Conrad to the quixotism of so many apparently admirable quests for political and individual enfranchisement. In leaving Poland in his youth to become a seaman abroad, however, Conrad could himself be regarded as "an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote":[7] his act of courageous independence could also be seen as an act of folly or desertion: one sort of loyalty could be one sort of betrayal. As a seaman in the merchant navy, Conrad was dedicated to a code of co-operative endeavour; yet such a navy served a centrally competitive economy: even the *Narcissus*'s "pilgrimage" had a "sordid inspiration".[8] As a servant of the Belgian company in the Congo in 1890, Conrad, as we know from his diary of the time, was a sensitive observer of the mendacities, intrigues and brutalities around him; yet he himself, as a paid employee of the company, had complicity with the exploiters. As one whose ancestry was in the land-owning gentry, he had an aristocratic contempt for the bourgeoisie: yet the bourgeoisie had made the feudal-aristocratic ethic an anachronism, and Conrad found himself in intermittent complicities with those who attacked the bourgeoisie from a socialistic standpoint. Yet, in turn, he had an aristocratic fear of a socialism that might become mobocracy or Cæsarism. He attacked those who pin their faith to "material interests", yet his mature fiction shows compellingly the

pervasive determining power of economic forces. In *Nostromo*, the Marxist is presented as a sinister, vulturine creature; yet the novel can to a large extent be read as a vivid validation of Marxist claims, as well as a critique of the potential hubris of every political ideology.

The paradoxes of Conrad's career and personality made it natural that his most intense literary friendship should be with a mercurial and aristocratic socialist pioneer, R. B. Cunninghame Graham; and the epistolary debate with Cunninghame Graham, which began in 1897, may partly account for the deepening of political and economic analysis in Conrad's fiction of the years 1897–1904.[9] The prime material for *Heart of Darkness* had been provided by Conrad's experiences in the Congo seven years before he had met Graham; yet the book is the fruit not of simple experience but of experience profoundly meditated, and the friendship with Graham was precisely the sort to give incisiveness to the meditations. *Heart of Darkness* deploys against imperialism the cosmopolitan arguments of the type of which Graham was a celebrated exponent, while incorporating in the discussion a complexity of pessimism that transcended Graham's. Conrad's close relationship with this figure who was a socialist demagogue as well as an aristocratic cosmopolitan may also have encouraged Conrad to explore with growing subtlety in his fiction the motif of the "secret sharer", in which a strange complicity is established between contrasting characters: a motif so evident in the presentation of Marlow's response to Kurtz, that genius who might have been a great political leader "on the popular side".

In the ensuing chapters I will refer again to the correspondence with Cunninghame Graham; and this will be in keeping with my method, which is that of one who steps back in order to jump forward. By means of comparisons I will repeatedly set the tale in a variety of contexts, and thus prepare the way both for resolution of some of the paradoxes I have listed and for attempted solution of some particularly taxing critical problems.

2

REFLECTIONS ON THE TITLE

i. AMBIGUITY

WHEN THE TALE was first published, as a serial in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, the title was *The Heart of Darkness*. Obviously enough, the title-phrase can mean "the centre of a dark (sinister, evil, corrupt, malevolent, mysterious or obscure) region". But because of the ambiguity of the word "of ", the phrase can also mean "the heart which has the quality of darkness", suggesting a human being with a dark (sinister, evil, corrupt, malevolent, mysterious or obscure) inner nature. The presence of "*The*" in the original title appears to tilt the balance, so that most readers would probably have sensed at once the former meaning and overlooked (until they were well embarked on the narrative) the latter. However, for the ensuing publication in book form, Conrad deleted "*The*"; and by thus making the grammatical format of the phrase resemble that of such phrases as "man of straw" or "hearts of oak", he gave an equipoise of ambiguity to the title. The very equipoise is functionally valuable, holding us briefly in doubt as we begin the tale, and appropriately heralding some of the duplicities of effect to come.

One reason for the work's enduring force is its critical anticipation of twentieth-century preoccupations; and one such preoccupation is ambiguity itself. In most periods, of course, major writers have exploited ambiguities in the pursuit of subtlety, complexity and compression (though the presence of ambiguities is in itself no guarantee of merit). But in no previous century has linguistic ambiguity as a topic approached the importance which it now holds. Ever since the Graves/Riding discussion of Shakespeare's sonnet 129 in an essay[1] which prompted Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, the topic has been explored in different contexts by innumerable literary critics; and this exploration is clearly related to the preoccupation of major and influential modern philosophers, particularly Russell and Wittgenstein, with the elucidation of ambiguous terms and statements as a means to the solution or euthanasia of philosophical problems. One general cause of this preoccupation can be formulated like this: the greater the prestige of

empiricism and individualism, the greater will be the sceptical attention directed initially towards matters of religion and later towards matters of communication between individuals. The connection between cosmic scepticism and a heightened sense of the deceptive plasticity of language is made in several of Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham, from one of which the following passage is taken – a passage which may remind us both of Marlow's brooding silence at the opening and close of *Heart of Darkness* and of recent critical discussions (notably George Steiner's *Language and Silence*) of "the seductions of silence" for twentieth-century writers.

> Life knows us not and we do not know life – we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore .....[2]

This note of philosophical melodrama or jeremiad is characteristic of these letters. Part of Conrad's nature deeply experienced the force of such pessimistic relativistic arguments, and they have currency in the work of several writers known to him, notably Schopenhauer, Maupassant, Pater and Graham himself. Yet, as Conrad remarked in his essay on Henry James, art is "rescue work": from denial and doubt it fashions new celebrations and durable, if qualified, affirmations: it uses old wreckage as material for new structures. And in his major works of fiction a more complex, circumspect, sensitive and intelligent Conrad is at work than the Conrad who deploys separated aspects of his nature in letters to correspondents. "Each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit": a view which might have been the basis of a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to the writing of fiction undergoes constructive metamorphosis as Conrad exploits in the works his sense of the different meanings that words can bear to different men in different contexts; and by obliging us to grasp and discriminate between the meanings of his many ambiguous key-phrases and key-terms, he conducts innumerable miniature campaigns against "folly and conceit".

Several of Conrad's works have titles which invite such discrimination. The title of *Nostromo*, for example, which means "our man"[3] and is the name given to the apparently devoted employee of the company, accumulates ironic force, since Nostromo's final loyalty is to himself only – and in such self-devotion he can be regarded as betraying

himself. Yet when he had been loyal to the company, had he not been betraying himself then, by letting himself be the patronised puppet of capitalism? In these ways the title serves as the nexus of several questions about loyalty to others and to one's own best possibilities, about solidarity, identity, and ownership. In the case of *The Secret Agent*, the title initially seems to have innocuously specific reference, but its connotations gradually undergo ironic expansion. It brings to mind Verloc himself – yet his activities as an agent are not secret from the police; then Winnie Verloc, whose secret and intense devotion to her brother is eventually the cause of her husband's death; and finally the hidden force of abstract "agents" like human madness and despair.

But unlike these later examples, the title *Heart of Darkness* offers not simply alternative readings in retrospect, but also, from the start, a certain disturbing mysteriousness through the immediate possibility of alternative glosses: we sense ambiguity even before consciously analysing the components of the phrase. And, throughout the tale, ambiguities proliferate in the areas of semantics (as when Marlow plays upon the different meanings of "absurd"), of association or connotation of imagery (as will now be discussed), and of character, motive and action. The title thus strikes the keynote, resonant, mysterious and equivocal, for one of the most intensely orchestrated works of fiction. "Dark", "darkness": the words re-echo to the very last paragraph, in which "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness".

In *Heart of Darkness*, corruption and evil are subversive and tentacular: they send out tentacles which entwine themselves about and amongst the seemingly sound and good. This effect stems largely from a principle which Cleanth Brooks defined when he was discussing *The Waste Land*. Brooks said that T. S. Eliot there "works in terms of surface parallelisms which in reality make ironical contrasts, and in terms of surface contrasts which in reality constitute parallelisms".[4] These words describe exactly the principle that Conrad uses in deploying the substantially but not entirely different materials of *Heart of Darkness*. Later I will be discussing many examples of this principle; for the present I wish to point out that it is partly applicable to the way in which Conrad exploits the primary and secondary literary connotations of "light", "darkness", "black" and "white."

"And God said, Let there be light ....." "Light" has the most ancient of associations with Godhead, sanctity and truth ("enlightenment"); and

"darkness" has long connoted evil, death, the sinister, ignorance, error, and the oppressively mysterious. "White" has associations with holiness, purity, chastity; and "black" with evil, damnation, sin. Thus is formed a reassuringly simplistic balance of primary connotations which Conrad repeatedly evokes and upsets: upsets by intermittently exploiting secondary connotations. St Matthew (Chapter 23, verse 27) had likened hypocrites to "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men's* bones, and of all uncleanness"; and, in the tale, white is the colour of Fresleven's bleached bones, of the skulls round Kurtz's hut, of Kurtz's bald head, of the ivory which elicits the pilgrims' avarice; and the city which contains the company's headquarters reminds Marlow of "a whited sepulchre". The signal examples of corruption are not among the blacks but among the white men, who are responsible for colouring-in the "white patch" that once, Marlow reminds us, filled the map of the "dark continent".

ii. DARKNESS AND SOLAR DEATH

> In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
>
> And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
>
> And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.
>
> And God saw the light, that *it was* good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
>
> And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night .....
>
> (Genesis, Authorised Version, Ch. l, verses 1-5.)

> The treasury of life and motion from age to age is running lower and lower. The great sun which, stricken with the pangs of dissolution, has bravely looked down with steady and undimmed eye upon our earth ever since organization first bloomed upon it, is nevertheless a dying existence. The pelting rain of cosmical matter descending upon his surface can only retard, for a limited time, the encroachments of the mortal rigors, as friction may perpetuate, for a few brief moments, the vital warmth of a dying man.
>
> (Professor Alexander Winchell: 'The Sun Cooling Off': *Scientific American* 65, p.. 230: 10 October 1891.)

> The creative art of a writer of fiction may be compared to rescue work carried out in darkness .....
>
> (Conrad: 'Henry James' in *Notes on Life and Letters.*)

Although "darkness" has many and varied connotations in the tale, its main connotation, gradually established, is the mysteriously or indeterminately sinister; and through repetition of the term in a variety of contexts, Conrad conveys the impression that this sinister force has an irresistible dynamism. At the end of Pope's *Dunciad*, universal darkness buries all; and by the end of *Heart of Darkness*, various parallelisms (for example, of the night that encompasses Kurtz's fiancée and the night that engulfs the yawl) have created a response which resembles that created by the ending of *The Dunciad*, in as much as one feels that it's no use to say, "Cheer up: dawn always follows night: the sun *will* in fact rise again." Conrad's imagery of darkness has centrally a peculiarly pessimistic resonance which resists such jaunty common-sense. And the basic reason for this can soon be located.

Conrad sensed more acutely than most of his contemporaries the late-nineteenth-century nightmare of a Doomsday in which the ultimate darkness would settle on this planet. H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), which Conrad had read, had given the most explicit presentation of that nightmare. There the Time Traveller voyages to the end of historic time on earth:

> So I travelled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth's fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away .....
>
> The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky

was absolutely black.

A horror of this great darkness came on me.[5]

This is one of those fine Wellsian passages in which the fantasy is made the more memorable by the rather thin, unoriginal, journalistic texture of the writing: the vision gains in authenticity by the fictional observer's inability to check his fascinated, almost gloating, science-reporter's instinct for a world-historical scoop: the hand may shield the eyes but between the parted fingers those eyes are watching hungrily. Given the Time Traveller's character, some of Wells's descriptive limitations become strengths. And the passage as a whole is the most emphatic reminder that if today we are likely to envisage Doomsday as nuclear holocaust, brighter than a thousand suns, in the late nineteenth century the Doomsday envisaged was that of eternal night setting on the solar system as the very sun cools in the sky.

A partial counterpart to Wells's description is in Conrad's essay, 'Henry James' (1905):

> When the last aqueduct shall have crumbled to pieces, the last airship fallen to the ground, the last blade of grass have died upon a dying earth, man, indomitable by his training in resistance to misery and pain, shall set this undiminished light of his eyes against the feeble glow of the sun. The artistic faculty, of which each of us has a minute grain, may find its voice in some individual of that last group ..... The artist in his calling of interpreter creates (the clearest form of demonstration) because he must. He is so much of a voice that, for him, silence is like death; and the postulate was, that there is a group alive, clustered on his threshold to watch the last flicker of light on a black sky, to hear the last word uttered in the stilled workshop of the earth.[6]

The essay displays Conrad's facility for laying quite contrasting emphases on particular facts or arguments. Earlier, in two letters much closer to the time of writing *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad had cited the dying sun not to stage a tribute to "indomitable" man but to offer a crushing retort to Cunninghame Graham's socialistic arguments. Thus, in a letter dated 14 January 1898, he wrote:

> The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness and silence.[7]

And on 15 June, the man who in a later essay was to attack the "arrogance" of declared pessimism is writing:

> Et les mots s'envolent; et il ne reste rien, entendez-vous? Absolument rien, oh homme de foi! Rien. Un moment, un clin d'œil et il ne reste rien – qu'une goutte de boue, de boue froide, de boue morte lancée dans l'espace noir, tournoyant autour d'un soleil éteint. Rien. Ni pensée, ni son, ni âme. Rien.[8]

For Conrad, the ultimate Heart of Darkness was *un soleil éteint*: an extinguished sun at the centre of eternal night.

One difference between Pope's vision of universal darkness at the end of *The Dunciad* and the endless night foreseen by Wells and Conrad is that in the late nineteenth century the nightmare was thought to be a starkly scientific prediction: metaphoric fantasy had become very cold fact. In the 1850s, William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin) had defined the thermodynamic principle of the dissipation of "available" energy; and the popularisation of this principle had disseminated the idea that the sun, like a Victorian coal-fire in the sky, was steadily burning itself out.[9] That idea of gradual decline has since been superseded by various hypotheses, one being that of constant regeneration, another being that the sun will undergo a phase of immense brightening and expansion, probably consuming the earth, before the final cooling; but in 1925, when Wells wrote his *Outline of History*, the Victorian belief was still being memorably popularised:

> Astronomers give us convincing reasons for supposing ..... that the sun ..... is now much cooler than it was. ..... There will be a time when the day will be as long as a year is now, and the cooling sun, shorn of its beams, will hang motionless in the heavens.[10]

Secular man had escaped the Apocalypse of Revelation to be confronted, it seemed, by the Doomsday of the universe known to science. From death by fire to death by ice. The rational sanctuary of the Newtonian universe had become for mankind a baited and inescapable trap.

It is tempting to speculate that *The Time Machine* may have encouraged Conrad to make Marlow something of a Time Traveller, one who feels that he is travelling back in time as he voyages forward upstream; and perhaps the discussion of "the geometry of Four Dimensions" which begins Wells's novel influenced *The Inheritors* (1901), in which Conrad collaborated with F. M. Hueffer to write a saga of

"Fourth Dimensionists". The long passage from *The Time Machine* which I have quoted, however, is intended to have a mnemonic function, rather than to raise questions of "influence" (although I think it quite probable that a preoccupation of the times was strengthened in Conrad by his knowledge of Wells's work and by his recent friendly correspondence with Wells himself). The nightmare made so explicit in *The Time Machine* haunts Conrad's writings in various forms, and could be regarded as a nexus of Conrad's interest in the themes of isolation, of futile or absurd action, and of the apparent sanctuary which is really a baited trap; and it seems to be an invisible centre of the pessimistic aspects of *Heart of Darkness*.

To the traditional Romantic theme of individual isolation Conrad brought a new bleakness, a tougher resistance to metaphysical and emotional solace, a keener intuition of nihilistic implications. Thus he anticipated, albeit critically, twentieth-century literary treatments of the theme. I say "albeit critically", because few later writers have had so Janus-headed an alertness to the value of certain forms of solidarity as well as to forces undermining solidarity, and to the points at which community may collapse *or* grow within conditions isolating a group. However, we may feel that Conrad's assimilation of the Thomsonian theory helped him to universalise that imaginative impress of the problems of isolation which had first been made by the uncommon loneliness of a childhood in which, by the age of eleven, he was an orphan. In the last paragraph of *Heart of Darkness*, the description of the little group of men encompassed by darkness would have connoted for Conrad that vision which he was later to present, as we have noted, in 'Henry James': it would have connoted the isolation of that last group of men listening to the last storyteller as the last long night begins.

The quotations from the letters to Cunninghame Graham have shown that Conrad's sense of the finitude of mankind's duration was often related to a powerful if intermittent sense of the ultimate futility or absurdity of all action; and even if the 'Henry James' essay makes the artist a privileged worker, he is privileged to interpret the fact that though men have laboured down the ages, there has come a day when "the last aqueduct [has] crumbled to pieces, the last airship fallen to the ground". In *Heart of Darkness*, the "boiler wallowing in the grass", the pieces of "decaying machinery" gradually being obliterated by the jungle, and the "undersized railway truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air", have disturbing connotations which are not fully explained by our noting that these are tokens of wasteful, inefficient industry; and this is partly because the peculiar fluidity of the time-scheme invoked by the

tale helps us to sense subliminally that far Doomsday when all man's technology is annulled by the non-human environment.

The third theme in the cluster under consideration is that of the baited trap. "I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I had been looking forward to – a talk with Kurtz." Oppressed by the horrors of the journey up-river, Marlow comes to think of the meeting with Kurtz almost as one thinks of sanctuary – but the "talk with Kurtz" is to be the greatest horror of all. In 'The Secret Sharer' (1910), the protagonist thinks complacently of his vessel as a sanctuary ("I rejoiced in the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land") – but it soon becomes a place of nightmarish worry and tension. In *The Shadow-Line* (1916), the young captain longs to escape from the fever-ridden shore to the sanctuary of open sea – only to be reduced almost to madness by the problems which beset him away from land. And for Conrad, in some moods, the ultimate fraudulent sanctuary, the most remorseless baited trap, was the globe of earth itself, whose attractions were all the crueller a seduction to a race that must eventually become extinct on it. April is indeed the cruellest month, to judge by Conrad's letter of April 1898:

> There is twilight and soft clouds and daffodils and a great weariness. Spring! Excellentissime – Spring? We are an[n]ually lured by false hopes. Spring! Che coglioneria! Another illusion for the undoing of mankind.[11]

In *Victory* (1915), Heyst reflects bitterly that Adam's fall began as soon as he took an interest in the world.

Heyst had inherited his pessimism from his father, and his father's insistence that life is a snare and a cheat[12] resembles that of Schopenhauer, whose views had their greatest influence during the 1890s; and Conrad was one of the many writers at that time whose sense of the *fin de siècle* was made more sombre by a sense of the *fin du globe.* Max Nordau, for example, whose work was known to Conrad, had in *Degeneration* (1895) concluded a survey of prevailing decadence by declaiming:

> Such is the spectacle presented by the doings of men in the reddened light of the Dusk of the Nations. ..... Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which all certainty is destroyed and any

> guess seems plausible. Forms lose their outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist. The day is over, the night draws on.[13]

Certainly, crepuscular gloom had some modishness in the period; but it is equally certain that the thematic nexus we have discussed has an imaginative centrality for Conrad. The evidence is not simply the frequency with which his writings offer instances of men beset by darkness, but rather the peculiarly haunting power of those instances: a power related to the suggestion of an annihilating dynamism in the darkness which (for example) assails *Nostromo*'s Decoud when he crosses the Golfo Placido at night, or besets the young captain of *The Shadow-Line* who reflects:

> When the time came the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sigh, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.[14]

And in the final scene of *Heart of Darkness*, with Marlow and his little group of hearers dwarfed beneath the growing gloom, Conrad makes us feel subliminally an array of his fears: the fear that a minority of decent humans is at present fighting a lonely rearguard-action against barbarism, the fear that human rationality is opposed by a cruel irrationality in the universe, and the fear that blank extinction awaits mankind as a race as surely as it awaits man as a mortal individual.

Conrad says in 'Henry James':

> The demand of the individual to the artist is, in effect, the cry "Take me out of myself!" meaning really, out of my perishable activity into the light of imperishable consciousness. But everything is relative, and the light of consciousness is only enduring, merely the most enduring of the things of this earth, imperishable only as against the short-lived work of our industrious hands.

iii. THE ANTIPATHETIC FALLACY

Three years after Conrad had described that lonely group of comrades on a yawl, Bertrand Russell compared mankind to comrades on a narrow

raft. In his essay 'The Free Man's Worship' (for which "marvellous pages," Conrad said, "the only return one can make is that of a deep admiring affection"),[15] Russell suggested

> that Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system .....

He claimed that in moments of insight

> we see, surrounding the narrow raft illumined by the flickering light of human comradeship, the dark ocean on whose rolling waves we toss for a brief hour; from the great night without, a chill blast breaks in upon our refuge; all the loneliness of humanity amid hostile forces is concentrated upon the individual soul, which must struggle alone, with what of courage it can command, against the whole weight of a universe that cares nothing for its hopes and fears. Victory, in this struggle with the powers of darkness, is the true baptism into the glorious company of heroes, the true initiation into the overmastering beauty of human existence.[16]

The present reader, while noting that the imagery of "the dark ocean", "the great night without" and "the powers of darkness" further illustrates the argument of my last section, may well feel an inclination to flinch away from the determinedly majestic oratory of Russell's prose, particularly at that last sentence where rhythmic momentum appears to have carried Russell to a point of speciously hyperbolic affirmation.[17] The philosopher has evidently decided that big matters demand a grand style; but the grandeur is markedly a matter of incantation ("all the labours ..... all the devotion ..... all the inspiration ..... all the noonday brightness"), and the apparently august emotion appears, on closer inspection, to be a magniloquent sentimentality. This is a danger which besets those who write epitaphs, and one which is particularly hard to avoid when the epitaph is for mankind.

Epitaphs are often consolatory; and to examine one such conso-

lation, I contrast, now, the Russell quotation with a passage from another writer who has links with Conrad, Alfred R. Wallace. (Wallace's journals had provided source-material for Conrad's early novels.) *In Man's Place in the Universe* (1903), Wallace writes:

> We are, therefore [in accepting Lord Kelvin's arguments], again brought to the conclusion that there has been, and is, no time to spare; that the *whole* of the available past life-period of the sun has been utilised for life-development on the earth, and that the future will be not much more than may be needed for the completion of the grand drama of human history, and the development of the full possibilities of the mental and moral nature of man.
>
> We have here, then, a very powerful argument, from a different point of view from any previously considered, for the conclusion that man's place in the solar system is altogether unique, and that no other planet either has developed or can develop such a full and complete life-series as that which the earth has actually developed.[18]

As the Tennyson quotation on the last page of his book confirms ("Fear not thou the hidden purpose of that Power which alone is great"), Wallace, in a carefully-phrased and ingenious exposition, is attempting to accommodate the physicists' recent findings within a novel version of the theologians' argument from design. Wallace is suggesting that if time is short for the human race, that may be precisely because the full development of the human race is all that time is waiting for: in a sense, fully-evolved man determines the life of the sun, instead of the sun's duration determining man's: so that man is indeed, as the theologians had long argued, a *very* special creation.

The rather archaic principle of Wallace's consolation helps to define, by contrast, the very different principle of Russell's, which has had considerable literary currency. Russell had claimed that man could, in the light of his present knowledge, be at least a nobly Promethean or Atlas-like figure who strives, "proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power".[19]

The closer you look at it, the odder this consolation becomes. Russell had claimed that the universe around man is totally alien, mindless, spiritless: non-human. The reader may conclude that Russell's Atlas, in his defiance, is as ridiculous as a man shaking his fist at a brick wall. But

to draw such a conclusion is made difficult by a seductive confusion of the notions of non-humanity and inhumanity. From thinking of the universe as non-human, neutral to man, it is easy to slide into the thought that the universe in its very neutrality is alien to man (who would like to feel anthropomorphic powers around him) and thus to the thought that the universe, being so alien, is positively hostile to man – and finally to the thought that man is eminently courageous to defy so powerful a foe. The consolation lies (a) in the extent to which these shifts anthropomorphise the universe (for even a foe is at least responsive to one, is he not?), and (b) in the way in which envisaging the universe as a great foe puts man into the rôle of a heroic (if tragic) figure who nobly fights against overwhelming odds.

The term "Pathetic Fallacy", coined by Ruskin, is commonly applied to the attribution of human feelings to non-human nature. In literature of past centuries, the examples that come most readily to mind are generally those in certain elegies – all nature mourns the death of a Lycidas or an Adonais – in which the attributed feelings are those of *sympathy* with man. It will therefore be useful for us to give the special term "Antipathetic Fallacy" to writings where, as in Russell's essay, the feelings attributed to nature are those of *antipathy* to man. The Russell quotation has demonstrated the ease with which a sceptic may rhetorically slide into a logical contradiction, anthropomorphising the non-anthropomorphic. We have seen how such linguistic features as the apparent similarity of "non-human" to "inhuman" facilitate such a transition to the antipathetic fallacy. We will note in passing that this fallacy, central in Hardy's work, remains potent in such recent writers as Hemingway, Sartre and Camus;[20] but what concerns us chiefly here is that now we understand how the antipathetic fallacy works, we are in a position to understand one of the most paradoxical features of *Heart of Darkness*: the fact that the tale creates a powerful sense of evil while at the same time conveying a powerful scepticism about matters of religion and morality.

3

THE "OBLIQUE NARRATIVE" CONVENTION AND THE TALE'S OPENING

i. (a) *Uses of the Convention*

By "the 'oblique narrative' convention" I mean the convention of the tale within a tale, whereby the "inner" narrative is presented in the words of a fictional narrator whom we first meet in the "outer" or enclosing narrative. Because stories employing this convention often return us in the last pages to the scene of the opening pages, it may be tempting to liken the outer and the inner narratives respectively to the frame and to the picture enclosed within the frame. However, the inadequacy of this analogy increases in proportion to the sophistication with which the convention is used; and I will therefore avoid it when discussing *Heart of Darkness*.

The convention has a simple mimetic origin: the format is true to common experience: when a group of people forms at a club or inn, on a journey, say, or at a dinner, someone sooner or later starts to tell a tale based on his personal experience or connected with his personal preoccupations. The history of the format can be traced back via *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron* to *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*; and in the mid-to-late nineteenth century there is an abundance of shorter narratives which employ this convention, partly as one consequence of the huge market which periodicals then provided for shorter narratives in general, and partly because the development of communications, foreign trade and empires meant that at clubs and other places travellers from remote regions would often be meeting informally to compare their experiences. As Norman Sherry points out,[1] the opening of *Heart of Darkness* has a clear factual basis in the outings on a yawl, also called the *Nellie*, on which Conrad had swapped yarns with ex-seamen like G. F. W. Hope, who was now a yachtsman and company director.

Among the writers respected by Conrad, oblique narrative was frequently employed by Turgenev, Maupassant, Wells, Kipling and Cunninghame Graham. It offered them a variety of facilities. It could permit the writer to use a more relaxed, discursive, conversational mode

than would be customary with the "omniscient author" convention; and it offered Wells, Kipling and Graham opportunities for comic, ironic and farcical effects stemming from the use of vernacular or dialect in presenting the inner narrative. Furthermore, most of the writers who used the form saw that it was a way of conferring plausibility on (or incorporating and disarming objections to) narratives which might in themselves seem melodramatic, bizarre or fantastic. For example, we are more ready to suspend our disbelief in the Time Traveller's story when objections to its credibility have been advanced by such characters in the outer narrative as the Editor and the Psychologist, whose reductive scepticism is, we suspect, a vocational affliction.

Conrad had made tentative experiments with the oblique convention in 'The Lagoon' (written in 1896) and 'Karain' (1897); but the first tale which, by employing Marlow and a group-audience, has close situational resemblances to *Heart of Darkness* is 'Youth' (1898). Both tales begin by introducing us to a group of five men: in 'Youth' we have "a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, Marlow, and myself"; in *Heart of Darkness* we have again a director of companies, an accountant, a lawyer, and Marlow and the un-named primary narrator. In both cases, Conrad is theoretically at two removes from the inner narrative, for it is relayed to us by this hearer in Marlow's audience. The men are ex-seamen: in 'Youth', all had "begun life in the merchant service" and share "the strong bond of the sea"; in *Heart of Darkness*, the primary narrator says: "Between us there was, as I have already said somewhere, the bond of the sea": and since he had not "already said" so in *Heart of Darkness*, we are clearly meant to assume a biographical continuity between the characters of both tales. Certainly, the Marlow who narrates the inner tale is superficially, ostensibly, the same man as in 'Youth'; and each time, the inner tale concerns a crucial event in Marlow's past career, a journey which for him had been ordeal and initiation.

'Youth' rightly has received this sort of critical judgement: "Oh, the tale is memorable because of the descriptive virtuosity, the colour and panache with which Conrad presents the *Judea*'s ill-fated voyage and the vicissitudes of the young Marlow amongst her crew; but obviously it is morally, thematically and psychologically a very slight tale compared with *Heart of Darkness*." Nevertheless an extract from 'Youth' will serve to qualify a disjunctive judgement of this kind.

At one stage, Marlow has been waiting impatiently in a boat for the rest of the crew to abandon the *Judea*, which is on fire. Nobody comes, so he clambers back aboard:

> "It was as bright as day. Coming up like this, the sheet of fire facing me was a terrifying sight, and the heat seemed hardly bearable at first. On a settee cushion dragged out of the cabin, Captain Beard, his legs drawn up and one arm under his head, slept with the light playing on him. Do you know what the rest were busy about? They were sitting on deck right aft, round an open case, eating bread and cheese and drinking bottled stout. .....
>
> 'The last meal on board,' [Mahon] explained solemnly. 'We had nothing to eat all day, and it was no use leaving all this.' "[2]

The vividness stems from the intersection of a number of bizarre contrasts, psychological as well as visual. Against an apocalyptic background of flame, a sleeping captain on a settee cushion, and a domestic foreground of bread and cheese and bottled stout; against the logic of Marlow (flee for your lives: the ship may sink at any moment), the master's oblivion and the logic of Mahon (we are hungry: why waste this food?): and the result is a characteristic Conradian effect of farcical nightmare which has continuity with some of the most important effects of *Heart of Darkness*, and which in that wider context breeds prolific implications.

Where the exploitation of oblique narrative is concerned, the interaction between outer and inner narratives is in 'Youth' mainly of an iteratively mechanical variety: from time to time Marlow interrupts his account with an apostrophe like "Youth! All youth! The silly, charming, beautiful youth", or with the request, "Pass the bottle." In thus jerking us from past to present, the elementary irony of ageing is emphasised by the simple contrast between the present nostalgic Marlow and the eager, ambitious, energetic Marlow of the inner narrative. At the end of the tale, Marlow (perhaps licensed by the bottle) waxes rhetorically sentimental:

> "But you here – you all had something out of life: money, love – whatever one gets on shore – and, tell me, wasn't that the best time, that time when we were young at sea; young and had nothing, on the sea that gives nothing, except hard knocks – and sometimes a chance to feel your strength – that only – what you all regret?"
>
> And we all nodded at him: the man of finance, the man of accounts, the man of law, we all nodded at him over the polished table that like a still sheet of brown water reflected our faces, lined, wrinkled; our faces marked by toil, by deceptions, by success, by love; our weary eyes looking still, looking always,

> looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone – has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash – together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions.

"Nonsense! Rubbish!" is, I think, a likely first response of some young present-day readers to this passage: and if it stems from a resistance to hypnotism by incantation, such a response may be more intelligent than the "Alas! How sad! And how true!" response that the passage seems designed to elicit. The principle of interaction between outer and inner narratives is obvious enough. The older Marlow has looked ruefully back at the immature adventurous enthusiasm of the younger Marlow who had thought "Now this is something like. This is great" in the face of what for the *Judea*'s captain had been a bitter disaster; and now the recalled enthusiasm, romanticism and ardour are allowed to put in a critical perspective the respectable but glamourless achievements of wrinkled maturity – not just of Marlow but of the audience of professional men. However, the final paragraph seems mainly to be a speciously inflated version of the cliché, "All men regret the passing of youth". The chief means of inflation is the rhythmically iterative syntax, which has a veiling or hypnotic effect, veiling with repetitions of structure the inconsistencies of idea – "toil ..... love", "weary ..... anxiously", "sigh ..... flash". The mysterious "something out of life" is finally associated loosely with either three terms ("youth", "strength" and "the romance of illusions") or one term with three aspects ("illusions" with the aspects of "youth", "strength" and "romance"). The ambiguous syntax gives a strong impression that Conrad, while striving for a climactic effect, doesn't really know what he's talking about. The centre of the passage's weaknesses seems to be the clause "And we all nodded at him": for where we might expect a critical response to Marlow, we have a compounding of sentimentality. The sentimentality is theoretically that of two fictional narrators: Marlow and the "outer" reporter. But in the absence of any evidence of ironic or critical reserves, it seems to be effectually that of Conrad.

We are now in a position to survey the main ways in which *Heart of Darkness* exploits the oblique narrative convention. First, there is use of the familiar principle that the bizarre events recounted gain vividness through the apparently respectable and sociable normality of the contrasting outer narrative. Secondly, there is a tentacular effect: the initial impression of contrast is disturbed by the implication that there

may be some complicity between the apparently respectable "outer" group and the brutalities of the "inner" narrative. Thirdly, and related to the last factor, is the handling of the convention that the characters of the outer group are known to us by vocational titles. In *The Time Machine*, the characters' critical comments on the Time Traveller's claims were aptly related to their "vocational temperaments". In 'Youth', the tale laboured the obvious fact that ex-seamen who are now respectable bastions of the middle-class professions may look back nostalgically to their relatively hazardous days at sea. In *Heart of Darkness*, as will later be illustrated, a far more subtle use is made of the "vocational" convention, largely through its initiation of a critical discussion of the "work ethic". Fourthly, unlike the "Pass the bottle" interjections of 'Youth', the intermittent references to the outer group during the presentation of the inner narrative have incisive functions: sometimes, for example, they will be used to suggest an alarming gulf in comprehension between those who hear of nightmare and the man who has undergone it. Fifthly (and this, in turn, relates to the previous point), the handling of the interaction between the two narratives – and between the characters of the two narrators – sometimes converts into a surprising strength that weakness noted in 'Youth', that attraction to the incantatorily eloquent: indeed, an important thematic concern is with the blandishments of high-flown eloquence and with the value of reticence. Sixthly, Conrad now surpasses Maupassant in the ability to make the final outer scene shed a retrospectively transforming light over the preceding narrative. Finally, when a man is extemporising a yarn, the narration does naturally tend to veer about temporally and spatially, glancing ahead, darting here and there, sliding and eliding. In letting the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* thus veer about, Conrad is not only developing the convention naturalistically but also increasing suspense, multiplying ironies, and offering generally a more kaleidoscopic and problematic presentation than the direct "omniscient author" technique customarily permits.

While 'Youth', with its nodding audience and "Pass the bottle" interjections, is still fresh in mind, I will now proceed to one of *Heart of Darkness*'s instances of a very complex interaction between inner and outer narratives. It demonstrates that we are dealing with a tale which is largely *about* the telling of a tale: about the responsibilities and difficulties of seeing truly, judging fairly and expressing adequately.

i. (b) *Analysis of a Complex Example*

> "The other shoe went flying off unto the devil-god of that river. I thought, By Jove! It's all over. We are too late; he has vanished – the gift has vanished, by means of some spear, arrow, or club. I will never hear that chap speak after all – and my sorrow had a startling extravagance of emotion, even such as I had noticed in the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush. I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life . . . Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! Mustn't a man ever – Here, give me some tobacco." . . .
>
> There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids, with an aspect of concentrated attention; and as he took vigorous draws at his pipe, it seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame. The match went out.
>
> "Absurd!" he cried. "This is the worst of trying to tell . . . Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal – you hear – normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be – exploded! Absurd! My dear boys, what can you expect from a man who out of sheer nervousness had just flung overboard a pair of new shoes? Now I think of it, it is amazing I did not shed tears. I am, upon the whole, proud of my fortitude. I was cut to the quick at the idea of having lost the inestimable privilege of listening to the gifted Kurtz. Of course I was wrong. The privilege was waiting for me. Oh yes, I heard more than enough. And I was right, too. A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard – him – it – this voice – other voices – all of them were so little more than voices – and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices – even the girl herself – now –"
>
> He was silent for a long time.
>
> "I laid the ghost of his gifts at last with a lie," he began suddenly. "Girl! What? Did I mention a girl?"[3]

This passage comes at the end of one of the most strange and vivid sequences of the tale. Marlow's vessel has been attacked by the tribesmen on the river-bank; the native helmsman has been killed by a spear, his blood soaking Marlow's shoes; and as Marlow struggles to pull the shoes off, his mind leaps towards Kurtz and the thought that he may

never have a chance to listen to Kurtz's eloquence. And suddenly we're thrown from the beleaguered paddle-steamer on the Congo to the yawl *Nellie* lying peacefully at anchor in the Thames estuary: for one of Marlow's hearers has sighed "in this beastly way" (perhaps impatiently, wearily; certainly critically); and that man or another has evidently made the comment, echoed by Marlow, "Absurd!" So: "Absurd? Well, absurd", says Marlow. "Good Lord! mustn't a man ever – Here, give me some tobacco."

We can conjecturally complete Marlow's question for him. He meant to say something like: "Mustn't a man ever, even under conditions of stress, depart from your conception of 'normal' conduct and ideas? Mustn't a civilised man ever admit to a feeling of kinship with savages? Mustn't a man ever record faithfully the sensations he experienced in crisis, however strange and illogical those sensations may seem to be?" Of course, it is important that the question should be left unfinished: for it is a gauge of the intensity with which Marlow has been re-living the experience, caught up in the horrific recapitulation, that the interruption by jerking him back to the present should catch him off-balance, make him stumble and grope for words for a while. And as he lights his pipe, that word "absurd" reverberates in his mind, and he explodes into commentary which is at once apologia and self-justification and mocking recrimination.

Marlow seęs that the word is like a signpost at a semantic cross-roads: that whereas to the interrupter the word meant "silly, stupid, ridiculous, irrelevant" (a comment both on the apparent oddity of Marlow's responses, and on the detail with which Marlow describes them), to Marlow the word has a significance like that which Sartre was later to make much more familiar. In the passage about "a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another", Marlow indicates that the interrupter's judgement is a complacent response typical of people who are led (or gulled) by familiar social sanctions to think that a civilised nature is unalloyed and that reality is essentially ordered and logical. "Excellent appetites, and temperature normal – you hear – normal from year's end to year's end. And you say, Absurd! Absurd be – exploded!" Marlow appears to mean: Security, or socially-induced complacency, makes you call my narrative "absurd" in the trivial sense, "silly", which it is not. It may, however, (as my lingering on the word, and as my general stress on the peculiarities of the journey make clear,) be "absurd" in the sense that it conveys a quality of madness or purposelessness which inheres in reality, and a quality of barbarism

which taints civilisation, could we but see without the rose-tinted spectacles of social convention (or with the jaundiced eye of fever).

A more complex interaction of outer and inner narratives in this quoted passage concerns the themes of eloquence and of light and darkness.

Marlow tells the audience that he had found himself looking forward to hearing Kurtz's "gift of expression, ... the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness". (This oxymoronic "like X – or like anti-X" pattern is a distinctive Conradian device which can become a parody-inviting[4] stylistic reflex or which can sometimes underlie the appraisal of a whole character, like Kurtz himself, or Lord Jim.) While recalling Kurtz's famed eloquence, Marlow is being impetuously eloquent himself, as the subsequent interruption of Marlow's flow reminds us – rather as an abrupt pause in a musician's solo emphasises the last note by giving it a silence to hang in, floating in memory. The eloquence of Marlow's invocation of Kurtz's eloquence gives a tentacle to Kurtz – his attributed qualities reach out at us through Marlow.

Marlow looked forward to hearing Kurtz – and as he tells us this, one of the group wearies, apparently, of hearing Marlow. Kurtz's words may possibly be "the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness": and, curiously, Marlow (whose words we are inclined to regard as truthful) speaks from the centre of a literal darkness on the yawl. Kurtz's words may possibly be "the pulsating stream of light" – and after the interruption, Marlow lights his pipe, and in the flare of the match we see "the worn and hollow face". He who has been telling us about so many metaphorically hollow men has a literal hollowness of feature – or is it that his facial hollowness also has some pejorative metaphorical quality? At the eventual meeting, he continues, Kurtz was "very little more than a voice" – and now that his match has gone out, the Marlow who says this is very little more than a voice on the *Nellie*. Marlow, whose tale has been called "absurd", reflects that in his memory the whole of his time in the Congo now seems "one immense jabber, ... without any kind of sense". Under the surface of Conrad's imagination seems to be stirring a recollection of Macbeth's "tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing", or of Genesis: "And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded, And the LORD said, ... Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

I am not suggesting that the prime function of these interactions is to imply that Marlow shares some of Kurtz's vices. What they do primarily is to unsettle us, to make us sense indeterminate connections between people, matters, regions, moral areas, that on first approaching the tale we are conventionally inclined to hold distinct from each other. As Marlow lights his pipe, his face "seemed to retreat and advance out of the night in the regular flicker of the tiny flame": it is a perfectly accurate notation of an optical illusion, and by imparting to the still and familiar an eerie and elusive instability, an advance and recession between light and darkness, this image serves as a focus of the disturbing narrative fluidity of the tale.

And this Marlow has an ascetic, somewhat ravaged appearance: his "lean face" is "worn, hollow, with downward folds". Certainly he has biographical continuity with the Marlow of 'Youth': where the bare facts of career are concerned it is easy to assume that these two narrators are "the same man". But in essentials the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* is very different from his counterpart in 'Youth'. In the earlier story we met a relatively simple fellow: a sociable forty-two-year-old, a little battered, but not set apart, by his life's experiences, reminiscing with mainly patronising nostalgic relish about his romantic earlier self ("And we all nodded at him ....."). The Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, however, has an enigmatic apartness: he's *in* the group, but not exactly *of* it; and he seems more intelligent, more intense, more circumspect; a man who has suffered more; homo duplex, the man of contrasting extremes, of paradoxical temperament: markedly both man of action and philosopher, both merchant seaman and "meditating Buddha", both romantic and cynic, both humanitarian and misanthrope. It is characteristic of Conrad's focusing of extremes in the later tale that the Marlow who criticises civilisation should more evidently than his counterpart in 'Youth' have the idiom and accent of the civilised colonial gentleman: in the very paragraph in which he compares his own sorrow with "the howling sorrow of these savages in the bush", for example, that gentlemanly idiom is strongly evident: "I thought, By Jove! It's all over. ..... Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? ..... Good Lord! mustn't a man ever –".

This extension of Marlow's personality goes hand in hand with the extension of philosophical and moral complexity in Conrad's writing. I say "goes hand in hand with", because it is not exactly cause, not exactly effect. In barest outline, the inner narrative of *Heart of Darkness* is much more problematic than the inner narrative of 'Youth', and there is now

an important reciprocal relationship between the issues of the inner narrative and the character of its narrator. I have previously mentioned that a variety of seeming self-contradictions can be compiled from parts of Conrad's letters and non-fictional writings: in some letters, Conrad sounds like an arch-romantic; in others, like an arch-cynic; in some, like a dogmatic conservative; in others, like a despairing anarchist. Through the agency of *Heart of Darkness*'s Marlow, all these diverse outlooks and attitudes of Conrad can be brought into a coherent, mutually-critical, mutually-enriching interplay. The example given previously showed that there was continuity between certain descriptive strengths in 'Youth' and some distinctive effects of *Heart of Darkness*: but the later Marlow is capable, as the earlier is not, of conceptualising and meditating some of the subversive implications of those effects, as when he thinks aloud over that interjection of "Absurd!"

The Marlow of 'Youth', who finally, sentimentally, praises "Ah! The good old time – the good old time. Youth and the sea. Glamour and the sea!", and the reader who wishes to make a neatly conclusive summary of the lessons of *Heart of Darkness*, are both inexorably rebuked by the Marlow who at the end of the later tale sits "apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha".[5] For him, it seems, the experience is not yet complete, the meaning of the journey is not yet resolvable, the whole affair is still food for meditation. This has indeed been "one of Marlow's inconclusive experiences". The very inconclusiveness is climactically conclusive; the open-endedness is the most decisive, because most appropriate, of closures.

i. (c) *The Principle of Entanglement: A Contrast with 'An Outpost of Progress'*

Conrad described 'An Outpost of Progress', which was written two and a half years before *Heart of Darkness*, as "the lightest part of the loot I carried off from Central Africa".[6] Though it is much shorter than the later tale, it has obvious similarities in plot, setting, themes and philosophical comment; but it uses the "omniscient author" convention, not oblique narrative, and some crucial effects are therefore lost.

In 'Outpost', two Europeans, Kayerts and Carlier, arrive to manage a lonely trading-station in the jungle. Initially they are comradely, and look forward to the establishment of "'Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and – and – billiard-rooms. Civilization, ... and virtue – and all.'"

Gradually their veneer of decency is eroded by continued isolation; they acquiesce when their African assistant barters some of the local natives to head-hunters in return for ivory; and eventually, after the delay of relief has increased their mutual irritation, they quarrel wildly over a spoonful of sugar. Kayerts, in the ensuing confusion, shoots the unarmed Carlier, and finally hangs himself from the cross over the grave of their white predecessor. And as the Company's manager arrives with the steamer bringing supplies, this is the sight that greets him:

> [Kayerts'] toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down: he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director.[7]

"Playfully posed" ..... "irreverently". A dangling man on a cross. It is a sardonic masterpiece of a short story; and it has many important anticipations of *Heart of Darkness*. As in the later tale, for example, the jungle (anthropomorphised in the convention of the "antipathetic fallacy") is presented as a corrupt but seductive mistress:

> And out of the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting.[8]

The death of Kayerts' predecessor at the station (a vestigially Kurtzian character "who, weary of pursuing fame on an empty stomach, had gone out there through high protections") foreshadows Kayerts' death; and in the later tale, the death of Fresleven offers partial premonition of the fate that may befall Kurtz. Carlier, who had been inspired by a report on "the sacredness of the civilizing work" to look forward to an era of billiard-rooms and virtue, eventually talks of "the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable": thus partly anticipating both Kurtz's idealistic report for the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs and its postscript, "Exterminate all the brutes!" Kayerts and Carlier might have lived if the steamer bringing relief had arrived punctually, and the steamer's delay is a consequence of the contempt the manager feels for the men. In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz might have lived if the steamer had not been wrecked; and the wrecking is connected with the manager's hostility to Kurtz.

Furthermore, some of the "omniscient author's" philosophical generalisations could apply as aptly to the later work as to 'Outpost': for example:

> Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contrast with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart.[9]

But, for all the subversiveness of the sentiments, 'Outpost' has very little of the subversive impact of *Heart of Darkness*: indeed, by contrast, the earlier story can induce a sort of complacency in the reader. It is so tempting for him to identify himself with that superior, sardonic, omniscient narrator of 'Outpost', and so easy to look down contemptuously, from an Olympian height, on Kayerts and Cartier, and think: "Yes, they are indeed mediocrities who lack my perceptivity and intelligence." And in the case of the paragraph about "the crowd", quoted above, it is so easy for the reader to say: "Yes, how true of the benighted masses, how true of the unthinking crowd – to which, of course, I'm superior." David Daiches has claimed that in 'Outpost' there is "no attempt to expand the implications of the narrative to something more subtly universal than the fate of the two white men at the Congo trading station".[10] This statement is clearly refuted by the quoted paragraph, which does "expand the implications": but Daiches' claim may stem from the fact that the reader *can* feel *insulated* from the implications.

'An Outpost of Progress' first appeared in the magazine *Cosmopolis*, alongside articles praising gunboat diplomacy and imperialistic enthusiasm (which "has happily become a commonplace");[11] yet the tale provoked no stir, no controversy, and, with the exception of a letter of praise from Cunninghame Graham to Conrad, no correspondence. We may conjecture that Conrad, reflecting on the reception of 'Outpost', thought: "Now, how can I develop similar themes in such a way as to undermine complacency, to get under the reader's skin?" If so, then the first stage in his solution was to give Kurtz far greater stature than either

Kayerts or Carlier (perhaps drawing on recollections of A. E. Hodister, an idealistic, autocratic trader in the Congo) and to make him a man of immense talents who even in corruption has an intensity lacking in the majority of "pilgrims". The next stage was to show how, when Kurtz has been corrupted, he nevertheless entangles in his destiny the apparently sound and decent Marlow. And the final stage was, by means of a very complex oblique narrative opening, to entangle the reader with Marlow – so that the reader is eventually entangled, via Marlow, with Kurtz. (In this respect it is notable that Marlow's *early* comments include apparently patriotic concessions to British imperialism.) The lighting has none of the starkness of 'Outpost', but is constantly shifting, flickering and being overshadowed.

But now it is time to examine the opening in detail. Afterwards we will follow Marlow's narrative, pausing now and then to consider the critical and thematic problems that occur.

ii. THE OPENING

The tale opens with a view of the Thames estuary seen from a cruising yawl at anchor. The emphasis is on tranquillity, stillness, stasis, waiting. The wind is nearly calm; red-sailed barges drift up with the tide.

> The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

Delicately but unmistakably, the text has already begun to reverberate, echoing the reverberations of the title. The waterway is without end; the distinction between sky and sea cannot be detected, nor is there a clear distinction between sea and shore; and the vessel is in fading light between two areas of darkness: one to the east, over Gravesend, and another to the west, over London. The phrase "and the greatest" (as distinct from "the biggest" town) seems to eliminate the momentary hint that the gloom "brooding motionless" may be less like a threat to a good London than like an emanation from a suspect London.

In the third paragraph, the narrator, who has identified himself as one of a group of five men on the yawl, describes the "Director of Companies" who is "our captain and our host". The Director commands the affection of the group, we are told; he has been a seaman,

as they have; but he is deceptive in appearance. "He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified", yet "It was difficult to realise his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom." Strange shadows play briefly across this figure, consequently: his appearance and setting are deceptive, and there is the possible implication that any work "within the brooding gloom" is untrustworthy. But reassurances return when we are introduced to the other members of the group, for they are "tolerant of each other's yarns – and even convictions": professional men, relaxed and at ease, meditative, "fit for nothing but placid staring". One of them is an accountant. At a first reading of the tale, he is scarcely remembered. At a second reading, the title "Accountant" at once reminds us that the ensuing narrative presents a corrupt accountant who serves the Congo company: so that a question flickers up from the text: Does this man, a tolerant ex-seaman, offer a complete contrast to that corrupt accountant, or would he, in similar circumstances, have displayed a similar corruption? Conrad signals plainly enough to us that we should be speculating, on a second reading or in retrospect after a first, about the relationship that may exist between the characters of the outer narrative and the inner. Conrad's signal is the word "bones". The accountant on the yawl "had brought out already a box of dominoes, and was toying architecturally with the bones". At the first reading, "bones" is merely a colloquial synonym, without further implications, for ivory dominoes. At the second reading, however, we are prompted to think: "Does this detail suggest, delicately, tentatively, a tiny but significant degree of complicity between the respectable men of the outer narrative and the corrupt men of the inner? The tale, after all, thrusts 'bones' at us repeatedly: Fresleven's bones, the bones of corpses, and the bones of dead elephants – the ivory, some of which may have been made into the very dominoes the accountant is handling now. If humans are murdered so that ivory can be exported to make playthings for civilised gentlemen, are not those gentlemen accessories, however remote, after the fact of murder?"

In these comments I have merely been placing a magnifying-glass over a few of our responses to a paragraph which, on the whole, is straightforward: but the ripples of complexity are soon to become a surge, and it is instructive to look closely at the sources of that surge. The paragraph's main emphasis is on serenity – but again the ominous is gnawing at the edges of the serene:

> 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.

"Brooding gloom"; "gloom brooding." That phrase is used five times within the first seven paragraphs of the tale. In the passage just quoted, the calm sunset is described epically and sonorously, the phrases rolling into anapaests at:

> / x x / x x / x x /
> stricken to death by the touch of that gloom .....

It's a rather operatic or melodramatic sunset, for an unexceptional evening; and the literary clichés ("*stricken* to death" and, unfortunately, the thematically important "brooding gloom" itself) give a rather inflated tone to the passage. But what is said – or almost chanted – does contribute to strengths elsewhere. It does so by conditioning us to suspect the horrific beneath the outwardly normal, by invoking the image of a solar death, and by hinting at an antipathy between the strivings of men and the processes of the cosmos: and the phrase "a dull red without rays and without heat" finely connects the everyday with the ultimate sunset.

Then an apparent reassurance. The long sixth paragraph offers one of the most accomplished "false starts" in literature, for it sounds much like the introduction to a conventionally patriotic romantic narrative. The narrator muses on the glamorous history of the river. The tidal waters of the Thames, we are told, had "known and served all the men of whom the nation is proud, from Sir Francis Drake to Sir John Franklin, knights all, titled and untitled – the great knights-errant of the sea". It had carried forth the *Golden Hind*, the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, adventurers, settlers:

> Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, ... 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.

The person who is reading the tale for the first time may well be outwitted by this; and the outwitting will be the more complete because of the absence of quotation-marks from the passage. As we will shortly learn from Marlow, some of these reflections were in fact uttered *aloud* to the group on the yawl; but, by avoiding quotation-marks and by using a pluperfect tense which equivocates between direct and reported speech, making a complex *erlebte Rede*, Conrad increases the possibility that the reader will be hoodwinked into false security, into thinking that the reflections offer a safe guide to the central attitudes of the author. If that reader is of a sentimental disposition, he may begin to smile approvingly at the romantic tribute to the Thames's past; if he is of a sceptical disposition, his smile may be one of complacent superiority. Both smiles will shortly be erased by Conrad. In paragraph eight, we are told that the Thames darkens, and London (formerly the "greatest" town) becomes "the monstrous town" which is

> marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.
>
> "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

Marlow's entry is memorably stark and dramatic: his words undercut the optimism of the historic Thames-scape by their laconic assertion of the dark past; and they have been heralded by the suggestion that London's gloom, like its present "lurid glare under the stars", is a perverse and ominous emanation, against nature, of the city.

But what of the man who is reading *Heart of Darkness* for the second time? Doesn't he lose, through preparedness, the dramatic effect of this entry? The general answer appears to be that the human memory is hedonistically compensatory: on a second reading of an exciting work, the mind tends to let those memories which now reduce the excitement of the once-unpredicted be compensated or displaced by memories which extend the significance of the predictable: by memories which, for example, permit ironic perceptions and anticipations. So, when this man reads the seventh paragraph, a cluster of ironic contrasts may flicker into his mind: Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin may now jostle Kurtz and the rapacious manager and the grotesques of the Eldorado Expedition; in his mind, the *Golden Hind* may now sail alongside the squat "sardine tin" of the Congo river; and the phrases, "bearing ..... the torch, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire", may recall to him the point in his first reading when he came to the description of Kurtz's

allegoric painting, which showed a woman bearing a torch into darkness – a woman who is blindfold. Thus, although Marlow's opening sentence may come to lose its unexpectedness, it gains immensely in potency and authority.

iii. MARLOW'S PREAMBLE

After Marlow's first statement, the anonymous narrator gives us a character-sketch which emphasises the duality of his nature. Unlike the other members of the group, Marlow still follows the sea: but although he is a seaman, he is "a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life". They are sedentary in the sense that they are mentally parochial, it is claimed; but Marlow lacks their "slightly disdainful ignorance" and is a prober of mysteries.

> 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.[12]

This character-sketch shows a fine balance of sympathy *and* criticism both for the extraordinary Marlow and for the ordinary sailors who are contrasted with him. The *sailors* (unsophisticated fellows) think that a "casual spree on shore" may unfold "the secret of a whole continent": but the narrator doesn't say that they are necessarily wrong in their attitude. Their yarns, which have "a direct simplicity", may sometimes be simplistic, but they may also, we are allowed to think, have a satisfying directness: cracking a nut may be a simple operation, but if the shell be full it is not the less satisfying for that. *Marlow* (sophisticated fellow) feels that the significance of a tale is a more delicate and subtle matter altogether, something that lies "outside", perhaps in implications, in reflections provoked. Yet there is an undercurrent of criticism in the narrator's phrasing: "*a haze*, in the likeness of one of these *misty* halos that sometimes are made visible by the *spectral* illumination of *moonshine*". If the seamen may over-estimate the simplicity of life, Marlow may sometimes over-estimate its subtlety, and perhaps be unsatisfyingly

subtle himself. "Haze" and "misty halos" suggest that the significance may be elusive, indeterminate, delicate, evanescent, perplexing, or vague. "Spectral" and "moonshine" (rather than "moonlight") even hint that the significance may be altogether illusory, and that Marlow's tales may be specious or waffling.[13]

This lunar passage has often been cited by commentators as a definition of Conrad's own technique in *Heart of Darkness*.[14] Certainly the affair of Kurtz depends for its value on the "outside": on the reflections of Marlow, and on our reflections about the inter-action of Marlow and Kurtz, for example. Nevertheless, the passage combines recognition of Marlow's subtlety with some reservations about its value. The tremulous balance of that paragraph should remind us of the swaying judgements, within Conrad's work generally, of sympathy and irony, admiration and mockery, when reflective man is weighed against unreflective man. In the presentation of the stolid Singleton in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and of MacWhirr in *Typhoon* and of the sophisticated Decoud in *Nostromo*, subtlety now commends simplicity and now patronises it; sometimes scepticism allies the narrator with Decoud, sometimes it shows the perils of Decoud's scepticism.

Marlow's opening statement is "accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even": they accept him, they tolerate him, they may be interested by him: but their silence does not necessarily entail agreement. We are being prepared for the more or less irritable interruptions of Marlow's narrative that will occur later.

He now points out that the "light", here meaning primarily civilisation regarded as a desirable epoch of history, is a "flicker", something ephemeral. Once Britain was in darkness and seemed to the Romans to be a land of savages. And he proceeds to give two imaginative sketches. The first is of a trireme-commander who in his vessel goes up the Thames: "sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages – precious little to eat fit for a civilised man". This man carried out his mission "very well, too, no doubt, and without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone through in his time, perhaps". The second Roman is "a decent young citizen in a toga", a fortune-seeker who in an inland post begins to feel "the utter savagery" all round him and experiences "growing regrets, the longing to escape, the powerless disgust, the surrender, the hate".

But having worried us (a) by reminding us that Britons were once savages in the eyes of the Romans, thus emphasising the brevity of British civilisation, and (b) by hinting at the perils and failures which may

await modern empire-builders as they once awaited the Romans, Marlow appears to offer reassurance. The analogy is imperfect, he says. We have "efficiency", whereas the Romans "were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect". They were mere grabbers:

> "It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . ."
>
> He broke off.[15]

The man reading the tale for the first time will probably find that passage intermittently troubling but on the whole reassuring, in so far as final emphasis appears to fall on the fact that *our* imperialism (British, or modern), unlike that of the Romans, is redeemed – by an "efficiency" which stems from "an idea" that commands "unselfish belief" and has the force of an object of worship. If he takes reassurance here, however, he will find that the later events of the narrative are strangely like what he had earlier inferred they would be *un*like. He may even feel that Marlow – or Conrad – has been inconsistent or confused.

However, the person who is reading the story for the *second* time will probably feel that Conrad, far from being confused, is here lucidly deploying a degree of incertitude that plausibly exists in Marlow, because Marlow is still trying to resolve the experiences of his past. This experienced reader will see, as the novice at this stage cannot, that the Roman trireme-commander in those character-sketches bears a close relationship to Marlow himself, who is, perhaps half-unconsciously, musingly, putting himself into the Roman's shoes, creating an imaginary Roman in the image of his own past experience. The man who was used to commanding an ocean-going trireme had to go to an unfamiliar area to command on a river a humble, frail vessel, "about as rigid as a concertina"; Marlow, who was used to commanding ocean-going vessels, had gone to an unfamiliar area to command on a river a frail, humble, "tin-pot" steamboat. The Roman had encountered "sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages", as Marlow had; and in doing his job "without thinking much about it either, except afterwards to brag of what he had gone

through in his time, perhaps", that Roman resembles again the Marlow who, through knowing when not to think too much, had helped himself to survive to tell the tale. (The implicit self-depreciation is, incidentally, an important and often neglected aspect of Marlow's character.) Similarly, the "decent young citizen in a toga", who experienced the "fascination of the abomination" of the wilderness, foreshadows Kurtz, who had also gone to the wilderness to "mend his fortunes". Such are the similarities between the historic past and the present, even though Marlow's "reassurances" seemed to depend on the positing of *contrasts* between them.

In fact, Marlow is attempting to reassure himself, and is failing in the attempt. He offers as salutary firstly "efficiency" and then "the devotion to efficiency": but as soon as he reflects further about "the conquest of the earth", Romans *and* modern imperialists are fused in the same harsh judgement. Then Marlow struggles to restore his distinction between them. There *is* something which redeems modern imperialism: "an idea at the back of it; ..... an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to . . ." And there he breaks off.

In our first reading, we won't know why Marlow breaks off there. We'll assume that this is merely naturalistic technique on the part of the author: that the character has simply lost the thread of his discourse and will have to start afresh. In retrospect, however, we see what is happening. In groping for a redemptive factor, Marlow offers "efficiency", which is inadequate, since "robbery with violence" may be efficiently conducted: so he modifies this to "devotion to an idea": but in defining the way in which this idea should be served, he demolishes the very support he was trying to build. For, horrifyingly, the attempt to define a redemptive factor has evoked a further memory of Kurtz, the one-time idealist who became for the natives literally what "the idea" is supposed to be for good imperialists: because Kurtz was "bowed down before", Kurtz received sacrifice.

And that is why, within a few lines of resuming his monologue, Marlow refers so casually to Kurtz, as though he were someone to whom the hearers had already been introduced: "I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap." Our sense of Marlow's casting about, hesitantly shaping up to the presentation of matters that deeply pre-occupy him, is one of the most powerfully-achieved effects of *Heart of Darkness*: simultaneously Conrad offers thematic precision and naturalistic fluidity.

Confirmation that Conrad is deploying firmly and consistently Marlow's uncertainties is provided partly by the first narrator's previous warning that Marlow's tales have an "inconclusive" character, and partly by the subsequent reflection of the very imagery used to describe those tales:

> "The place where I first met the poor chap ..... 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. It was sombre enough too – and pitiful – not extraordinary in any way – not very clear either. No, not very clear. And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light."[16]

A sceptical reader might suggest that with a preamble of this kind, Conrad is giving himself licence to let the tale flow where it will. (In the "Author's Note", Conrad says of Marlow: "I made no plans. The man Marlow and I came together in the casual manner of those health-resort acquaintances which sometimes ripen into friendships. This one has ripened.")[17] Such a reader may wish to claim that Marlow is an evasive device, a persona through which Conrad may express his own views even when they are not fully resolved. Certainly Marlow's personality is very close to Conrad's; certainly the imaginative distance between them fluctuates – and sometimes, later, to the tale's disadvantage, it will dwindle to vanishing-point. The "principle of entanglement" depends on our having a strong sense of alliance with Marlow; but in earlier sections of this chapter, and particularly in the contrast with 'Youth' in section i (a) and in the analysis of i (b), we have seen that the right sort of alert alliance depends on our sense of Conrad's far greater readiness than in 'Youth' to look round and beyond him. Marlow becomes more intelligent because of his sense of possibly adverse comment from the group; Conrad becomes more intelligent because of his readiness to conceive of him as a character within a credibly diverse group of characters.

Jocelyn Baines once commented very sceptically on a letter from Conrad to Cunninghame Graham written during the serialisation of the tale. Conrad had told Graham: "I am simply in the seventh heaven, to find you like the *H of D* so far. You bless me indeed. Mind you don't curse me by and bye 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."[18] Baines commented: "So wrapped up is it that one wonders whether Conrad was always clear as to his

intention and whether one is justified in trying to unravel the story to the extent of imparting a coherent meaning to it."[19] This comment is one of the factors which have encouraged me to emphasise frequently the disparity between our responses at a first and at a second reading of the tale. By this means, I can pay tribute to the vivid (though sometimes bewildering) initial impact, while proceeding, in recognition of the ironic structuring of the work, to pay tribute also to Conrad's maintenance, throughout most of the tale, of an astonishing degree of imaginative co-ordination. The full extent of that co-ordination is something of which Conrad may not consciously have been aware; but his imagination knew what it was doing.[20]

4

MARLOW'S NARRATIVE (I)

i. (a) *The Company's Headquarters*

MARLOW PROCEEDS to tell us how he got the appointment which took him to Africa. After "loafing ashore" for a while, he had sought unsuccessfully a further seafaring post; then one day the sight of a map of Africa had re-awakened his boyhood fascination by unexplored regions, and he had decided to apply for command of a steamboat plying the Congo. Through the agency of an aunt living in Europe, he had a successful interview with a director of a huge trading company, and, after an examination by the company's doctor and a further meeting with his aunt, set off on the journey to Africa.

This part of the narrative offers various kinds of relief to the reader. The previous pages of the tale have been difficult for him to negotiate: he has been thrown to and fro in time, from the "present" to the days of the Roman conquest and back again, and he has been passed from one first-person narrator to another. But now he can settle into acceptance of Marlow as chief guide, the dominant voice; and a comparatively straightforward narrative pattern emerges as the relatively generalised, philosophical and reflective gives way to the relatively specific, practical and active. And Marlow soon displays a number of characteristics which invite sympathetic identification with his personality. He has a self-critical, self-mocking quality ("I was loafing about, hindering you fellows in your work and invading your homes, just as though I had got a heavenly mission to civilise you"); he treats reticently or curtly the experiences which in a less sophisticated man would be the subject of self-pitying recollection ("But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game too"); and he has an ironically critical eye (for when the aunt explained that she had represented him to the company as "an emissary of light", Marlow had "ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit"). Furthermore, the reader, who has probably suffered the strains of interviews himself, feels sympathetic identification with the Marlow who so vividly records the Alice-in-Wonderland feeling which

interview-tension induces: that half-hallucinated, half-intoxicated vision produced by apprehensiveness and unfamiliar surroundings.

Ominous hints multiply. When Marlow had seen the map of Africa in the shop-window, the central river had looked like a snake, and the map had fascinated him "as a snake would a bird". A similar map greets him at the Company's offices: and again the river seems "fascinating – deadly – like a snake". Between the references to the two maps, we are told of the fate of his predecessor, Fresleven, who was killed in the jungle. The city in which the offices are situated reminds Marlow of "a whited sepulchre". In the offices, two strange women are "guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall": and of the elder, he remarks: "*Ave*! Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again – not half, by a long way."

"*Morituri te salutant*" (the Roman gladiators' tribute to their emperor, "They, who are about to die, salute you",) is indeed the key-note of this section. The jovial clerk who takes him to the doctor's suddenly becomes very cool when Marlow expresses surprise that he isn't going to the Congo. "I am not such a fool as I look," he comments. And the doctor who so clinically examines Marlow hints not only that few return from the journey, and not only at the perils of madness there, but also that anyone who applies for such a post may *ipso facto* be touched by lunacy ("Ever any madness in your family?"). These cameos of the clerk and the doctor convey adroitly Marlow's sense of critical alienation from them, and theirs – beneath their outward joviality or courtesy – from him: specimen observes specimen.

One of the problems presented by this sequence is that of Marlow's geographical evasiveness. It is easy enough for the reader to infer that the snake-like river is the Congo, that the region of the company's activities is therefore the Belgian Congo and that the "sepulchral city" is therefore Brussels. Yet Marlow leaves this to be inferred, instead of naming the various places. Since his reticence does not conceal, what is its purpose?

We have here a good example of a fiction-writer's ability to eat his cake and save it, to secure simultaneously the benefits of apparently exclusive possibilities. Our easily-made inferences root Marlow's "autobiography" in the topical, enabling it to be read as a denunciation of particular evils which flourished at a particular time in a particular place; while his degree of obliqueness, the apparent reticence, by inducing our imagination to flicker initially over a wider geographical and

temporal range, extends the tale's moral and political subversiveness – and furthermore, as J. I. M. Stewart has said, "we are constantly aware of a beckoning across the borders of normal consciousness".[1] We may also recall Conrad's famous reproach to Richard Curle:

> Didn't it ever occur to you, my dear Curle, that I knew what I was doing in leaving the facts of my life and even of my tales in the background? Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and also in expression. Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art.[2]

Marlow comes closest to naming the African region of his journey when he says that on the company's map:

> "There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre."

Red for British possessions, blue for French, orange and green for (perhaps) Portuguese and Italian, purple for German, and yellow for Belgian. We may wonder why, if Conrad is striving throughout the tale to widen the range of his criticisms of imperialism, Marlow so explicitly congratulates Britain ("some real work is done in there"). One explanation may be that, as the earlier uncertainties in Marlow's contrast of Roman with modern imperialists have suggested, Marlow himself has not fully resolved the implications of his experience, and he often tends to make local affirmations and generalisations that later parts of his narrative will undermine. We have already seen that apparent contradictions in Marlow do not necessarily imply any confusion on Conrad's part. In fact, the "some real work" judgement is one which Conrad, outside the tale, certainly supported, and it need not be seen as a contradiction of the general criticisms of modern imperialism that Conrad makes via *Heart of Darkness*: a general criticism is not the same as a sweeping condemnation. Conrad believed that all imperialisms were tainted because of the materialism, egotism, avarice and sheer hubris that

beset all such vast human enterprises; and in 'Autocracy and War' (1905) he wrote: "the conscience of but very few men amongst us, and of no single Western nation as yet, will brook the restraint of abstract ideas as against the fascination of a material advantage".[3] From a general survey of Conrad's works we can judge that if he were to rank various nations according to the failings of their imperialistic enterprises, then, beginning with the least corrupt and continuing to the most corrupt, the ranking would approximate to this: Britain, France, Austria, Holland, the United States, Belgium, Prussia, Russia. In the liberal tradition, Conrad assesses the nations according to the degrees of mental and physical freedom that they allow their subjects, and according to the degree to which political opportunism is tempered by considerations of justice; but nevertheless, more circumspect than many liberals, Conrad maintained a sardonic awareness of human limitations: and 'Autocracy and War' again offers an appropriate text.

> Industrialism and commercialism ..... stand ready, almost eager, to appeal to the sword as soon as the globe of the earth has shrunk beneath our growing numbers by another ell or so. And democracy, which has elected to pin its faith to the supremacy of material interests, will have to fight their battles to the bitter end, on a mere pittance – unless, indeed, some statesman of exceptional ability and overwhelming prestige succeeds in carrying through an international understanding for the delimitation of spheres of trade all over the earth, on the model of the territorial spheres of influence marked in Africa to keep the competitors for the privilege of improving the nigger (as a buying machine) from flying prematurely at each other's throats.[4]

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's tribute to Britain has the prime structural function of making the (then) contemporary British reader lower his guard; and the absence, within the tale, of any *overt* explanation of the compatibility of "real work" with the harsh facts we are shown preserves the tale's meditability and power to trouble, and prevents severance of the political from the psychological issues.

A second question that may be raised by this sequence of the narrative concerns the thematic rôle of the two women at the company's offices, for they seem so portentous. One is a sort of receptionist who ushers the interviewees to a waiting room; the other is her companion. The former walks almost like a somnambulist; the latter has a cat reposing on her lap, and uses a foot-warmer; both are knitting black wool. They are

rather ludicrous figures, yet their presentation makes almost superfluous Marlow's emphasis on their "uncanny", "fateful" aura. They seem to exist at the intersection of two dimensions, the everyday and the mythical. As "everyday" beings, their "feverish" concentration on knitting, and the indifference of the elder lady to the arrivals, can be explained by saying that they are a pair of bored spinsters who have seen too many interviewees to be more concerned with them than with the knitting. But they also have an aura of timelessness given by various literary and legendary connotations. The equilibrium of their temporal and timeless aspects is preserved by the partly-parodic quality of those connotations: and that quality is natural to a cultivated and ironic temperament like Marlow's. The "*morituri te salutant*" exclamation half-mockingly attributes to them the powers of life and death which the Roman emperors exercised over the gladiators. By knitting black wool the ladies evoke, distantly and largely parodically, the Fates of Roman legend: Clotho and Lachesis, who spin the thread of each man's life which is to be cut by Atropos; and the elder woman's "quick glance of unconcerned wisdom" and the fact that both women are thought of as "guarding the door of Darkness" may evoke a fleeting memory of the Sibyl in Virgil's *Æneid* who guards the door of the Underworld into which Æneas is to venture. A less remote literary reminiscence is of Dickens's Madame Defarge, who throughout *A Tale of Two Cities* "knitted on, with the steadfastness of Fate",[5] who says that she is knitting "shrouds",[6] whose knitwork incorporates the names of the exploiters who are to receive retribution, and whose knitting companion is called "Vengeance". (Towards the end of his narrative, Marlow says that after he had discovered the deranged Kurtz, the elder lady "obtruded herself upon my memory as a most improper person to be sitting at the other end of such an affair". She is "improper" in so far as she is, in a naturalistic dimension, a respectable lady; but she obtrudes herself because she is also, in a symbolic dimension, a fatal or retributive agent.) Analysis of them also has to take account of the unanalysable: of what we may call "the *opacity factor*". The haunting vividness of some of the tale's characters results from a combination of external question-begging idiosyncrasies and an internal answer-frustrating opacity: they resist exorcism, because they resist exhaustive analysis.[7]

Just before and just after the visit to the offices, Marlow calls on his aunt, a benevolent, bustling and naïve lady; and on the second occasion, Marlow is prompted to generalisation about women by her over-idealistic view of the company's activities:

> "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, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset. Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over."

The opinion has psychological validity: given the nature of Marlow's aunt, we can see why he should at this point express an opinion of this kind. It is remarkably easy for us to overlook the fact that Marlow's opinion is ostensibly contradicted by the two ladies he so recently had met at the offices, who may "live in a world of their own" (meaning in their case that they have a strange detachment from the men around them) but convey through their manner not a trace of that optimistic naïvety that he ascribes to feminine nature. The reason why we may overlook the ostensible contradiction is that their connotations of timelessness make the knitters not so much exceptions from Marlow's generalisation as exceptions from normal humankind. They live and breathe, but they are also archetypes at the portals of the archetypal aspects of the narrative. Marlow's journey, though contemporary, relates to many fateful journeys in life and legend at different times and places: and retrospectively, therefore, those two ladies gain in earnest something of the status that he half-jestingly had attributed to them. The joke is on Marlow, as it was on the boy who cried wolf.

One other point of his statements on "how out of touch with truth women are" will escape us completely at our first reading of the text; but on a second reading, these statements suggest that he is subconsciously associating the aunt's naïvety with the Intended's love for Kurtz, which, in the terminal interview of the tale, Marlow protects from "some confounded fact". To put the same point in different terms: at a very early stage of the narrative, Conrad, by means of what looks like a ruminative digression, is actually foreshadowing the final episode and Marlow's rôle in it.

i. (b) *Literary Allusions: 'The Æneid'*

At one place in this early part of Marlow's narrative that we have been considering, Marlow tells how his predecessor, Fresleven, was killed, speared by the son of a native he was brutally attacking; then his tale jumps forward in time to the point where, after having gained

employment with the company, he found Fresleven's remains in the Congo; and then we are rapidly taken back in time to the point where Marlow in the European city is heading to the interview which preceded his appointment. After an account of a murder in the African jungle, an account of the familiar order of urban Europe. But when Marlow is describing that city, he mentions its "dead silence, grass sprouting between the stones": which reminds us, unexpectedly, of the immediately preceding account of how, in the silent clearing from which the native villagers had fled, "the grass growing through [Fresleven's] ribs was tall enough to hide his bones". The subliminal effect of this echo is to erode the contrast between jungle and city by suggesting a faint but uncanny connection between that macabre corpse and this urban routine. Thus we have an example of the way in which *Heart of Darkness* approaches the methods and effects of *The Waste Land*, (a) by offering apparent contrasts that often reveal underlying connections, (b) by an impressionistic, kaleidoscopic quality sanctioned by the spatial and temporal fluidity of first-person oblique narrative, and (c) by its sometimes macabre intimations that in the midst of life we are in death – that in unlikely surroundings, planted corpses may begin to sprout.

A problem which greatly taxed James Joyce in *Ulysses* (begun in 1914), Ezra Pound in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (written 1920–21) and *The Cantos* (begun in 1915), and Eliot in *The Waste Land* (written 1921–22), was the problem of giving order and coherence to a work which has a prime function of reflecting the disorder and incoherence of much contemporary life. One solution that occurred to all three writers was the method of allusion to myths and literary works of past ages, and particularly to epics. By evoking the epics through echo, quotation, or less specific allusion, the writer imports a co-ordinating "sub-structure" into his work; simultaneously, the echoes often have satiric or ironic functions, through the contrast between, on the one hand, the often noble, devout and purposeful actions of the past works, and, on the other hand, the apparent lack of devoutly or nobly purposeful actions in much of the modern life described; and furthermore, the echoes may appear parodic, in proportion to the validity of the contrasting modern viewpoint or style.[8]

The "mythical method" was not the novelty that Eliot claimed, for these very principles were being quietly developed by Conrad in 1899. This anticipation resulted partly from the late-nineteenth-century interest in bringing the legendary past to bear critically on the present (Wagner, Sir James Frazer and Freud all shared it), partly from Conrad's janiform

temperament, and partly from his acute sensitivity to those malaises of modern civilisation which the First World War was catastrophically to proclaim. The element of continuity, in principle and preoccupation, between Conrad and Eliot is signalled not only by the title and epigraph of Eliot's 'The Hollow Men' but also by the fact that Eliot's first choice for the epigraph to *The Waste Land* was a passage from *Heart of Darkness* that ends with Kurtz's cry of "The horror!"[9]

As *The Waste Land* was to do, *Heart of Darkness* alludes occasionally to Dante's *Inferno*. Both Conrad and Eliot, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, section ii, make crucial use of Dante's distinction between those who are damnable and those who are too worthless to be fit for Hell. Intermittent connections (which, because of the elements of irony and parody in the modern work, can scarcely be called "parallels") can also be detected between *Heart of Darkness* and the account of the underworld journey in Book 6 of Virgil's *Æneid*, as in the following instances.

Marlow and Æneas gain important knowledge after a perilous and often horrifying journey into a region remote, strange and "dark"; Æneas, under the aegis of the gods, learning about the founding of a new civilisation; Marlow, under empty heavens, learning about the corruptions of an established civilisation. As we have noted, the elder lady who sits knitting at the company's headquarters has an air of wisdom and is a guardian of "the door of Darkness": thus her many remote antecedents include the Sibyl who guards "the door of gloomy Dis". Æneas can enter the underworld only after he has found and interred the long-unburied corpse of Misenus; Marlow is enabled to join the company as a replacement for Fresleven, whose body remains long unburied until Marlow arrives. Æneas encounters a groaning chain-gang and learns that its members are being punished for their crimes; Marlow encounters a chain-gang of emaciated natives and comments sceptically that "they were called criminals". At the climax of the journey through Hades, Æneas meets the shade of his father Anchises, who eloquently foretells the glories of Roman civilisation to come; while at the climax of the journey through the Congo, Marlow meets "this shadow", Kurtz, famed for eloquence, who in himself is an eloquent commentary on the corruptions of modern European civilisation. Æneas returns from the depths not by the gate of horn but by the gate "finished fair of gleaming ivory", by which "false dreams are ..... Sent by the Manes to the world above";[10] Marlow returns from the Inner Station on a vessel which carries a hoard of the ivory that inspires the Europeans' dreams of success, and –

"Wait a moment", my reader may interrupt. "Some of the connections listed here seem strained and tenuous, don't they?" I agree that they do: but this is mainly because, for the sake of conciseness, they have been listed; and there's an obvious disparity between the rigidity of a list and the fluidity of our responses to the text. Conrad, no doubt, did not work with *Æneid* Book 6 at his elbow; but his tale reverberates constantly in the imagination and strikes strange and often discordant echoes from the recesses of memory, and it is an important part of the total effect that occasionally some fleeting echoes should be struck from distant memories of *The Æneid*: echoes provoked chiefly by four factors. Firstly, Marlow's likening the Congo journey to a venture into some netherworld (as when he says: "I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth"); secondly, his frequent use of the terms "pilgrims" and "shades" for the beings encountered there; thirdly, the link with the epic past provided by the theme of the establishment of empires; and fourthly, the way in which the tale's discussion of modern civilisation repeatedly refers us back to Roman civilisation. Obviously, some of the "echoes" in the list will merge into or be muffled by other literary connotations, as when Kurtz's sacrifice of principle for power reminds us of Faust; as when the combination of imagery of light and dark with the pattern of Kurtz's career reminds us of Lucifer ("Light-bringer"), the brightest of the angels, who fell through pride, and thought "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n"; or as when Marlow's failure to bring Kurtz back from darkness parodies Orpheus' quest for Eurydice. The point to be emphasised is that we are talking of auxiliary echoes and not of allegoric correspondences. And any parent knows that if you consider the family traits which link a child to its ancestors, you finally gain a heightened sense of the distinctive life of the child.

One of the chief temptations besetting allusion-hunters is that of extending a particular pattern of allusions into a quasi-allegoric level with which, like the poor guests on the bed of Procrustes, the "naturalistic" level of the narrative is made to conform. Lillian Feder, in an important essay which postulated many more connections with *The Æneid* than this section has mentioned, came to the brink of allegorising the tale, but sensibly withdrew from the brink with the observation: "In the Congo, there are no supernatural beings; all is credible on a purely realistic level. However, the imagery of hell, with its suggestion of the supernatural, implies the terror and violent suffering which Kurtz, the betrayer of light, must face."[11] Robert O. Evans, in his essay on the Dantean

allusions, was not so circumspect. He attempted to correlate each of the tale's characters with specific categories of sinners to be found in *The Inferno*. He claimed, for example, that the Russian who attends Kurtz is an example of the sin of Heresy; and as for Kurtz himself: "Kurtz fits Dante's scheme perfectly, as traitor to kindred" – like the Alberti brothers, who, however, were trapped eternally in ice. Evans remarks: "Perhaps he is not symbolically fixed in ice, like the Alberti brothers, because Conrad wished to suggest that evil as he was a still worse fate awaited him. His final words, 'the horror, the horror,' may not only refer back to his Satanic service but may also look ahead to an everlasting horror."[12] The gauge of the extent to which Evans is allegorising a non-allegoric work is his reluctance to see that in equatorial Africa we are unlikely to encounter a man "symbolically fixed in ice"; and his explanation of Kurtz's last words is narrower in range than the explanations which, as we will see, the text explicitly offers. From this we may elicit the rule that the better the interpretation of a text, the larger the number of salient narrative facts that interpretation will (in principle or in demonstration) accommodate, and the fewer it will contravene.

To talk of the "levels" of *Heart of Darkness* is a convention which damages one's sense of the work's unity but which seems to be an unavoidable heuristic device. We may reduce the damage by letting the criterion of "fullness of accommodation" be our guide. The level that matters is the level of richness and fullness of our appropriate imaginative responsiveness; and the vitality of that imaginative dimension is largely sustained by the fluctuating – and not a static – range of allusiveness.

Conrad told a correspondent:

> A work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. And this for the reason that the nearer it approaches art, the more it acquires a symbolic character.[13]

ii. THE CONGO AND THE WORK ETHIC

Marlow's aunt, in using her influence to secure his appointment, had claimed that he was "an exceptional and gifted creature". Marlow adds:

> "It appeared ..... I was also one of the Workers, with a capital – you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a

> lower sort of apostle. There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about 'weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways,' till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the Company was run for profit."[14]

The writer most celebrated for talking of "the Workers, with a capital" was Carlyle; and though he had died in 1881, his grandiose philosophy of Work was later cited with approval by the explorer H. M. Stanley, the propagandist for Leopold II's enterprises in the Congo. In 1898, for example, Stanley made this statement, quoting Carlyle's *Past and Present*:

> Carlyle says that "to subdue mutiny, discord, widespread despair by manfulness, justice, mercy, and wisdom, to let light on chaos, and make it instead a green flowery world, is beyond all other greatness, work for a God!" Who can doubt that God chose the King for His instrument to redeem this vast slave park. ..... King Leopold found the Congo ..... cursed by cannibalism, savagery, and despair; and he has been trying with a patience, which I can never sufficiently admire, to relieve it of its horrors, rescue it from its oppressors, and save it from perdition.[15]

From his own experiences in the Congo, Conrad knew that Leopold's operations were distinguished by their combination of extreme brutality and extreme hypocrisy. The "Congo Free State" was effectually the private property of Leopold; and though he proclaimed himself (and was proclaimed by Stanley) a light-bringer, later historians amply confirmed the extent of the despoliation and rapacity that flourished in his name.

With some irony, one of the first of those humane historians was Roger Casement, the diplomat who was eventually executed as a traitor to Britain. In Conrad's 'Congo Diary' of 1890, we find that among so many encounters with mean and scheming officials, one chance encounter offered a complete contrast. Conrad wrote:

> 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. Thinks, speaks well, most intelligent and very sympathetic.[16]

Thirteen years later, in December 1903, Casement completed for the British Government an official report which reviewed in detail the

evidence of the murders, slave-dealings, mutilations inflicted on the natives – hands hacked off and collected by the basketful – and other barbarisms of the Belgian administration in the Congo. (Incidentally, he noted that one of the slave-dealing officials was known to the natives as "Widjima" – "Darkness.")[17] There was an international outcry against Leopold, helped by the publication of this report and of the scathing books by E. D. Morel. Casement visited and corresponded with both Conrad and Cunninghame Graham about the campaign; Graham in turn sent advice to Morel. In one of the letters to Casement, Conrad remarked:

> The black man ..... shares with us the consciousness of the universe in which we live – no small burden. Barbarism per se is no crime deserving of a heavy visitation; and the Belgians are worse than the seven plagues of Egypt .....[18]

And in a letter to Graham, noting Graham's comparison of the Spanish Conquistadores to the Belgian Imperialists, Conrad said of "our modern Conquistadores":

> Their achievement is monstrous enough in all conscience – but not as a great human force let loose, but rather like that of a gigantic and obscene beast. Leopold is their Pizarro, Thys their Cortez and their "lances" are recruited amongst the souteneurs, sous-offs, maquereaux, fruit-secs of all sorts on the pavements of Brussels and Antwerp.[19]

And Conrad's final judgement on the exploitation of the Congo came when, in the essay 'Geography and Some Explorers' (1924), he referred to it as "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration".

One important source of complexity in *Heart of Darkness* is that when Conrad came to analyse "the vilest scramble for loot" he was inevitably obliged to make a critical analysis of the Victorian work ethic, to which in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897) he had paid lyrical tribute.

The work ethic may have mild or extreme forms. In its mild form, it consists of a number of moral recommendations which are so generally acceptable that they seem platitudinous: for example, that it is good for a worker, whatever his class, to complete a socially-necessary task to the best of his ability, and that it is good for men to collaborate honestly, energetically and selflessly in such tasks. In its extreme form, however,

the work ethic looks rather like a religion artfully disseminated by prudent capitalists and Tory politicians: and the typical moral recommendations are, firstly, "Attain salvation by work, for work brings Grace, and heroic labour brings man close to God", and secondly – in effect – "Yours not to reason why: yours but to do (and, if necessary in the interests of the army or government or employer, to die)". Frequently, nineteenth-century fiction commends the workman who toils unquestioningly, loyally, without joining a union or thinking of going on strike; sometimes he is not only commended but also given the moral status of a patriarch. A tell-tale feature of such modern patriarchs is that in conditions where there is a conflict between masters and workers, they effectually side with the masters: thus George Eliot's Caleb Garth, for all his musings on the dignity of rural labour, effectively sides with the railway company when the rural labourers fight the company's surveyors. We may also note that her Felix Holt, the "radical" working man, opposes the demand for universal suffrage by claiming that the workers are not yet sufficiently sober and mature; and Dickens's Stephen Blackpool, though subjected to utter injustice by his callous employer, is obdurate in his refusal to join the trade union (– and, in the attempt to justify this improbability, Dickens has to resort to the desperate expedient of a "promise" that the published text never explains).[20]

In Conrad's novels, the epitome of this ethic is found in Singleton, the patriarchal helmsman of the *Narcissus*, who "steered with care" unquestioningly through calm and storm alike – and who steers with care even when, the ship having been swept on its side, such diligence is less a practical activity than a symbolic gesture of loyalty to the captain and the code of duty. Typically, when strife arises between master and crew, Singleton – a man of whom Carlyle might have been proud – is laconically contemptuous of the mutineers. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* can thus be read not only as an embodiment of the extreme form of the work ethic but also as a conservative political allegory which commends loyal and uncomplaining toil, *usque ad finem*, under firm, responsible and paternal leadership. The emphasis on mutuality of responsibility relates Conrad to the tradition of "organicist" conservatism to which Dickens, Carlyle and Ruskin variously contribute. They are conservative in the sense that they oppose the polarisation of class-conflict which, through trade union activities, was steadily developing in the nineteenth century; but their desire for an organically cohesive state, cohesive through mutual responsibility and understanding, also enabled them to offer radical criticisms of laissez-faire capitalism and of the "cash nexus". As

social critics, therefore, the position of Dickens, Carlyle and Ruskin may often appear congruent with that of a socialist; it is when their positive recommendations are made that they most clearly emerge, through their emphases on various forms of "change of heart" rather than on a strengthening of organised labour as a countervailing force, as conservatives in effect. Carlyle, as is now notorious, went some distance towards anticipating fascism by his growing contempt for democratic procedures, coupled with a growing faith in "heroes" and "hero-worship" as a means of social regeneration.

Few readers of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* could have foreseen the extent to which the shift to the subject-matter of *Heart of Darkness* would elicit from Conrad a complicated critique of both the "mild" and "extreme" forms of the work ethic. Carlyle's "to let light on chaos ..... is beyond all other greatness, work for a God" has its echo in Kurtz's report: and the hubris of Carlyle's claim is exposed not only by the eventual form of Kurtz's divinity (and the worshippers of this hero include a representative of civilisation, the Russian, as well as the savages), but also by Conrad's reminder that if the light-bringing task is "work for a God", it is certainly beyond the capacities of the mass of men. The "yours not to reason why" aspect of the ethic is undermined by Conrad's emphasis on the fact that in the Congo there is ample dying but little "doing", little in the way of constructive achievement; and among the Europeans there is altogether too little "reasoning why", too little reflection about the moral implications of their actions. Where there is an appearance of collaborative endeavour among the Europeans, it is so often shown to be collaboration in a destructive, rapacious or absurd pursuit; and as we will see shortly, the work of the company's accountant, and even, sometimes, of Marlow himself, is presented as a refuge from moral awareness rather than as a means of moral fulfilment. It is typical of the tentacular qualities of the tale that when – a rare exception – we are shown a man who is truly "a good worker", he still has a question-raising eccentricity. This man is the "foreman – a boiler-maker by trade –" whom Marlow later meets at the Central Station and who toils indefatigably to repair the steamer. He has a beard that hangs to the waist, and Marlow says:

> "At work, when he had to crawl in the mud under the bottom of the steamboat, he would tie up that beard of his in a kind of white serviette he brought for the purpose. It had loops to go over his ears. In the evening he could be seen squatted on the bank rinsing

> that wrapper in the creek with great care, then spreading it solemnly on a bush to dry."[21]

The beard and the serviette have no function in the plot; but they illustrate that adroit attention to odd minutiae of appearance and behaviour which constantly colours the tale with memorable vividness. From the care with which the foreman guards his beard and cleanses the serviette we can infer the care with which he works on the steamer. But the reference functions subversively, too. Punctiliousness in a "socially necessary" task, restoring the vessel, is linked with punctiliousness in performing a quaintly private, almost fetishistic, ritual. Perhaps this modern workman, could we but penetrate the opacity of his nature, is psychologically not so very remote from the savages who place their faith in talismans and charms. So in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad not only shows how far the company's activities fall short of the demands of the work ethic; he also looks very closely into the possible dangers of that ethic; and on the rare occasions when good work is being done, Conrad will sometimes, by psychological notation, weaken the Carlylean sense that this particularly characterises a civilised nature. He certainly amplifies the Carlylean argument that working, rather than reflecting, saves man from a paralysing sense of his littleness in the face of Nature; but while Carlyle had asserted that "Doubt, of whatever kind, can be ended by Action alone",[22] Conrad chooses to emphasise the validity of "Doubt". Above all, as we will see in the next chapter, he intermittently but forcefully levels against the work ethic the "argument from ultimates". What, he asks, comes ultimately of any man's labours?

A critic with a literal cast of mind could find many apparent lies of omission in *Heart of Darkness*. He could claim that Conrad, unhistorically, takes too disparaging a view of Congolese activities by omitting any suggestion of durable and valuable achievement, any hint that the great cities and industries of modern Africa could result from the pioneering endeavours of the late nineteenth century. He could cite the researches of Norman Sherry, which show conclusively that even at the time of Conrad's journey there, trading and colonisation were far more organised than we might infer from the tale.[23] The fictional Inner Station is a solitary decaying house; the corresponding Inner Station on Conrad's journey was Stanley Falls, a thriving settlement whose many buildings included such civilised establishments as a hospital and a stone-built prison. Our literalist critic (whose sense of fair play does him credit) could also complain that *Heart of Darkness* gives no suggestion of

what, from H. M. Stanley's account, we see to be the case: that some, at least, of the European traders combined industry with a concern for justice, and that an official like Stanley himself could be sensitive to forces that in the tale seem perceptible only to an outsider like Marlow. Stanley readily concedes that "unspeakable" forces can burst from Europeans as well as from the natives:

> Unfledged Europeans fresh from their homes, brimful of intolerable conceits, and indifferent to aught else save what submits to their own prejudices, are not as a rule the best material to work with for the civilisation of the African. As the European will not relax his austerity, but will very readily explode his unspeakable passions, the aboriginal native does not care to venture into familiar life with the irascible being ..... But there are natives who are quite as likely to explode into mischievous passions as the Europeans .....[24]

Stanley can also indict the whites for their centuries-long depredations in Africa:

> Boma (Mboma) has a history, a cruel blood-curdling history, fraught with horror, and woe, and suffering. Inhumanity of man to man has been exemplified here for over two centuries by the pitiless persecution of black men, by sordid whites .....
>
> Now do you wonder, as you look about over the large area of wilderness and sterility, that so much of those rich plains, now covered with mournfully rustling grass, lies untilled?[25]

Even Marlow's sense of an oppressive unreality around him has its counterpart in the experience of the man who was foremost in organising the "civilising work" in the Congo: for, in speaking of the landscape under the African sunshine, Stanley says:

> Its effect is a chill austerity – an indescribable solemnity, a repelling unsociability ..... Gaze your utmost on the scene, admire it as you may, worship it if you will, but your love is not needed. Speak not of grace or of loveliness in connection with it ..... It is to be contemplated, but not to be spoken to, for your regard is fixed upon a voiceless, sphinx-like immobility, belonging more to an unsubstantial dreamland than to a real earth.[26]

The answer to those accusations of "lying by omission" is that *Heart of Darkness* is a fertile mixture of modes, among them the naturalistic, the satiric and the symbolic, and we are offered the various ways to truth which are appropriate to those modes. As the indictments by Casement and Morel were to show, the atrocities and rapacities described in the tale were historically to be found in the Congo. In terms of bricks and mortar, railways and timetables, there was more construction than the tale suggests; but given the propaganda of the time which so often exaggerated the merits of such material "progress", Conrad's partly-satiric emphasis on wasteful futility still serves the cause of truth dialectically, by offering a sceptical questioning of the inner nature and ultimate results of European imperialism. By a variety of devices, Conrad increases the range of implications of the narrative so that it offers symbolic commentary on events far beyond the local. The terrain includes the mind and the heart.

5

MARLOW'S NARRATIVE (II)

i. (a) *The Voyage down the African Coast*

ON LEAVING EUROPE, Marlow travels as a passenger on a French steamer which puts soldiers and customs officials ashore at various lonely outposts on the African coast; eventually the seat of government is reached. In describing this journey, he emphasises the impervious vastness of the mainland, which "seemed to glisten and drip with steam", the consequent futility of the repeated activity of landing men at settlements which seem "no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background", and, as a further consequence, his growing sense of alienation from such apparently mechanical and senseless activities.

> "We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks to levy toll in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness, with a tin shed and a flag-pole lost in it; landed more soldiers – to take care of the custom-house clerks presumably. Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went. Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved; but we passed various places – trading places – with names like Gran' Bassam, Little Popo; names that seemed to belong to some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister backcloth. The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning."

A further comfort is provided by the sight of a canoe paddled by blacks:

> "They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks – these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there."

But Marlow's comforting sense of belonging to "a world of straightforward facts" is repeatedly dissipated by such sights as the French man-of-war:

> "In the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water, there she was, incomprehensible, firing into a continent. Pop, would go one of the six-inch guns, a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech – and nothing happened. Nothing could happen. There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight."

All these quotations are taken from one long and powerful paragraph.[1] "The toil of a mournful and senseless delusion": "sordid farce"; "a touch of insanity in the proceeding"; "lugubrious drollery": these phrases sum up the main descriptive effects not only of this paragraph but also of much of *Heart of Darkness* and, indeed, of much of Conrad's mature fiction. Conrad commonly achieves these effects by flexible use of one or more of the following techniques which, for want of a better available term, I'll call "absurdist". (The word "impressionistic" is too capacious, as not all impressionist procedures create those feelings of absurdity which Conrad's writing often arouses.)

i. (b) *Absurdist Descriptive Techniques: A List*

(1) Empirical hyperbole. The observer's fidelity to the immediate testimony of his senses entails the subordination or exclusion of conventional notions of the function, rôle or order of what is observed. Experience becomes at once vivid and recalcitrant.

To adapt A. H. Basson's contrast: this technique promotes the ostensible by demoting the functional.[2] If I describe the ostensible aspects of, for example, a pin, I might say that it is a slim little rod of metal, pointed at one end, about an inch in length, silvery and gleaming, hard and cold to the touch. If, on the other hand, I concentrate on its functional aspects, I might say that it is an implement for pricking holes

or for fixing together items like sheets of paper or pieces of dress-material. Now, in Sartre's novel *La Nausée*, the protagonist suffers from the unfortunate malady of thinking that only the former method is reliable. His consequent impression of the meaninglessness and superfluity of things is thus a tautology rather than a discovery about the world. Nevertheless, a descriptive bias of this kind is often a most effective literary means of challenging the habitual or conventional ascriptions of order and intelligibility.

The technique of empirical hyperbole is extensively used in *Heart of Darkness*: not only in memorable descriptions like that of the attack on the steamer but also in the frequent presentation of characters who are glimpsed briefly and intensely, so that their visual appearance is vividly before us while their inner natures remain arcane.

(2) Delayed decoding. (I gratefully borrow the term from a recent lecture by Professor Ian Watt.) This is a particular aspect of empirical hyperbole, and could alternatively be termed cart-before-horse presentation: for here the writer confronts us with an *effect* while withholding or delaying knowledge of the *cause*; and the eventual explanation may not entirely erase the strong initial impression of the event's strangeness, illogicality or absurdity. A fine example in *Heart of Darkness* is provided by the utter terror, in the face of attack, of Marlow's "poleman", which is so described as to suggest initially that the man has inexplicably decided to take a short nap at a most incongruous time. In *The Shadow-Line*, the worried captain hears mysterious sounds of tapping on the deck; he receives "a slight blow under the left eye" and feels "an enormous tear" run down his cheek. The explanation? "Raindrops."

The work of a later writer shows that stage drama offers a close equivalent to this technique. In Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, at the climax of Act II, there is a terrifying and apparently cataclysmic blackout. Later, we learn that the meter needed a shilling.

(3) Reductive reification: presentation of the animate as though it were inanimate, of a human as though he were a mere thing, of the organic as though it were mechanical, of men's deeds as though they were the performances of automata. An illustration is provided in *Heart of Darkness* by the treatment of the "hairdresser's dummy" of an accountant; another, in *Under Western Eyes*, by the presentation of the "galvanized corpse", Madame de S—.

The philosopher Henri Bergson, thinking mainly of theatrical farces, claimed in *Le Rire* that "*les attitudes, gestes et mouvements du corps humain sont risible dans l'exacte mesure où ce corps nous fait penser à une simple mécanique.*"[3]

The ominous force of Conrad's use of this technique is partly explained if we recall T. H. Huxley's phrase, "we are conscious automata": for in the nineteenth century the prestige of empirical science had given new emphasis to the extreme determinist case. Conrad had certainly read Schopenhauer, who had claimed in 1851 that "the entire empirical course of a man's life is, in great things and in small, as necessarily predetermined as clockwork".[4]

(4) The dwarfing perspective: use of a viewpoint that offers a reductive, dwarfing view of human activities. It may be a "bird's eye view", or, so to speak, a star's, jungle's or mountain's view of men. Here are two examples from *Nostromo*. The first, from Pt. 1, Chap. 4, depicts a battle:

> Horsemen galloped towards each other, wheeled round together, separated at speed ..... The movements of the animated scene were like the passages of a violent game played upon the plain by dwarfs mounted and on foot, yelling with tiny throats, under the mountain that seemed a colossal embodiment of silence.

The second, from Pt. 3, Ch. 10, concerns the death of Decoud:

> The lover of Antonia Avellanos rolled overboard without having heard the cord of silence snap in the solitude of the Placid Gulf, whose glittering surface remained untroubled by the fall of his body. ..... Don Martin Decoud ..... .disappeared without a trace, swallowed up in the immense indifference of things.

(5) The frustrating context. Where the purpose of an action is evident, the given context will make that purpose seem incapable of fulfilment, so that the actions will appear to be blind or impotent. (In 'Autocracy and War', Conrad says that action satisfies man's vanity by offering "the illusion" of a mastered destiny.)[5]

A concise example comes in the account of the railway-building in *Heart of Darkness*: "A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock." Marlow virtually sums up the effect of the frustrating context with his remark, "men going at it blind – as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness".

Now the whole of the paragraph in which Marlow describes the coast is an excellent example of "empirical hyperbole"; and his account of the

landing of the custom-house clerks and the soldiers is an example of the third technique ("reductive reification"), because of the emphasis on the mechanical repetitiveness of an action which embraces – and costs – the lives of humans. ("We pounded along, stopped, landed soldiers; went on, landed custom-house clerks ..... landed more soldiers ..... Some, I heard, got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care. They were just flung out there, and on we went.") Techniques 4 and 5 ("dwarfing perspective" and "frustrating context") are combined when we are told that the soldiers have the purpose of guarding the clerks who in turn have the purpose of levying toll "in what looked like a God-forsaken wilderness", in settlements which, even if they are some centuries old, are "still no bigger than pin-heads on the untouched expanse of their background". The "civilisers" are made to seem an irrelevant and impotent intrusion into a vast, unchanging, impervious continent of jungle. "Every day the coast looked the same, as though we had not moved."

The description of the French man-of-war predominantly uses the fourth technique: the vessel is seen as dwarfed, an ugly toy, against "the empty immensity of earth, sky, and water ..... firing into a continent". The general purpose of the ship's action, conducting a war, is subjected to the fifth: how can a war be waged against a continent? And the specific purpose of the action – to destroy a camp of "enemies" – is not given until the end of the paragraph, so that the pattern of the second technique ("delayed decoding") has emerged.

In this passage, Conrad conducts a pincer-movement attack on complacency. See how the pincers close. Let's imagine that a staunch jingoist puts down *Heart of Darkness* at this point and says to Conrad: "Why, you're being fraudulent. You're ignoring common sense. Common sense will surely tell you that such activities as landing soldiers or customs-men and shelling tribesmen are a perfectly logical and practical part of colonial activities. The purposelessness is in *you*, not in these actions." To which we may imagine Conrad replying: "Firstly, the view I offer is psychologically true: the observer, the fictional Marlow, is a stranger to the region who has 'the idleness of a passenger' and is in 'isolation amongst all these men with whom [he has] no point of contact.' You may argue that these conditions induce distorted – albeit unusually vivid – vision in Marlow. Perhaps, however, his isolation may make him a privileged, more objective observer, like the little boy who truly perceived that the emperor had no clothes. Perhaps unusual

observation-conditions reveal the true and the essential, radically different though the true and the essential may be from what most men take them to be. Let's suppose that of the activities on the coast three views may be taken: an immediate, a mediate, and an ultimate perspective. You, the complacent man, take the mediate view, a familiar and conventional notion that what is going on there is quite purposeful, sensible, logical. Marlow sees the immediate view, and in doing so hints at an ultimate view. For, ultimately, vegetation outlasts flags, ocean outlasts gunboats, the continent of Africa will outlast Europeans: so the 'superficial' sense of imperialism's impotence and futility is in harmony with ultimate facts; and Marlow's perceptions thus link two temporal dimensions: the moment-by-moment impact of the present, and, subliminally, a remote future age when this local invasion of 'civilisation' has vanished from Africa. Whether the ultimate view is a platitude or a salutary warning depends rather on the reader's preconceptions: but in your case, it may not be a platitude."

The argument which I have here put into the mouth of Conrad's shade is a further reminder that the interplay of immediate and remote perspectives, spatial and temporal, is one of the finest devices of Conrad's scepticism. Whether this scepticism has radical or conservative consequences depends on a great variety of circumstances. The "argument from ultimates" is one that Conrad could deploy against a variety of political positions, and in Chapter 2 we saw how Conrad deployed it against the socialism of Cunninghame Graham; but when we reflect that *Heart of Darkness* belongs to the era of Lord Salisbury and the Boer War, we see how the argument can contribute to effects which are "radical" in the sense of being courageously admonitory of a prevailing political mood.

ii. THE OUTER STATION

The company's Outer Station is reached after a steamer-journey with a Swede who adds to the ominous suggestions by telling Marlow of a compatriot who had hanged himself after a short time up-country. "Hanged himself! Why, in God's name?", cries Marlow. And the laconic reply is: "Who knows? The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps."

At the Outer Station, Marlow's observations juxtapose instances of the barbaric treatment of the natives with instances of apparently futile

and objectless work in whose cause the natives are being destroyed or debased. He sees a boiler wallowing in the grass, a railway truck on its back, decaying machinery, rusty rails, smashed drainage-pipes in a hole, and pointless blasting. Descriptively we are at an intersection of the realistic and the surrealistic, the documentary and the absurd; and Marlow's ironies drive a wedge firmly between propaganda and action, claim and deed, word and thing.

> "A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way of anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on."[6]

Conrad uses to such effect the principles we have called techniques 2 and 5 that the phrase "building a railway" acquires invisible quotation-marks and becomes hard to read aloud in any tone other than one of contempt. Marlow explicitly links this scene with the scene of the French man-of-war shelling its "enemies": when he sees the chain-gang of negroes being led by "one of the reclaimed", a detribalised native, he comments: "They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. All their meagre breasts panted together, the violently dilated nostrils quivered, the eyes stared stonily uphill." With customary compression, Conrad by referring us back to the episode of the man-of-war is simultaneously referring us back to the description of the exuberant natives canoeing through the surf, a description which there functioned as contrast to the alien and incongruous maritime activity, and which now in memory functions as contrast to the wretched plight of the natives on land.

While the members of the chain-gang stare "stonily uphill", their native guard has eyes for Marlow: "He, ... with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust. After all, I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings." In the act of feeling scorn for the guard, Marlow finds that he is regarded by the fellow as an accomplice, as indeed, in a sense, he is. Once again, apparent contraries are linked by tentacular bonds.

Walking further, Marlow steps into the trees for shade, and finds that he has walked into a grove of death:

> "..... It seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno. The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise filled the mournful stillness of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound – as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible.
>
> "Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.
>
> "They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom."[7]

"They were not enemies, they were not criminals": again we're referred back to the natives who had been shelled by the man-of-war and to the members of the chain-gang, and Marlow's compassion is integral with indignation at the linguistic hypocrisy of the "civilisers". Again we see a critical interplay of the immediate, the mediate and the ultimate perspectives: here conveyed, notably, by the description of sounds, with the "mediate" view being suggested by the noise of the "work" continuing, the "immediate" view being of the horror of human suffering in a grove permeated by the sound of distant rapids, and the linkage of "immediate" and "ultimate" being provided by that astonishing simile, "as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible". A fourth perspective is provided by the allusion to literary archetype: "the gloomy circle of some Inferno".

Once more, eyes meet Marlow's: not this time in an unnerving glance of complicity, but in an unnervingly vacant stare from a dying native:

> "The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly."

Marlow gives the man a biscuit, and notes that "He had tied a bit of white worsted round his neck – Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge – an ornament – a charm – a propitiatory act? Was there any idea

at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas."

The function of this array of questions is partly psychological (for we sense the pressure of horror in Marlow largely because of his evident compulsion to seek psychological relief in speculation about a tiny detail of the scene); partly that of pointing a direct irony, because all that civilisation appears to have brought this man is early death and "this bit of white thread from beyond the seas"; and partly that of contributing to a cluster of ironies provided by visual contrasts, notably between this naked tribesman and the immaculate accountant. For Marlow retreats from the grove to the Company's buildings, and there he meets this devoted official, this sire of our century's concentration-camp bureaucrats:

> "I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled, under a green-lined parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing, and had a pen-holder behind his ear."

The ironies in Marlow's cameo of the accountant are recessive in their mutual qualifications, and as usual there is a dynamic relationship between observer and observed. Consider the modulations of approval and scorn here:

> "Moreover, I respected the fellow. Yes; I respected his collars, his vast cuffs, his brushed hair. His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralisation of the land he kept up his appearance. That's backbone. His starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character. He had been out nearly three years; and, later, I could not help asking him how he managed to sport such linen. He had just the faintest blush, and said modestly, 'I've been teaching one of the native women about the station. It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.' Thus the man had verily accomplished something. And he was devoted to his books, which were in apple-pie order.
>
> Everything else in the station was in a muddle."[8]

The complexities in the presentation of the accountant stem basically from the technique whereby Conrad offers apparent reassurances (here, that the accountant is worthy of respect) and then undermines them. The undermining is provided by the implication that the accountant had

to bully or beat the native woman to force her to do his laundry, and by the later information that he regards the groans of a sick man in his room as an irritating distraction when he is working at the books, and has come to hate the savages, again because the noise they make is distracting. The final effect is of condemnation by juxtaposition – juxtaposition of the immaculate accountant's immaculate entries with the horrors he ignores:

> "In the steady buzz of flies the homeward-bound agent was lying flushed and insensible; the other, bent over his books, was making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions; and fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the still tree-tops of the grove of death."

Yet the ironies that tinge Marlow's early statement, "I respected the fellow", are not sufficiently powerful to reverse completely the meaning of that statement. In a station where everything else is "a muddle", the accountant preserves at least a simulacrum of order: compared with chaotic corruption, there's something to be respected in corruption which preserves some elements of discipline. Another complicating factor is that Marlow's word "respected" is here close in meaning to "beheld in awed amazement". In a way, the accountant transcends orthodox moral judgements of the "he is a callous man" variety, simply because he is presented as an amazing phenomenon, a bizarre and freakish *thing*, rather than a human of whom moral appraisals can consistently be made. "He was amazing, and had a pen-holder behind his ear." You cannot judge the surreal exactly as you judge the real, nor can you judge an automaton as you judge a fellow-being.

The total effect of the passage, then, is that a strong final condemnation of the accountant for taking leave of humane responsiveness emerges from the early qualifications, from the partial tributes based on recognition (a) of the fact that a simulacrum of order is better than none at all, (b) of his freakishness, approved by the aesthete or humorist-connoisseur in Marlow, and (c) of the "ostrich" factor, which is yet to be explained. The accountant is like an ostrich with its head in the sand: surrounded by the vile and horrific, he can be seen as taking refuge in myopic devotion to his books and clothing. And while making us aware of the callousness, the crushing of responsive awareness, thus entailed, Marlow can "respect" – i.e., "appreciate the reasons for" – this ostrich-factor: for he himself, from time to time, appears to guard his sanity by simply retreating from horror. We saw an

example of a psychological retreat when Marlow had concentrated his responses on a tiny detail, the "bit of white worsted" round the neck of a native in the grove of death; and he had made a physical retreat just after that, when another native, after crawling to the river to drink, had sat and let his head slump down on his chest. Perhaps he had died: but Marlow didn't stay to find out. "I didn't want any more loitering in the shade, and I made haste towards the station." That was when he had met the accountant. And later, when Marlow is oppressed by the muddle and intrigue of the station, it is to the accountant's office that he retreats.

Here he first learns of Kurtz, who is admired by the accountant. Evidently this admiration isn't universal: the accountant hints that since mail is intercepted at the central station, it might be dangerous for him to write to Kurtz. We learn that Kurtz is the most successful of the ivory-hunters: he "sends in as much ivory as all the others put together" and "will be a somebody in the Administration before long. They, above – the Council in Europe, you know, mean him to be." And the message the accountant wants Marlow to take to Kurtz is that " 'everything here' – he glanced at his desk – 'is very satisfactory.' "

iii. THE JOURNEY FROM THE OUTER STATION TO THE CENTRAL STATION

Marlow's companion on the journey is a white man who catches fever and has to be carried in a hammock on a pole. "As he weighed sixteen stone I had no end of rows with the carriers", and eventually, Marlow says, "I made a speech in English with gestures, not one of which was lost to the sixty pairs of eyes before me." The next morning, Marlow finds "the whole concern wrecked in a bush – man, hammock, groans, blankets, horrors. The heavy pole had skinned his poor nose. He was very anxious for me to kill somebody, but there wasn't the shadow of a carrier near. I remembered the old doctor – 'It would be very interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.' "

In Conrad's diary for the equivalent stage of his own journey through the Congo, we find these entries:

> *Wednesday*, 30*th* [*July*] ..... Harou [became] very ill with billious [*sic*] attack and fever ..... Vomiting bile in enormous quantities. At 11 gave him 1 gramme of quinine and lots of hot tea. Hot fit ending in heavy perspiration. At 2 P.M. put him in hammock and started

> for Kinfumu. Row with carriers all the way. Harou suffering much through the jerks of the hammock .....
>
> Expect lots of bother with carriers to-morrow. Had them all called and made a speech, which they did not understand. They promise good behaviour.
>
> *Thursday*, 31*st* ..... Great difficulty in carrying Harou. Too heavy – bother! Made two long halts to rest the carriers. Country wooded in valleys and on many of the ridges.[9]

Jocelyn Baines has remarked that the one entry in the diary that has been phrased with literary care is this: "Saw another dead body lying by the path in an attitude of meditative repose";[10] and the effect created in this entry anticipates the way in which, in the tale, Conrad's imagination supplies an element of black comedy which transforms the memory of the incident with Harou and the bearers. Conrad's speech to the natives may not have been understood, but it elicited from them a promise of "good behaviour"; and if difficulties still occurred, they do not appear to have been as ludicrously dramatic as the disaster with "the whole concern wrecked in a bush" which beset Marlow and his companion. The modulation from farce to black comedy comes when that companion is "very anxious" for Marlow to kill somebody in retaliation for his skinned nose. Furthermore the ludicrousness is, in Marlow's case, compounded by the fact that what the natives have understood through his "gestures, not one of which was lost", is, apparently, the opposite to what he wished to communicate.

Another aspect of the tale's "linguistic" theme is illustrated by the episode that appears to have originated in an encounter recorded in the diary on July 3rd. The diary entry is: "Met an off^{er} of the State inspecting. A few minutes afterwards saw at a camp^{g} place the dead body of a Backongo. Shot? Horrid smell." In the tale, Marlow meets

> "a white man in an unbuttoned uniform, camping on the path with an armed escort of lank Zanzibaris, very hospitable and festive – not to say drunk. Was looking after the upkeep of the road, he declared. Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement."

The same sequence also maintains the technique of radical shifts in perspective, as when Marlow comments on the depopulation of the region:

> "The population had cleared out a long time ago. Well, if a lot of mysterious niggers armed with all kinds of fearful weapons suddenly took to travelling on the road between Deal and Gravesend, catching the yokels right and left to carry heavy loads for them, I fancy every farm and cottage thereabouts would get empty very soon."[11]

The impressive feature of this technique is its economy, fusing as it does a surrealistic imaginative scenario with the moral questioning implicit in a "native's view" of the European invasion (and with an echo of the opening discussion of the Roman conquest). One of the questions is adroitly emphasised when Marlow describes the sound of distant drums as "weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild – and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country". Whether much irony or none is seen in the phrase "as profound a meaning", Marlow's conjecture remains equally discomfiting to conventional orthodoxy.

iv. THE CENTRAL STATION

On arrival at the company's Central Station, Marlow finds that the steamship which he is supposed to command has been wrecked, and he is delayed there for a period while the vessel is under repair. The gate of the station has a "neglected gap"; the station's brickmaker makes no bricks; a European running for water to extinguish a fire has "a hole in the bottom of his pail"; and like K. in Kafka's *The Castle*, Marlow experiences that mixture of curiosity and detachment, irritated contempt and dismay, that comes with the feeling that one is both spectator of and unwilling participant in a nightmare. As he says:

> "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, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams ....."[12]

"Unreal", as in *The Waste Land* a generation later, becomes a keyword in the descriptions:

> "There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. 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."[13]

There is, however, one important exception to Marlow's claim that nothing came of the "air of plotting". The exception is the manager's plot to accelerate Kurtz's death: for, as in the world of Kafka, the dream-like machinations inflict real destruction.

"Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive / Officiously to keep alive": Clough's aphorism has a bearing on the manager's attitude. If we may describe as a murder plot a scheme to delay a man's relief, in conditions which virtually ensure that without prompt relief the man will succumb to disease and death, then *Heart of Darkness* is a murder story. A person reading the tale for the first time is unlikely to notice this. At a first reading we may note various hints of intrigue, and we may perceive that the manager resents Kurtz's success and regards Marlow as an ally of Kurtz; but so many bizarre things are happening in this sequence that only on our second reading are we likely to piece together in the following way the various scattered hints which show the extent of the manager's culpability.

When Marlow discovers that the steamer is wrecked, he remarks: "I did not see the real significance of that wreck at once. I fancy I see it now, but I am not sure – not at all. Certainly the affair was too stupid – when I think of it – to be altogether natural. Still . . ." The circumstances of the sinking are peculiar: two days before his arrival, "They had started ..... in a sudden hurry up the river with the manager on board, in charge of some volunteer skipper, and before they had been out three hours they tore the bottom out of her on stones."[14]

At Marlow's first interview with the manager, he is asked how long it will take to repair the wreck. "How can I tell?" says Marlow, and receives the reply: "Well, let us say three months before we can make a start [upstream]. Yes. That ought to do the affair." Marlow therefore considers him "a chattering idiot", but adds: "Afterwards ..... it was borne in upon me startingly with what extreme nicety he had estimated the time requisite for the 'affair'."[15]

The repair is delayed because there are no rivets at the Central Station. There are, however, rivets in abundance at the Outer Station, and a message could summon them; but evidently Marlow's request is never sent. Some conversations supply the reasons. Marlow overhears the manager talking to his uncle, and their talk makes clear that the manager's chief rival for promotion is Kurtz. Kurtz's main assets are that he has influential friends in Europe; he commands attention because of his crusading spirit, his idealistic eloquence; and he is a very successful ivory collector. The manager's main asset is exceptionally good physical health: he has been working in Africa far longer than Kurtz, in fact for the phenomenal period of nine years – thus outliving many whites, in an area where premature death for Europeans is an everyday occurrence. Kurtz has already been ill, has recovered imperfectly, and is two hundred miles from the nearest doctor. Therefore, the manager's uncle tells his nephew, "trust to this" – and he points to the jungle.[16]

If the manager is referring to the relief of Kurtz when he tells his uncle, "the extraordinary series of delays is not my fault", he is evidently lying. Marlow learns from the brickmaker why the rivets aren't forthcoming: the brickmaker writes "from dictation": i.e., the manager decides which requests are to be despatched or omitted.

We see, then, that before Marlow had arrived to take command of the vessel for its upstream journey, the manager had persuaded "some volunteer skipper" to steer the vessel on to stones; and he then impedes the repair for three months by withholding materials. A further two months are taken by the steamer's eventual journey – and by the time relief arrives, Kurtz, who has thus been isolated for well over a year, is dying.

Perhaps because it is so obliquely conveyed, few commentators have noted this murder-plot.[17] Once again we see how Conrad manages to eat his cake and have it: the elliptical presentation enables him to maintain the general atmosphere of purposeless activity, even though the manager's activity is in fact highly purposeful; and thematically the murder-plot is central to the evolutionary discussion.

v. THE EVOLUTIONARY THEME

Conrad is Darwinian and anti-Darwinian: he uses Darwinian findings not only to combat the optimism that Darwin himself, and many of

those who were later influenced by him, illicitly tried to distil from evolutionary theory, but also to combat imperialist ideologies that attempted to derive support from Darwinism.

Even when Hardy's novels are taken into account, *Heart of Darkness* has a more potently Darwinian atmosphere than any other major work of fiction. Insistently, Conrad raises questions about man's evolution, about the relationship between the civilised and the savage, about the relationship between the human realm and the natural environment, and about the continuity between the present age and the remote past. Marlow, on that journey up-river, says:

> "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 ..... We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth ..... The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? ..... We were travelling in the night of first ages ....."[18]

At the conclusion of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which appeared forty years before Conrad's tale, is a remarkably "consolatory" peroration:

> When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled ..... [Many species will perish, but] As all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Silurian epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.
>
> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws ..... being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance .....; Variability .....; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to

> Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.[19]

I cite this peroration at length because, even if Conrad never read this passage, he would certainly have been familiar with these concluding arguments through their currency in other books, in periodicals and in general discussion in the late nineteenth century. I think that the attempt to give a colouring of optimistic teleology to evolutionary theory would have grated on Conrad's temperament like steel squealing on glass; and that a consequent critical preoccupation with the theory moves just under the surface of several of his works and breaks surface defiantly in *Heart of Darkness*.

Darwin had said, "we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length". But Darwin's own previous findings had shown that man had evolved into being as a result of such factors as environmental changes and chance variations in offspring, rather than by the special ordinance of a loving Creator: therefore the very forces that had brought man into existence might operate, one day, to eliminate him. Conrad, by his emphasis on the unconquerable might of the natural environment, underlines such a pessimistic inference. As Conrad had told Graham: "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins."[20]

Darwin had said: "As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection." The inevitable moral connotations of terms like "the good of each being" and "progress towards perfection" give a teleological coloration to the statement, and could even suggest to some readers that a benevolent Power was immanent in the evolutionary process. Yet, strictly, the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest" could not refer to the *morally* best or most perfect, but only to those physically,

mentally or constitutionally most capable of survival in given physical conditions. Conrad drives a wedge between the theory and its moralistic accretion by showing a predatory battle for survival, in testing environmental conditions, between a manager and a Mr. Kurtz: a struggle in which the manager, however base, prevails because his imperviousness to disease makes him physically the fittest to survive in the disease-filled environment. It is one local struggle; but it may be applied as a critical paradigm to all benevolently moralistic interpretations of evolutionary theory. (In *A Personal Record*, Conrad wrote: "The ethical view of the universe involves us at last in so many cruel and absurd contradictions ..... that I have come to suspect that the aim of creation cannot be ethical at all. I would fondly believe that its object is purely spectacular.")[21]

Darwin says: "From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows." According to the main body of his arguments, "higher" should mean only "more fully evolved": but the phrase "the most exalted object" rather adroitly confuses this non-moral sense of "higher" with the moral sense of the word (finer, better, superior in moral endowments). Whether Conrad did or did not have the ending of *The Origin of Species* specifically in mind, *Heart of Darkness* does in practice drive a further wedge between the confused elements by showing a "war of nature" in Africa – humans competing with each other for survival and furtherance, and competing for life with the natural environment – and by asking the reader whether that battle appears to be producing anything morally "higher".

Darwin had supported his optimism by referring us to "an entangled bank". Let us, therefore, look at an entangled bank in *Heart of Darkness.*

> "We capered on the iron deck ..... We stopped, and the silence driven away by the stamping of our feet flowed back again from the recesses of the land. The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. And it moved not. A deadened burst of mighty splashes and snorts reached us from afar, as though an ichthyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river. 'After all,' said the boiler-maker in a reasonable tone, 'why shouldn't we get the rivets?' "[22]

Silence – vegetation – splashes – ichthyosaurus – rivets; a rich flux of impressions that gives us initially a sense of vivid randomness; but every part is co-ordinated in a pattern which has as one axis the consciousness of Marlow and as another the work's themes: we sense his subconscious fears, and these fears relate to the evolutionary theme. For example: "The silence driven away by the stamping ..... flowed back again". The noise of Marlow and the foreman dancing on the hulk's deck (they think the rivets may at last be coming) has banished for a while the vast silence; but now the silence flows back as though it were a dynamic principle striving to engulf and annihilate men (here's our antipathetic fallacy, again). The same sense of man's perilous isolation and vulnerability as an evolved being underlies the next observation: the vegetation seems "ready ..... to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (not Darwin's "most exalted object" but "little man", "little existence"). Of course the wall of vegetation "moved not": but Marlow is so oppressed by a sense of man's ephemerality that he records the fact almost with surprise, and with that dramatic syntactical inversion: and behind the fear is Conrad's sense that on a vast evolutionary time-scale the environment may indeed prevail, while men fall by the wayside. Proof that Marlow's subconscious mind is being used as a vehicle for evolutionary fears is offered by the "ichthyosaurus" reference in the next part of this passage. He hears mighty splashes, "as though an ichthyosaurus had been taking a bath of glitter in the great river". Why should he think of that creature, of all things? After all, we have previously been told by Marlow that there is an old hippopotamus in the locality, which accounts for the sounds. But he doesn't think "Big splashes – it's that hippo again": he thinks of an ichthyosaurus, and quite naturally: for since he is preoccupied with the ephemerality of man, he associates the splashes not with the hippo but with a prehistoric saurian reptile which, for all its apparent might, was made totally extinct by the evolutionary process.[23] (Wells's Time Traveller, we may recall, found that "horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, had followed the Ichthyosaurus into extinction":[24] which may have suggested the choice of that particular saurian.)

The quoted paragraph's final reference to "rivets" forms part of the same logic, for though Marlow does not at the time appreciate the fact, the continued absence of the rivets is a consequence of the manoeuvres on the part of the manager to prove that he, and not Kurtz, is the "fittest" to survive.

There are several other ways in which recollections of the debate over evolution should affect our reading of *Heart of Darkness*. For example, some of the more oratorical comments on the jungle-background, comments which may out of context seem vapid, may sometimes gain precision as a result. Marlow, commenting on the stillness of the surrounding jungle during his journey up-river, says:

> "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."[25]

The second of these quoted sentences has acquired notoriety since F. R. Leavis commented in *The Great Tradition*:

> Is anything added to the oppressive mysteriousness of the Congo by such sentences as: "It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention" – ?
>
> The same vocabulary, the same adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery, is applied to the evocation of human profundities and spiritual horrors; to magnifying a thrilled sense of the unspeakable potentialities of the human soul. The actual effect is not to magnify but rather to muffle.[26]

Certainly there are some parts of the tale against which such charges may aptly be levelled; though I think that those parts are fewer than Leavis implies, particularly when it is recognised that often the intermediary presence of Marlow can not only shield Conrad from adverse criticism but even turn an apparent vice of style into a virtue. In the case of this particular example, Leavis's charges do not appear to be apt. To borrow Leavis's own criterion of legitimate fictional comment, Marlow's statement about the implacable force "seems to emerge from the vibration of [the thing rendered] as part of the tone": or, to put the point less delicately, though Marlow's statement might, out of context, sound like waffle, the context effectively fills the statement with meaning. The "implacable force" is the ultimately supreme strength of the natural environment, a strength to which a hundred particulars (like the instance of the man-of-war shelling a continent) have amply testified; the "intention" is the seeming will of the environment to prevail over invading men; and the intention is "inscrutable" partly because such a seeming will does not have literal existence, and partly because (as the

ichthyosaurus passage indicated) it is something sensed or intuited by Marlow – a matter of "as though it were" rather than of "clearly it is". Finally, the effect of isolating the sentence (as Leavis does) should be noted. In isolation, it is possible to read the sentence in a parody-inviting insistent tone which evokes romantic Hollywood travelogues or the sherried reminiscences of a stage colonel. But in its context, the immediately preceding and immediately following sentences, by virtue of their curt and lucid simplicity, ensure for the enclosed statement a matter-of-fact rather than a thrilled or insistent tone. (Of course, we may readily concede, the fact that in *this* case the abstract privative adjectives reward inspection does not invalidate the general objection that Marlow's too-frequent use of such adjectives – "inconceivable", "inexplicable", "unfathomable", "indefinable" – tends to discourage such inspection.)

In the late nineteenth century, many apologists for aggressive imperialism propped their arguments with illicit inferences from Darwinian principles – illicit, because Darwin was dealing with competition between species and species, or between species and environment, but not between nations and races. The illicit argument went like this: It is a law of nature that creatures should compete, that the "fittest" should survive and prevail over the "unfit". Therefore, if Europeans seize Africa and subjugate the Africans, they are simply doing what they are naturally obliged to do – the fit cannot help but prove their fitness. This argument was implicit in, for example, Lord Salisbury's distinction between "living" and "dying" nations: "The living nations will gradually encroach on the territory of the dying ..... It is not to be supposed that any one nation of the living nations will be allowed to have the profitable monopoly of curing or cutting up these unfortunate patients ..... We shall not allow England to be at a disadvantage in any re-arrangement."[27] Conrad, who in his letters referred mockingly to Salisbury's speech,[28] retorts in *Heart of Darkness* by turning Darwinism against the political Darwinians. If a goal of the evolutionary processes is an equilibrium between the creature and its environment, that goal has in Africa been reached by the natives whom Marlow observes on the coast, who "wanted no excuse for being there" and who blend with their setting, rather than by the Europeans, who appear absurdly anomalous and perish rapidly there or survive as grotesques or brutal automata. This retort is augmented, as we have seen, by Conrad's post-Darwinian emphasis on the continuity in instincts, customs, fetishes and taboos between the savages and the Europeans.

vi. THE JOURNEY FROM THE CENTRAL STATION TO THE INNER

The steamboat eventually proceeds up-stream, bearing Marlow, the manager, three or four "pilgrims", and a crew of twenty cannibals. The strange vastness of the forest gives a phantasmagoric, sometimes enchanted, sometimes oppressive, atmosphere to the journey.

> "On silvery sandbanks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had once known .....
>
> "..... Sometimes we came upon a station close by the bank, clinging to the skirts of the unknown, and the white men rushing out of a tumble-down hovel, with great gestures of joy and surprise and welcome, seemed very strange – had the appearance of being held there captive by a spell. The word 'ivory' would ring in the air for a while – and on we went again into the silence, along empty reaches, round the still bends, between the high walls of our winding way, reverberating in hollow claps the ponderous beat of the stern-wheel ..... For me it crawled towards Kurtz – exclusively ..... The reaches opened before us and closed behind, as if the forest had stepped leisurely across the water to bar the way for our return."[29]

Even these few extracts from the extensive description of the paddle-steamer's progress serve to show the characteristic contrasts and obliquities of perspective which sustain Conrad's descriptive effectiveness. The frustrated "butting" of the vessel gains in imaginative impact because of the contrast with the placidity of the sunbathing alligators and hippos. The white men do not rush out with joy, surprise and welcome, but with "gestures of" joy, etc. They seem strange because we have observed them in a slightly oblique and remote perspective as gesticulating shapes rather than as feeling fellow-men (a combination of techniques 3 and 4 in our earlier list). The conversation is reduced, as though heard from afar, to a matter of a word which rings briefly in the air before being engulfed by the land's silence; and although the noise of engines constantly accompanies the boat, we experience, again as though from a remote view-point, rather the constancy of the silence on which the noise intrudes.

Marlow tells us that he also sensed the "vengeful aspect" of the forest, but he adds: "I got used to it afterwards; I did not see it any more; I had no time." He was too busy navigating, he explains, watching for hidden banks or sunken stones.

> "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. 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 – "
>
> "Try to be civil, Marlow," growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself.
>
> "I beg your pardon. I forgot the heartache which makes up the rest of the price. And indeed what does the price matter, if the trick be well done? You do your tricks very well. And I didn't do badly either, since I managed not to sink that steamboat on my first trip."[30]

The generalised comment on the "inner truth" heightens by contrast the visual specificity of the description; the reminder of the *Nellie* heightens by contrast our sense of the strange remoteness of the Congo; and Marlow's commentary asserts a basic similarity between the areas contrasted: that all men's activities are like monkey-tricks on tight-ropes if seen from the point of view of the greater environment. (In *Nostromo*, Conrad wrote: "In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part";[31] and this "whole scheme of things" is related in meaning to Marlow's phrase "the inner truth", just as the phrase "its mysterious stillness" refers not simply to the silence of the jungle but rather, finally, to the eternal silence of an alien universe, connoting the recalcitrant ground of experience which human rationality attempts to colonise.) Marlow's scepticism is met by a brusque rejoinder, "Try to be civil": and he obliges with the rapid, rather facile-sounding, concessionary recognition of "the heartache" and the value of the work that he had just called "monkey tricks".

This apparent volte-face by Marlow in reply to the critical interjection or reproach complicates our judgement of some of the philosophical generalisations in the narrative. In response to the interruption, he offers a seemingly self-contradictory emphasis – on the value of what had just now been denigrated. A self-contradictory emphasis need not entail

logical self-contradiction: for just as a coin may seem round or rectangular depending on whether one views its face or its edge, so Marlow may take views of the value of labour which contrast in accordance with contrasting vantage-points. As we saw in the case of his comments on feminine nature (those comments that fitted the immediately-preceding account of his aunt, though not the less immediate account of the knitting ladies), he has facility in generalising quite sweepingly from the narrow basis of one or two examples or occasions. The interruption we are considering increases our impression that this facility – a term implying both the fluent ease and also the possible glibness of utterance – is an aspect of Marlow's character which has been grasped, planned and placed by Conrad.

Thus Conrad has the best of both worlds. The character of Marlow licenses a freedom of general philosophical and moralising commentary which is often essential in preserving our sense of the breadth of implication of the events, and where these comments seem suspect or, perhaps, self-contradictory, we feel that we cannot criticise Conrad for self-contradiction, since these questionable features have been defined as a distinctive and natural outcome of Marlow's personality as civilised gentleman-raconteur – and as one whose reflections may contain a little "moonshine". Again, some of Marlow's contrasting statements are in harmony with his tendency, evidenced in that remark about imperialism's being justified by "something you can set up, and bow down before", to grope about for some moral affirmation that later events in his own narrative will undermine.

For example: Later in the journey up-river, he speaks of the alarming and subversive sense that something deep within a civilised man has "kinship" with the "wild and passionate uproar" of the dancing savages on the bank.

> "He must meet that truth with his own true stuff – with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags – rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief."[32]

A little later, while considering the peculiar restraint of the cannibal crew who, though desperately hungry, do not attack the out-numbered "pilgrims", he says:

> "No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to

> superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze ..... It takes a man all his inborn strength to fight hunger properly."[33]

In the former passage, the quality that preserves civilised man is "inborn strength", which is equated with "a deliberate belief " and contrasted with inadequate "principles". In the latter passage, on the other hand, "beliefs" and "principles" are both in the category of the inadequate, and are contrasted with "inborn strength". Furthermore, the "inborn strength", which in the first passage was presented as the quality guarding civilised man from the primitive, is in the second passage the secret of the primitive man's peculiar restraint!

Conrad again, as for much of the narrative, seems to be shielded from the imputation that he himself is confused. The shield is provided firstly by the familiar pattern of Marlow's "contradictions" (assurance sought, given, and later found wanting); secondly, by our impression that Marlow is in some sense a "liberal existentialist", now trying to justify his determined commitment to liberal values, now trying to convey his sense of the valueless void encompassing rational experience; thirdly, by the technical fact that our sense of the debatable quality of Marlow's affirmations keeps the basic questions (What *is* the centre of a truly civilised nature? What *is* the basis of moral being?) the more alive for us; and finally, by the way in which the dissatisfaction that we may feel with Marlow's generalising facility finds expression via the interjections of his audience.

After asserting that a deliberate belief guards one from the perils of atavistic kinship, Marlow adds:

> "An appeal to me in this fiendish row – is there? 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. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who's that grunting? You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no – I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes – I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man."[34]

This passage is of an excellence which tends to go unappreciated because critical appraisals so often concentrate on descriptive rather than on reflective or ruminative excellences. The "grunting" from his audience appropriately deflates both the romantic afflatus in Marlow's philosophising ("for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced") and the touch of vanity ("a fool ..... is always safe" from these perils besetting philosophers like Marlow). The previous facile insistence on the implications of "remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" ("And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything – because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future") is salutarily and comically deflated by a reductive concreteness: "You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance?" And the man who just now was proclaiming the value of "a deliberate belief " reveals that what saved him from "a howl and a dance" was not so much a deliberate belief as the simple demands of the task in hand – the "surface truth" of steering and the leaky steam-pipes.

Thus, Conrad's imaginative attention to the oblique narrative form – in this case, his attention to the likely responses of Marlow's audience – acts as a control which virtually extends Conrad's intelligence and converts into a strength a characteristic which elsewhere in Conrad's work appears as a weakness: the characteristic we noted when considering the conclusion of 'Youth', for example. There, some inflated philosophising by Marlow was approved through even more inflated philosophising by the narrator, and all the members of the group nodded in sage agreement: and if the consensus was that of a fictional group, Conrad could still be condemned for allowing so unintelligent a consensus to go "unplaced", uncriticised. In *Heart of Darkness*, greater attention to the likelihood of a disparity between the viewpoints of men of business and Marlow as philosophiser has had valuably incisive consequences.

In his preamble, Marlow had recommended as a salutary principle of imperialism a dedication to an idea: but later we are to be shown Kurtz, whose dedication to an idea did not save him. The same preamble had said that a salutary principle of imperialism was the devotion to efficiency: but later we were shown an accountant whose devotion to efficiency went hand in hand with myopia and callousness. By emphasising the zombie-like nature of so many of the pilgrims, Marlow seems to be commending insight into what lies beneath the superficial: but it is concentration on the superficial that saves Marlow from going for "a howl and a dance". The cannibals on the steamer are commended

for their restraint: but one of the reasons for Kurtz's descent into savagery is that he "lacked restraint". Marlow tells us that he can't stand lies, which have a taint of death: yet eventually he will lie to Kurtz's Intended.

In *The History of Rasselas*, Dr. Johnson's Imlac says: "Inconsistencies cannot both be right, but, imputed to man, they may both be true." It is natural for a man in Marlow's position, telling a tale spontaneously, to improvise generalisations and reflections on the basis of some incident he has just been describing. We do not expect from a man in that position the relatively conclusive generalisations that we might expect from an omniscient author. There is an obvious provocative and subversive value to this paradoxical presentation of themes. The most dramatic and provocative way of recommending a highly complex ethic, a cluster of value-recommendations, is not to thrust the whole at the reader in its synthetised or highly-qualified form. It is much more dramatic to play off against each other apparently-opposed components from within that cluster. The seeming oppositions may emerge, when we reflect retrospectively on the whole work, as qualifications, modifications, ifs and buts, discriminations between the various meanings of ambiguous terms. The possibility of final confusion is reduced because we have one salient ethical guide: the character of Marlow in action: the way in which, in practice, he responds to a diversity of moral tests. As we will see, there is a peculiar modesty about him. His commentary often emphasises a reductive, sceptical or cynical viewpoint; but his actions display, for the time and place, a remarkably catholic humanitarianism. For example, while the "pilgrims" enjoy shooting at the natives, Marlow prefers to sound the boat's steam-whistle, which is not only a more effective way of defending the vessel but also the most humane way of dispersing the natives. When we survey the variations in his responses to various tests, it will almost appear that Conrad is translating into terms of morality, with great virtuosity, the paradigm of navigating a sailing-ship. I do not mean that Conrad is basically commending the duty, fidelity and discipline of an old salt; far from it. But the recent emphasis by Hillis Miller[35] on Conrad's "nihilism" suggests the need for a recapitulation of that paradigm.

If a seaman wants to sail a ship to the desired port, and the winds are blowing in that direction, an observer can tell from the setting of the rudder and the sails what the desired port is. If there are side-winds or head-winds, the seaman has to tack. To reach a port to the north, he may have to sail now to the west, now to the east. An observer would

then have difficulty in deducing the port of call. If a storm comes up, the seaman may decide that the best way of ensuring that he reaches port is not to move at all for a while: to take down all the sails. But when the storm is past, he can resume his progress, intact. The ethic of Marlow in action has, on the whole, a similar basic consistency and flexibility. For "maintenance of progress towards the port" we may read "maintenance of humane principles"; and the equivalent to the sailless ship riding out the storm is the Marlow who to preserve balance and sanity has from time to time to concentrate on remaining on the surface – in the realm of "surface truths". The sea of experience can sustain or engulf moral being; and within the vessel there is a possibility of mutiny or anarchy.

One of the responsibilities that engages Marlow on this journey up-river is that of looking after the native fireman.

> "He was an improved specimen; he could fire up a vertical boiler. He was there below me, and, upon my word, to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs. A few months of training had done for that really fine chap. ..... 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. He was useful because he had been instructed; and what he knew was this – that should the water in that transparent thing disappear, the evil spirit inside the boiler would get angry through the greatness of his thirst, and take a terrible vengeance. So he sweated and fired up and watched the glass fearfully ..... and we crept on, towards Kurtz. But the snags were thick, the water was treacherous and shallow, the boiler seemed indeed to have a sulky devil in it, and thus neither the fireman nor I had any time to peer into our creepy thoughts."[36]

"Neither the fireman nor I": for all Marlow's patronising tone, he has a humane recognition that the fireman and himself have a kinship of work and fear. This description also continues the type of criticism of the "civilising mission" implicit in the earlier presentation of the "detribalised" native in charge of the chain-gang. If you attempt to "civilise" the savages, this argument goes, the result will be neither a "civilised" man nor a true savage, but a hybrid: a hybrid who has superstition without dignity, who toils without comprehension of the task. Better the "unreclaimed", dancing on the banks, than this absurd

anomaly who lacks even Caliban's power of defiance: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse."

In 'The Lord of the Dynamos' (1894), H. G. Wells had told the story of the negroid Azuma-zi, who works in a London power-station and conceives a form of worship of the dynamo he tends.

> Azuma-zi was practically a savage still; the veneer of civilization lay no deeper than his slop suit, his bruises, and the coal grime on his face and hands .....
>
> He took every opportunity Holroyd gave him of touching and handling the great dynamo that was fascinating him. He polished and cleaned it until the metal parts were blinding in the sun. He felt a mysterious sense of service in doing this ..... One morning he salaamed to the Lord of the Dynamos .....[37]

Eventually he "sacrifices" Holroyd, his English master, on the terminals of the dynamo, in retaliation for Holroyd's brutality. Like Conrad later, Wells effectively gives a "worshipper's view" of the machinery, but Wells's clinical presentation of the "worshipper" lacks the blend of contempt and compassion, of the ludicrous and the pitiful, that we find in Conrad's cameo. And in his uncomprehending and idolatrous concentration on the gauge, Conrad's fireman is not entirely remote from the European pilgrims with their idolatrous dedication to ivory: even the pilgrims are hybrids, though subtler ones, of the savage and the civilised. The cruelty, destructiveness and rapacity which we might associate with savages are never far below the surface of their conduct. Wells, in the much more limited scope of his melodramatic short story, makes the cruder but related point that the murderous vengeance of the "nigger" has been provoked by the brutal bullying of Holroyd, who "liked a nigger help because he would stand kicking". As in an earlier era of foreign exploration and exploitation – the era in which Montaigne's 'On Cannibals' and Shakespeare's *Tempest* were written – the late nineteenth century is rich in writing which uses the contrast with the primitive to mirror the inner nature of European civilisation; and if in Kipling's work the mirror was sometimes perniciously flattering, in the fiction of Conrad and Wells, Cunninghame Graham and Stevenson, an uglier and truer image was shown.[38]

At one stage of the upstream journey, Marlow goes ashore to an abandoned hut. Some wood for the steamer's boiler is neatly stacked there, and a message begs the relieving party to "Hurry up" yet to

"Approach cautiously". In the hut, Marlow finds an old, much-thumbed book which has been "lovingly stitched afresh with white cotton thread"; and he comments:

> "It was an extraordinary find. Its title was, *An Inquiry into some Points of Seamanship*, by a man Towser, Towson – some such name – Master in His Majesty's Navy. ..... Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. Such a book being there was wonderful enough; but still more astounding were the notes pencilled in the margin, and plainly referring to the text. I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! .....
>
> "I had been dimly aware for some time of a worrying noise, and when I lifted my eyes I saw the wood-pile was gone, and the manager, aided by all the pilgrims, was shouting at me from the river-side. I slipped the book into my pocket. I assure you to leave off reading was like tearing myself away from the shelter of an old and solid friendship."[39]

Marlow handles that manual with the interest, admiration and sense of communion with which a Puritan of the seventeenth century might have handled the Bible; and in his affectionate handling of the book, Marlow reminds us not only of the value which, as a seaman, he places on the methods and traditions of seamanship, but also of the quasi-religious sustaining force of the work ethic in the nineteenth century. But although the manual of workmanlike activity serves to expose the "unreality" of so much of the corrupt and shoddy activity around him, Marlow, in the very act of admiring the book, is becoming a shoddy workman himself, neglecting his responsibilities, forgetting about the waiting steamer. As with the theme of the baited trap, this scene well displays Conrad's fascination by morally paradoxical situations: here a reminder of the need for vigilance seduces a man from vigilance; appreciation of the rules of effective routine helps Marlow to forget routine; responsiveness to the calling of seamanship keeps Marlow tarrying on dry land. And the book is stitched with white cotton, as though to establish some occult relationship between that manual and

the factory-made cotton strip which might have been a talisman to that dying negro in the grove of death.

Finally, we may note that the "Babel" theme is maintained by the notes "in cipher". As we learn later, these are simply notes in Russian: words which Marlow cannot comprehend, in an alphabet he has failed even to identify.

The paddle-steamer makes very slow progress upstream, but

> "the manager displayed a beautiful resignation. I fretted and fumed and took to arguing with myself whether or no I would talk openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or my silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what any one knew or ignored? What did it matter who was manager? One gets sometimes such a flash of insight ....."[40]

Two sorts of resignation are juxtaposed. There's the "beautiful" resignation of the manager, which is not so much a matter of patience with the slow progress of the vessel, but rather of inner contentment that the journey's slowness decreases Kurtz's chances of survival – as Marlow's comments imply. And Marlow, in a turn of reflection which may remind us of his tarrying over Towson's *Inquiry*, is tempted by the resignation which entails an abandonment of the struggle to comprehend, by the resignation which is a huge shrug of the shoulders in the face of life. It's a temptation that Conrad himself knew well: an undertow of scepticism pulling towards utter detachment and passivity. It pulls at several Conradian protagonists: Decoud in *Nostromo*, whose scepticism destroys his will to live; Heyst in *Victory*, who strives for a hermit-like reclusiveness and who, like Decoud, eventually kills himself; and the young-old heroes of *The Shadow-Line* and *The Arrow of Gold*, who have peculiar difficulty in shaking off acedia or inertia. There is a connection between this Conradian preoccupation and the difficulty we may experience in reading a number of Marlow's ironies, in which a humane instinct trembles in the balance with contempt for the world, for the whole world of men. Marlow's "What did it matter what any one knew or ignored?" may remind us of Conrad's "..... nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing."[41] Yet Marlow survives to tell the tale of his almost-fatal journey, as Conrad survived to make fictions of the suicide-attempt in his youth.

Fog settles on the river around the paddle-steamer, and on the bank the natives are gathering, perhaps in preparation for an attack. The cannibal crew of the vessel, who had exercised "restraint" in not assailing the Europeans, look forward to the chance of eating natives who may be killed by the whites if an attack develops. Marlow explains the cannibals' situation:

> "[The pilgrims] had given them every week three pieces of brass wire, each about nine inches long; and the theory was they were to buy their provisions with that currency in riverside villages. You can see how *that* worked. There were either no villages, or the people were hostile, or the director ..... didn't want to stop the steamer for some more or less recondite reason. So, unless they swallowed the wire itself, or made loops of it to snare the fishes with, I don't see what good their extravagant salary could be to them. ..... Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us – they were thirty to five – and have a good tuck-in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. ..... I perceived – in a new light, as it were – how unwholesome the pilgrims looked, and I hoped, yes, I positively hoped, that my aspect was not so – what shall I say? – so – unappetising: a touch of fantastic vanity which fitted well with the dream-sensation that pervaded all my days at that time. Perhaps I had a little fever too. ..... I had often 'a little fever' ..... It's really easier to face bereavement, dishonour, and the perdition of one's soul – than this kind of prolonged hunger."[42]

The centre of the imaginative life of this passage is Marlow's bizarre hope that he might look relatively "appetising", a hope made credible (a) by Marlow's tendency to look at men and events from oblique angles – and particularly at white men's activities from the natives' angle; and (b) by the information that Marlow suffers from fever on the journey: information that will further complicate criticism of the texture of the inner narrative, as we shall see later.

The theme of cannibalism is important not only in *Heart of Darkness* but also in other works of Conrad. Here, the theme is treated with characteristic paradoxicality. The cannibals show remarkable "restraint" – and even a civilised man, Marlow says, can be expected to lose all restraint in the face of starvation. The cannibals resist the immediate chance to prey on the Europeans – yet the Europeans are, in their own way, preying on the natives, metaphorically and literally. The scene in the grove of death showed how, metaphorically, the whites prey on the life-

blood and life-energy of the natives; and later it is strongly hinted that the idealistic Kurtz has literally become a cannibal.

In the essay 'On Cannibals', Montaigne had long ago argued that Europeans are "further from nature" and often more "barbarous" – more perverse, cruel and hypocritical – than those they choose to call "barbarians":

> I do not believe, from what I have been told about this people [of Brazil], that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. ..... They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own. ..... I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees ..... under the cloak of piety and religion – than to roast and eat a man after he is dead.[43]

In the same tradition of the radical critique of "unnatural" man is Rochester's 'Satire against Mankind', with its aphorisms drawn from Montaigne and Boileau to the effect that civilised man is more hideously brutal than any beast – though for Rochester, treachery rather than voracity is the distinguishing vice:

> Birds feed on Birds, Beasts on each other prey,
> But savage Man alone does Man betray.[44]

The chief betrayer in *Heart of Darkness* is, as we have seen, the manager who effectually murders Kurtz; and in a characteristic linkage (characteristic, because an ambiguous key-word enforces a comparison of the apparently unrelated), Marlow insists that "restraint" characterises the manager, as well as the cannibals.

> " 'It is very serious,' said the manager's voice behind me; 'I would be desolated if anything should happen to Mr. Kurtz before we came up.' I looked at him, and had not the slightest doubt he was sincere. He was just the kind of man who would wish to preserve appearances. That was his restraint. But when he muttered something about going on at once, I did not even take the trouble to answer him. I knew, and he knew, that it was impossible."[45]

The manager is sincere in the sense that although he hopes Kurtz will die, he truly wishes to "preserve appearances": he wants Kurtz to die after, rather than before, the relieving party arrives. His restraint, then,

lies in hypocritically concealing his treachery under the cloak of propriety. Compared with this, the restraint of the cannibals, who evidently consider the whites unappetising but openly display their hunger for human flesh, is admirably free from perversity.

In the short story called 'Falk' (1901) Conrad again explored the theme of cannibalism. Falk is a seaman who, driven by hunger, shoots and eats a carpenter who is a fellow-member of the crew of a drifting, disabled ship. The narrator – Marlow again – ostentatiously defends Falk's cannibalism on the ground that it is natural and logical in the circumstances: "The best man had survived." The implications of the tale expand when the narrator repeatedly reminds us that Falk's love for the heroine is as natural as hunger: "He was hungry for the girl, terribly hungry, as he had been terribly hungry for food."[46] "Don't be shocked," adds Marlow: and he explains that in Falk we see, in pristine form, two offshoots – the predatory and the amatory – of the instinct to survive. Nevertheless, the tale remains disconcerting in its suggestions that it is "squeamishness" to condemn a man who in conditions of extreme hunger murders and eats a fellow man, and that sexual impulses are, in their origins, closely related to cannibalistic ones. Perhaps Conrad's interest in the "rationale" of cannibalism began when, as a boy, he heard that during the Napoleonic campaign his grand-uncle Nicholas had been driven by hunger to devour the carcass of a dog;[47] but there is a connection between this preoccupation and Conrad's Hobbesian sense that the "natural state" of man is egoistic, competitive and anarchic: "Fraternity means nothing unless the Cain-Abel business";[48] and the dying Kurtz will be seen opening his mouth voraciously, "as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him".[49]

When Wells's Time Traveller returns from the future, he is ravenously hungry for *meat* because he has been living among the highly-evolved Eloi, who are frugivorous. In his craving, the Time Traveller has a feature in common with the subterranean proletariat of the future, the Morlocks; but they satisfy the craving by eating the Eloi: evolution has borne man from the old era of cannibalism into the new. As Wells thus shows, evolutionary studies brought grim reminders of the primitive antecedence of man's present carnivorous habits. Shaw (a vegetarian!) even pointed out that "the discovery of the wide prevalence of theophagy as a tribal custom has deprived us of the last excuse for believing that our official religious rites differ in essentials from those of barbarians".[50]

Marlow's references to the "butcher", then, have a distinctly subversive connotation. On one occasion he says to his audience "Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round the other, excellent appetites ....."[51] On another occasion: "You can't understand. How could you? – with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbours ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman ....."[52] The citation of these familiar elements of civilised life is not random. If the references to the policeman are a reminder of the lawless impulses which are constantly present and may prevail when familiar controls are removed, the references to the butcher, coming as they do between a discussion of the crew's cannibal instincts and the revelation that Kurtz accepted "unspeakable" offerings, combine a domestic and a sinister reminder of man's primæval carnivorous instinct.

Eventually, the steamer is attacked, and the attack is described in a way that conveys the full danger, excitement and horror of the situation, while yet giving it an Alice-in-Wonderland air of unreality. ("The arrows came in swarms. They might have been poisoned, but they looked as though they wouldn't kill a cat.") A native who is taking soundings collapses in terror on seeing the attackers, and the helmsman is killed by a spear; and in presenting the events, Conrad makes adroit use of the effect-before-cause descriptive method. The "decoding" of events is repeatedly delayed.

> "I was looking down at the sounding-pole, and feeling much annoyed to see at each try a little more of it stick out of that river, when I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. .....
>
> "Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the [helms]man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little camp-stool. It looked as though after wrenching that thing from somebody ashore he had lost his balance in the effort. ..... My feet felt so very warm and wet ..... My shoes were full ....."[53]

We may notice again that the technique of delayed decoding, while lending an incongruous air of black comedy to the events, is also a psychologically veracious way of conveying the impressions of a man under crisis-conditions.

Marlow disperses the savages on the bank by sounding the whistle, and at this point he becomes "morbidly anxious" to change his shoes and socks. They are soaked with the helmsman's blood; and the intensity and desperation of Marlow's action ("tugging like mad at the shoe-laces") suggest strongly that at an unconscious, symbolic level he is struggling to escape from the whole situation in which he has complicity with bloodshed. If Marlow had not been available to take the vessel upstream, or if he had not steered it so close to the bank, the helmsman might have lived. In talking of his predecessor, Fresleven, Marlow had said: "I ..... stepped into his shoes":[54] and now Marlow is attempting, symbolically, to step out of them.

vii. (a) *The Inner Station; the Return; and the Character of Kurtz*

Kurtz's station is "a long decaying building" with holes in the roof and bordered by a dozen slim posts "ornamented with round carved balls". The steamer is greeted by a young man who, in clothes of vari-coloured patches, resembles a harlequin. Through his broken reminiscences we learn of his uncritical devotion to the charismatically eloquent Kurtz. We also learn that Kurtz had been pillaging the land at the head of his tribe of loyal natives (who in "defence" of him had attacked the steamer); and Marlow realises that the "round carved balls" are in fact human skulls, all but one of which face inwards towards the building.

Kurtz, emaciated and feverish, is carried to the steamer, but in the night he crawls ashore in an attempt to participate in savage rites in the jungle; Marlow with difficulty heads him off. He dies on the homeward journey, his last words being "The horror". Marlow tells us that he himself came close to death from fever soon afterwards, but was incapable of making such a final summing-up; and later, back in Europe, all humanity in the "sepulchral city" had seemed utterly contemptible to him.

In the city, Marlow receives a number of callers. A representative of the company is disappointed to be given no commercially-useful papers but only Kurtz's "report on the 'Suppression of Savage Customs,' with the postscriptum ['Exterminate all the brutes!'] torn off". A cousin

arrives to grieve over the loss of Kurtz's immense talents as a potentially "great musician". A journalist insists that Kurtz's proper field "ought to have been politics 'on the popular side' ". And finally Marlow visits the "Intended" and assures her that Kurtz's last utterance had been her name.

It is thus evident that the final stages of Marlow's narrative offer us a plurality of Kurtzes. One of the themes of the tale has been the alarming ambiguity of language and especially of key-terms like "restraint", which have contrasting meanings in different contexts for different people, and the theme now expands to include ambiguity of personality: we see how diversely Kurtz exists as a series of constructs of other people's natures.[55] To the faithful Intended, Kurtz is essentially the faithful lover; to the organist, he is essentially a great musician; to the journalist, he is, if not a good writer, nevertheless the man whose astonishing powers of expression enable him to command mass audiences. In each case Conrad hints that to an alarming extent "reality" is a construct of the values, needs, desires and prejudices of the observer.

And inevitably, therefore, given the dual nature of our "homo duplex", Marlow as central observer, we find that through Marlow's eyes we see a dual Kurtz – a hollow man and a full man.

In our first reading of the tale we may well find Marlow's range of response to Kurtz bewilderingly extreme, with tribute modulating into condemnation and back again: notably, Kurtz's final cry receives from Marlow not one interpretation but a whole spectrum of interpretations, and the extremes of the spectrum appear paradoxical or contradictory. Again, the harlequin-like Russian, who as a "disciple" might be expected to clarify Kurtz's nature, is himself remarkably enigmatic. Only in retrospect can we effectively order and assess the data with which we have been bombarded.

As Marlow had proceeded up-stream he had experienced an increasing desire to meet Kurtz. In part, this was the "ostrich" device of psychological self-defence: concentrating his mind on Kurtz could take his awareness briefly away from some of the oppressive horrors of the journey. In part, this desire was a product of simple curiosity: Marlow wanted to see and hear for himself a creature hailed as a "very remarkable person", who provokes speculation, loyalty or hostility wherever he goes. Circumstances had pushed him into a position of complicity with Kurtz, because in the attempt to get the rivets for the repair of the steamer, Marlow had let the brick-maker believe him to be

Kurtz's ally. And finally, Marlow had anticipated, we sense, that Kurtz in himself might offer a solution to the moral and psychological problems that the journey had presented. It seemed possible that Kurtz had reconciled idealism and materialism: for, while coming to the Congo as one of "the gang of virtue" with humanitarian ideals, he has been so effective as an ivory-hunter that he sends back more ivory than all the other agents together; and he seems also to have overcome the psychological problems of survival in the oppressive wilderness, for he had long ago opted to return to his station after having come most of the way downstream:

> "After coming three hundred miles, [he] had suddenly decided to go back, which he started to do alone in a small dugout with four paddlers ..... I seemed to see Kurtz for the first time. It was a distinct glimpse: the dugout, four paddling savages, and the lone white man turning his back suddenly on the headquarters, on relief, on thoughts of home perhaps; setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness, towards his empty and desolate station. I did not know the motive. Perhaps he was simply a fine fellow who stuck to his work for its own sake."[56]

One motive is certainly implicit in the way that Marlow imagines the scene: an outsider himself, he envisages Kurtz as a courageous, romantic outsider, venturing into the unknown.

Given the possible value with which he invests the imagined Kurtz, it is scarcely surprising that when Marlow reaches the Inner Station and learns the extent of Kurtz's depravity, there should be an almost hysterical profusion of judgements and responses to the situation; and furthermore Marlow, who has been touched by chills and fever on the journey, is approaching an almost-mortal illness.

His assessments of Kurtz are a compound of contempt, horror, revulsion, awe, and a form of respect, the assessments varying according to the context in which Marlow is viewing his actions. He can judge Kurtz as a hollow man who succumbed to the jungle, or as a "full" man who opted for the jungle; as a man who betrayed his ideals, or as a man who had ideals to betray; as a man who sold his soul, or as a man with a soul to sell. The very name signals the problems. "Kurtz – that means 'short' in German – don't it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long."[57] The name "tells a lie" yet utters through irony a truth. It is true to the

paradoxical character of the man that the name should be false; and Kurtz's falsity tells truths about civilisation.

When Marlow's criterion is the presence of an inner discipline of humane moral principles, Kurtz appears to him to be the contemptible ultimate in a long line of hollow men. He takes his place alongside the pilgrims who resemble automata, the "hairdresser's dummy" of an accountant, the "papier-mâché Mephistopheles" of a brickmaker, and the unscrupulous manager of whom Marlow remarked "Perhaps there was nothing within him" and who believes that "Men who come out here should have no entrails". As for Kurtz: "the wilderness ..... echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core".[58] Decent conduct, it seems, is largely a social artefact, a product of myriads of social sanctions, and where these sanctions no longer apply and the individual has no inner moral defences, he can succumb to any form of corruption, from theft to cannibalism. The emphasis on Kurtz's diversity of potential abilities has here the function of showing that even the apparent exceptions may be actual confirmations of the general rule that civilisation in men's natures is a fragile surface over an abyss. And one obvious reason for the emphasis on his strange eloquence is proverbial: empty vessels make most sound. The man who silently gets on with the job may have inner moral controls lacking in the articulate, intellectual, imaginative man. As Marlow says in *Lord Jim*, "your imaginative people swing farther in any direction, as if given a longer scope of cable in the uneasy anchorage of life".[59] Kurtz has broken loose and is wrecked, and Marlow is "not prepared to affirm the fellow was exactly worth the life we lost in getting to him": the life of the native helmsman whose blood had spattered Marlow's shoes. This hollow Kurtz is an index to the hollowness of European civilisation at large: for his name could be Belgian or Dutch or Prussian or Austrian or Swiss; he had been "educated partly in England"; "his mother was half-English, his father was half-French"; and, *kurz* (in short), "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz".[60]

But it is the "atavistic" theme, rather than that of hollowness, that accounts better for Marlow's extremity of fascinated revulsion. He himself had experienced but resisted the tug of distant hereditary kinship with the savages on the bank; Kurtz has succumbed, and Marlow recoils from being told the full extent of his degeneration:

> "..... the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl . . . 'I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when

> approaching Mr. Kurtz,' I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist – obviously – in the surshine."[61]

Marlow's recoil may remind us of Captain Brierly in *Lord Jim*, who, appalled to discover that a white gentleman-seaman like Jim can act like a coward while a mere Malay stays at the helm, commits suicide; but the added subtlety of the horror that Marlow experiences lies in his sense that Kurtz's "European" ambitions have become the plaything of the jungle and have been moulded into an "African" form – which can convey the alternative sense that "European" values are sophisticated versions of "African" desires. In Europe, Kurtz might have made a promising musician; in Africa he is lured to the bank by the music of the savage rituals, the throbbing of drums. In Europe he might have been a romantic lover; in Africa he takes a black mistress. There, he might have become a great leader of the masses; here, he becomes the adored chief of a predatory tribe. In his report for the Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, he had written 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',"[62]

and this, he claimed, facilitated the Europeans' task of bringing progress; but in the jungle he becomes and remains a jungle-deity. However, Marlow's revulsion is combined with a grudging respect for the man who, though he may have gratified "monstrous" appetites and passions, sexual, sadistic, avaricious, megalomanic, does at least have plenty of appetites to gratify. In that respect, Kurtz is *not* hollow, but the accountant, the brickmaker and the manager are, by contrast, bloodless zombies. And we may recall, looking far beyond the text, that in a letter to Cunninghame Graham in 1904 Conrad made these comments about the mortally-ill painter, G. F. Watts: "What a full and rounded life. And yet it seems poor in stress and passion ..... Better be born a lord – a king – better die Arch priest of an incredible religion!"[63]

The atavistic theme blends with the Faustian theme. The latter is largely a matter of rhetorical emphasis, of metaphorical heightening of the atavistic theme; but intermittently it takes an independent status, and a note of metaphysical melodrama sounds. (If we accept that metaphor is the conjunction of a figurative "vehicle" and a literal "tenor", then it seems that with some of the text's Faustian metaphors the vehicle is sufficiently plausible to resist conversion into a secular tenor.) At these points, Marlow's criticism of Kurtz modulates again into a sort of respect, for Kurtz can at least be regarded as having a soul, a capacity for damnation: and in this he again offers a contrast to other Europeans.

> "Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong – too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. I take it, no fool ever made a bargain for his soul with the devil: the fool is too much of a fool, or the devil too much of a devil ....."[64]

This theme implies that like Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, "the branch that might have grown full straight", the gifted Kurtz has chosen to surrender his soul in return for the gratification of his drives for power and secular fulfilment. The wilderness (some novelettish prose asserts) has been the tempting spirit:

> "The wilderness had ..... taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation."[65]

Faustus's pact was most indelibly sealed by the embrace with an evil spirit in the guise of Helen; and Kurtz's native mistress is, in one aspect of her presentation, an incarnation of the seductively corrupting spirit of the wilderness:

> "She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose."[66]

A remote counterpart to the scene of *Doctor Faustus* in which a devout old man reasons with Faustus in a last-minute attempt to save his soul is provided by the scene on the river-bank when Marlow, by means of a detour, gets between Kurtz and the rites centring on a horned being and tries to "break the spell", to head him off: "Soul! If anybody had ever struggled with a soul, I am the man."[67] Of course, a warning against

translating thematic suggestions into an allegoric structure has been provided by Marlow's jocular description of the brickmaker as a "papier-mâché Mephistopheles": for the brickmaker's master, the manager, has not even a papier-mâché resemblance to Lucifer; and at the Inner Station, our sense of Kurtz's Faustian extremity is actually heightened by the contrast with the manager's abysmally secular response: "There is no disguising the fact, Mr. Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. ..... Upon the whole, the trade will suffer."[68]

The Faustian theme merges, in turn, with an occult theme. Kurtz is described by Marlow as "an initiated wraith" and as "that Shadow – this wandering and tormented thing" which is all voice without substance:[69] as though Kurtz's ancestry distantly included those shades of the unburied who suffer the curse of experiencing death without rest, like the shade of Misenus in *The Æneid* or the accursed crewmen of 'The Ancient Mariner'. This theme, too, has a parodic coloration: to speak of Kurtz as "wraith" and "shadow" is, in part, just a mock-epically hyperbolic way of saying that he was remarkably emaciated by fever; but the proximity to the Faustian theme and the previous allusions to the infernal journey of *The Æneid* give these metaphors some serious resonance.

Given this thematic range, then, it is not surprising that Kurtz's last exclamation, "The horror! The horror!", receives such a diversity of interpretations from Marlow. At one end of the spectrum we have Marlow's claims that in those words,

> "the remarkable man ..... had pronounced a judgement upon the adventures of his soul on earth. ..... It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory."[70]

The occult metaphors linger vestigially in the sense that by pronouncing such judgement Kurtz has in some way brought his unquiet soul to the point where it can now rest in peace. If the previous Faustian allusions are in our minds, we see that in a statement of emphatic self-condemnation Kurtz, tardily as Faust, has at last come to recognise the horrific vileness of his actions. The theme of atavism reaches its conclusion as Kurtz judges the nature of his past gratifications; and as for the theme of the hollow men – well, this hollow man proves finally to have just sufficient residual morality within him to be able to see how

hideously, for want of moral principle, he had succumbed to the jungle's voices. In this last respect, we may notice that whether he "succumbed to" or "opted for" the jungle can be a matter of evaluation of one event rather than a matter of choice between contrasting events. A father may without self-contradiction say, in reference to one event, both "My son chose to begin cigarette-smoking" and "My son succumbed to cigarette-smoking"; and though the former statement might imply approval (perhaps continuing "and I knew he was no longer a child") while the latter might imply disapproval (perhaps continuing "and he has persisted in this filthy habit"), both valuations can consistently be made by one man. Unfortunately for lovers of thematic unison and moral clarity, however, Marlow's responses to Kurtz's last words indicate an incompatible diversity of facts as well as of appraisals. Consider the following range.

Marlow suggests that "The horror!" means: (a) that Kurtz judges his own past actions to be horrible, and this is "a moral victory"; (b) that Kurtz judges to be horrible but also *desirable* the temptations of the jungle: the whisper has "the strange commingling of desire and hate",[71] and therefore is not a moral victory after all, it seems; (c) that Kurtz deems horrible the inner natures of all mankind: "no eloquence could have been so withering to one's belief in mankind as his final burst of sincerity", and his stare "penetrate[d] all the hearts that beat in the darkness";[72] and (d) that Kurtz deems horrible the whole universe: "that wide and immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe ..... 'The horror!' "[73]

All these readings of so ambiguous a cry are individually possible: but Marlow offers them insistently, emphatically, and as a conglomerate, without showing awareness of their contradictory aspects. Even the remarkable Kurtz cannot simultaneously affirm and deny a moral judgement. If a conjuror produces four rabbits from a hat, we may be greatly impressed; but if four rabbits leap from the hat after the conjuror has promised one, and throughout the operation he enthusiastically describes each of the four as though it were the promised rabbit, we may sense that the business is being bungled.

Marlow's assertiveness, his tendency to elicit first one meaning and then another from an ambiguity, while talking as though each meaning were exhaustive, is a trait of his character, as we have seen; though at no other point in the text is he so lengthily and declamatorily interpretative as when glossing Kurtz's last words. What is lacking at this point is the feature that would have turned weakness into strength: a further

sceptical interruption by the audience. There is none: here, it seems, Conrad gave him too much rope. Everything that Marlow says is, in its manner, consistent with Marlow's character: we cannot automatically claim that *Conrad* is being over-insistent. But we *can* criticise Conrad for letting Marlow be so unrebukedly over-insistent; and Conrad's irresolution in controlling him suggests that he, like Marlow, is being thrown to and fro between conflicting final valuations of such a character as Kurtz's.

The late Douglas Brown once made the claims that "the horror of Kurtz is in part an evil done upon style" and that we should detect in Marlow's rhetoric the corrupting force of that evil.[74] These claims are partly supported by the tale's "linguistic" theme, but they are not, I think, convincing as a critical defence of Marlow's climactic interpretative flight. They would have been convincing if there had been an interruption criticising that flight, or if Kurtz's own statements had had close stylistic similarities to that rhetoric: but most of Kurtz's *quoted* statements have nothing of Marlow's fluently adjectival magniloquence but rather a testy curtness, e.g.: "Don't tell me. Save *me*! Why, I've had to save you. You are interrupting my plans now."[75] It is certainly true that Kurtz's *reputed* words have Marlowesque affinities: in describing Kurtz's report, for instance, Marlow says:

> "..... 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."[76]

However, although some valuable functions are served by our being reminded that Marlow's facility of utterance has connections with Kurtz's, it is self-defeating, thematically, if we sense the facile in the very words with which Marlow emphasises Kurtz's significance: for this devalues the significance of the sensed connections. Each of the various meanings of Kurtz's "The horror!" relates to many of the most effective parts of the preceding narrative, but when Marlow is attempting to persuade us of the general importance of the phrase, over-statement weakens Marlow's credibility. He says: "Perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible."[77] In striving to persuade us of the specially privileged nature (wise, true

and sincere) of Kurtz's last words, Marlow has defeated his own ends, partly by the extremity of the conjecture ("all" the wisdom? "all" truth? "all" sincerity?) and partly because his postulation of a general privilege ("we" share it) comes so soon after the somewhat contradictory information that when Marlow was at death's door he "found with humiliation that probably [he] would have nothing to say". There is, however, a partly self-deflating recovery of intelligence when Marlow adds: "Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry ....."

It is not surprising, then, that critical interpretations of Kurtz's character should exhibit such extreme divergences. As examples of such divergence we may contrast the following pronouncements. One critic, Robert F. Haugh, says:

> Conrad's hero may leap high into the rarefied air as does Jim, or plunge deep into the darkness of the pit as does Kurtz; in his remarkable actions he defines the mortal condition, and in his last moment of vision he sees all the scheme of the universe; and we share it in a moment of tragic exaltation. But for most of us fidelity to household gods is the clue to "how to be"; our leaky boilers hold us to surface truths, even as we learn the meaning of life from the moral adventurers who go to their deaths at the far rims of the universe.[78]

Another critic, Douglas Brown again, says:

> It seems perverse and sentimental to attribute to anyone except Marlow the notion that Kurtz represents a character to be admired, or his end some sort of "moral victory": a Marlow, moreover, recording the disorder and fascination remembered from a state of nervous collapse. Yet a good deal of criticism appears to suppose simply this to be Conrad's own view of the matter.[79]

Brown's comment will remind us of the Kurtz who is described as a "hollow sham" and who maintains his avarice and imperceptive egotism; Haugh's comment will remind us that there is a sort of admiration which is not so much a matter of moral approval as of fearful awe before the man who by the sheer intense extremism of his conduct questions the very foundations of any structure of moral values: an aspect of Kurtz which seems to contribute to the very "state of nervous collapse" in

Marlow to which Brown refers. In emphasising now the hollowness of Kurtz, now his self-condemnation, now his Faustian and occult aspects, Marlow seems to be again and again casting a net of moral evaluation over a Kurtz who in one sense will always elude the mesh, precisely because he is the protean mnemonic of an arbitrary quality about the relationship of morality to experience. Such is the effect of Conrad's struggle to make Kurtz's nature, as apprehended by Marlow, the focus and resolution of all the themes through which the tale has explored the paradoxes of human morality, psychology and rationality.

To sum up this stage of the discussion:

As a characterisation, Kurtz splits under extreme and counter-acting thematic pressures; and Marlow was licensed to utter insistent self-contradictions by an author whose imagination was almost at buckling-point because of the contradictory needs to make a climactic assessment of Kurtz while yet preserving the multiplicity of moral ironies dependent on a highly ambiguous character.

vii. (b) *The Harlequin*

The enigmas presented by the Russian "harlequin" who serves Kurtz are altogether easier to solve. His bizarrely multicoloured clothing, for example, has ample explanation, naturalistically and thematically. He's a lone adventurer who begs here and borrows there, and he has had to patch his clothes with bits and pieces that he took from Kurtz's storehouse: the stitching, meticulous, reminds us of the way he had repaired Towson's *Inquiry*. The clothing aptly suggests the garb of the Commedia dell'Arte's harlequin, for the Russian is comic in his blindness to reality, in his readiness to be gulled by Kurtz's words. The garb may also remind us, parodically, of the coat of many colours worn by Joseph the dreamer and seer (and if Joseph was despised by his brothers, the Russian is despised as an interloper by the other "pilgrims"); in its medley of colours, it may recall to us the patchwork of colours on the map of Africa at the beginning of the narrative; in its theatricality, it preserves the sense of the farcical absurdity of events in the Congo; and in its idiosyncratic gaiety it functions admirably, simply by presenting an unexpected splash of colour in the descriptive scheme, just as the man himself, in his innocent absurdity, offsets the squalid and sinister absurdity of the other Europeans. The little theme of "stepping into another man's shoes", which we have previously noted, is

completed when Marlow presents a pair of his own shoes to the Russian. (As in the tale 'The Secret Sharer', in which the narrator gives his sun-hat, as protection, to the lone exile from the law who is about to swim away to a tropical island, the gift seems tantamount to a blessing bestowed by one outsider on another, contrasting, outsider.) As the meticulously-sewn but frail patchwork-clothing suggests, he is a mixture of the sound and the unsound, both a seaman with a respect for the workmanlike and an adventurer with a reckless and imperceptive audacity. His hero-worship of Kurtz entails an astonishing readiness to gloss over Kurtz's perversity. We are told that the Russian is the son of an arch-priest: perhaps he found a father-figure in the Kurtz who preaches rapt sermons. And the fact that he is a Russian may remind us of Conrad's later warnings (in 'Autocracy and War') that the Russian nature has become conditioned to submissive acceptance of despotic authority. Nevertheless, amid so much cynical self-seeking, he has at least served Kurtz with loyalty and affection. He is admired by Marlow for his youthful courage, altruism and emotional vivacity, and for a general "glamour": which reminds us of the undiscriminating way in which the Marlow of 'Youth' had exploited the nostalgia of the middle-aged for their younger past. Here, "The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags ..... There he was gallantly, thoughtlessly alive ..... I was seduced into something like admiration – like envy. Glamour urged him on, glamour kept him unscathed."[80] (The word "glamour" almost appears to give the status of a guardian angel to Marlow's own relish for the boy.) He is a selfless fellow; but Marlow discriminates clearly between his good qualities and their unthinking misdirection: "I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. ..... I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far."[81]

In keeping with the tale's tentacular principle, the encounter with the harlequin anticipates, unexpectedly, the encounter with the Intended; and by duplicating in her the harlequin's quality of imperceptive devotion, Conrad implies the bitter general rule that the greater one's idealistic altruism, the greater will be one's blindness to reality. Perhaps that was one meaning of Kurtz's painting of the torch-bearing but blindfolded figure.

vii. (c) *The Intended*

One of the features that makes Marlow's eventual meeting with the Intended an ironic *tour de force* is that, through him, Kurtz is guaranteed a victory, whether Marlow chooses to reveal *or* to conceal Kurtz's last words. Kurtz's empire is symbolically extended, whichever choice Marlow makes. If Marlow tells the truth about those words, he has to tell the truth about Kurtz's character: and as a consequence, the passionate devotion of the Intended would be shattered, and one of the few islands of naïve idealism in the world would be conquered. On the other hand, by actually choosing to lie to her, he extends the empire of lies of which Kurtz is a symbolic centre: Marlow had long previously said that he could not stand lies because of their "taint of death". Marlow's lie ("The last word he pronounced was – your name") could be interpreted as an ultimate horror in its implication that loving idealism can only survive in ignorance of reality: hence his sense of the enormity of what he has done. ("It seemed to me that the house would collapse before I could escape, that the heavens would fall upon my head.") It can also be regarded in a common-sensical manner as an understandable, consolatory white lie: hence Marlow's "But nothing happened. The heavens do not fall for such a trifle."[82] (Again we notice Marlow's characteristic trait of giving over-lavishly with one hand, and taking back, as if in a recovery of sceptical intelligence, with the other.)

In so many ways, this last conversation is an astonishing scenario of black comedy. The Intended rapturously utters romantic cliché after romantic cliché ("It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. ..... Who was not his friend that had heard him speak once? ..... He drew men towards him by what was best in them. ..... His words, at least, have not died. ..... He died as he lived"): and every cliché is sardonically demolished by the reality it recalls.

Again, the visual ironies give, *in principle*, impeccable support to the oral ironies. Amid a proliferation of imagery of whiteness and blackness, light and darkness, a salient feature is that the glowing whiteness of her forehead is being steadily encompassed, in the twilight, by the night. On Marlow's entry to the drawing-room he sees "a grand piano ..... with dark gleams on the flat surfaces like a sombre and polished sarcophagus": perhaps he thinks of a sarcophagus in particular because the piano has reminded him of the dead Kurtz, a one-time musician; certainly the simile increases our sense of Kurtz's sinister and pervasive presence. Again, it is in principle a superb visual irony that when the

Intended puts out her arms as though towards the lover whom she imagines, her gesture recalls that of a savage who had "stretched tragically her bare arms" after Kurtz as the steamer carried him away.

I have repeatedly used the phrase "in principle", because although the conception of the scene has such virtuosity as to make one's eyes prickle with admiration, the embodiment of the conception is marred in two ways, both of which stem from Marlow's loquacity of commentary. The first snag is that by this stage in the tale, the reader has had quite an extensive training in the art of detecting ironies; and it is at times, therefore, rather irritating when Marlow elaborately points those ironies out to us. For example, the connection in gesture between the Intended and the native mistress is over-indulgently proclaimed: "I shall see her too, a tragic and familiar Shade, resembling in this gesture another one, tragic also, and bedecked with powerless charms, stretching bare brown arms over the glitter of the infernal stream, the stream of darkness."[83] Some of the components of the statement are telling: one woman had tangible charms, the other had charms of character, and both have been powerless; and the references to the "familiar Shade" and "the infernal stream" sustain the half-ironic, half-grave, pattern of epic allusions: for as bearer of Kurtz's body or of his memory, Marlow has a Charontic rôle. But these components come in a sentence with an incantatory surge, and the main purpose of the incantation is to persuade us to accept the verdict "tragic": a verdict which is much too simple even for its immediate context.

The second weakening-factor is related to the first. The cutting force of the dialogue, the potency of the black comedy of the scene, stems from the way in which a harsh reality undercuts the Intended's romantic clichés. But Marlow's own commentary on her is almost as full of romantic clichés as her words. ("I perceived she was one of those creatures that are not the playthings of Time. ..... Her forehead, smooth and white, remained illumined by the unextinguishable light of belief and love. ....."[84]) Our knowledge of Kurtz makes many of her statements dramatically ironic, but Marlow, in describing his own impressions of her, shows a determination to make her theatrically tragic; and this theatrical quality is increased largely by the constant manipulation of the lighting, which plays on the Intended like a spotlight on a leading actress.

Marlow's extreme embarrassment at this interview is compounded by the fact that when he had first seen her portrait, he had experienced a stirring of vague, ill-defined emotions which had included not only curiosity, not only a sense of responsibility, but also, possibly, love: love

for a girl whose beauty seemed so perfectly expressive of truth. Hence his decision to return the portrait and the letters to her personally.

> "She struck me as beautiful – I mean she had a beautiful expression. I know that the sunlight can be made to lie too, yet one felt that no manipulation of light and pose could have conveyed the delicate shade of truthfulness upon those features. She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself. I concluded I would go and give her back her portrait and those letters myself. Curiosity? Yes; and also some other feeling perhaps."[85]

So there is, latently, a personal romantic element when Marlow calls on the Intended: he is visiting an intriguingly beautiful, bereaved young lady, who is eager for companionship in mourning; and he is in a position of power, for whether he tells her the truth about Kurtz or not, she is in an emotionally exploitable situation. But his embarrassment grows with the recognition that the preservation of her beauty of "truthfulness" depends on his connivance in the extension, by falsehood, of ignorance.

Possibly we are meant to sense that a minor tragedy of "what might have been" for Marlow is entailed by the tragedy of the Intended. Unfortunately, by the end of the dialogue, the reader is likely to feel that he is witnessing melodrama rather than tragedy:

> "I heard a light sigh and then my heart stood still, stopped dead short by an exulting and terrible cry, by the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain."[86]

It is a cry that would tax the resources of any actress.

vii. (d) *The Aftermath*

> Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. This is because the plot requires to be wound up. Why is this necessary?
>
> (E. M. Forster: *Aspects of the Novel.*)

Marlow ends his narrative, and we return to the anonymous primary narrator.

> Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director suddenly. I raised my head.

> The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.

One effect of this concluding paragraph is of an accomplished recovery of control by Conrad. Relative weakness at one part of the tale may augment the sensed strength of another part. It may be useful, in this respect, for us to recall the distinction between a traditionally linear, climactic narrative form and a relatively cyclical form. We could correlate the strains in Marlow's story with the pressures towards the climactic: pressures operating when Marlow had been over-insistent on the importance of Kurtz's last words and of the encounter with the Intended. Conrad, however, has power in reserve, after all, to accommodate the climactic pressures finally within a cyclical form. The return to the yawl qualifies all Marlow's interpretative assertions. He is "in the pose of a meditating Buddha"; and "nobody moved for a time": as though all are brooding on meanings still to be formulated. Like the Ancient Mariner, it seems, Marlow has overcome by his questions if not his assertions the resistance of a once-restless and impatient audience. Even the fact that until the Director speaks the anonymous narrator's head is lowered contributes to the picture of a group that was either in continuing meditation or else, like Coleridge's Wedding Guest who "went, like one that hath been stunn'd / And is of sense forlorn", in the blank state from which they may emerge sadder and wiser men.[87]

The Wedding Guest, however, having been delayed by a tale commending love to all man's kindred, missed the wedding-feast of his next of kin. The words of the Director remind Marlow's audience that while listening to a narrative which (amongst many other things) commends a vigilant awareness of man's multiple responsibilities, they have "lost the first of the ebb" for which they were waiting. In recalling them to their immediate task, the Director is a little like the manager whose shouts had recalled Marlow to the steamer when he had been preoccupied by the enigma of Towson's *Inquiry*: and the effect is of a hinted, tenuous connection between even this innocent-seeming pleasure-cruise which is about to begin and that macabre journey that Marlow had made so long ago.

The paragraph's final emphasis on the encompassing darkness has an inevitable yet virtually unparaphrasable effectiveness. It refers us cyclically back to the past – to the narrator's early and too-sanguine

account of luciferous expeditions from the Thames, and to all the sinister connotations of "darkness" in Marlow's tale; and it does this in such a way as to provide the indeterminate ground of ominous predictions about, perhaps, the eventual triumph of the darkness of men's hearts; about, perhaps, the annihilation of men by their greater environments, the evolutionary process and the solar system itself; and about, perhaps, the finally unconquerable complicity of all the unknowns, geographical, psychological, moral and metaphysical, that challenge exploring men. My "perhapses" paraphrase the narrator's "seemed" ("The tranquil waterway ..... seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness"): but certainly, since "the offing" is "barred by a black bank of clouds", stormy weather of one sort or another may well lie in wait for the crew of the yawl. And this vista, in which the visual present so strongly implies the historical future, reflects the sombre and chastened mood of the un-named man who not so long ago was extolling the "greatness" that had "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."

In one of her letters, George Eliot wrote:

> Conclusions are the weak point of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.[88]

In the ending of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad has found a way to offer a contrast which is no negation, a culmination which does not truncate the continuum of life, and a conclusion which is also a commencement.

6

VARIOUS THEMES: LINGUISTIC, MORAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL

i. LINGUISTIC

> Words have killed images or are concealing them. A civilisation of words is a civilisation distraught.
>
> (Ionesco: *Journal.*)

> Neurath's comment on the famous last sentence of the *Tractatus* "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" was that "One must indeed be silent, but not about anything" and Ramsey pointed out, in another context, that "What you can't say, you can't say and you can't whistle it either."
>
> (Ayer: 'Reflections on Existentialism'.)

i. (a) *Functionary titles*

ONLY THREE CHARACTERS in the tale, Marlow, Kurtz and Fresleven, are named; a few are identified by relational titles: the aunt, the Intended, the manager's uncle; and the majority have vocational or functionary titles: "the Director of Companies", "the Lawyer", "the Accountant", "the clerk", "the doctor", "the Company's chief accountant", "the manager", "the brickmaker", "the pilgrims". Some of these functionary titles are explicitly or tacitly ironic: the brickmaker makes no bricks; the pilgrims are on a profane pilgrimage; the manager is morally guilty of various forms of mis-management; and the company's accountant lets a myopic fidelity to accounting absolve him from important forms of moral accountability. A more general effect of these titles is to preserve the prominence of the tale's discussion of the work ethic, in which we are variously reminded of betrayals of vocational responsibility, of the evasion of moral responsibility as a consequence of the ritualisation of work, and of the betrayal of individuality through mechanical rôle-playing.[1] Marlow says:

> "I don't like work – no man does – but I like what is in the work – the chance to find yourself. Your own reality – for yourself, not for others – what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means."

But the tale reminds us quite as forcefully that men may lose themselves, as well as find themselves, in work; and that, given the exploitative aspects of a capitalist economy, even diligently loyal labour may entail some betrayal of our fellow-men.

In 1890, the respected precursor of Freud, William James, had written in his *Principles of Psychology*:

> Habit is ..... the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor ..... It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again.[2]

"..... like plaster". Hairdressers' dummies were made of plaster; and the company's accountant resembles one. "Habit is ..... the enormous fly-wheel": and a fly-wheel, though it may stabilise a machine, may also (as the descriptions of the Outer and Central Stations remind us) prolong the momentum of a machine that is running destructively out of control. The functionary titles constantly remind us of the inescapable extent of that machine.

i. (b) *Jargon and cliché: language which can veil or falsify reality and may thus sanction brutality*

In *How to Read* (1931), Ezra Pound said:

> When ..... the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e., becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a lesson not yet half learned.[3]

Alas, Pound's feet are in the very mire from which he is trying to lift civilisation: his coarseningly "virile" style includes some "slush" (e.g., "the whole machinery ..... goes to pot"); and there is something "excessive or bloated" about his assertion of a simple cause-and-effect

relationship between linguistic corruption and rampant social corruption. Yet the element of truth within Pound's hyperbolic claim remains evident, and it is forcefully anticipated by *Heart of Darkness*; and the reader of the tale will even be well prepared for Wittgenstein's realisation that "our language determines our view of reality, because we see things through it".[4]

The French ship is conducting "one of their wars" by shelling "enemies"; the natives of the chain-gang are "criminals"; a debased native is "one of the reclaimed"; the "Workers" are generally destructive rather than constructive, and often slothful as well; Kurtz's victims are "rebels"; and Kurtz's megalomanic depravity is, according to the manager, the "vigorous action" for which the time was not ripe: "unsound method". If the Europeans were presented as consciously hypocritical, the tale would be less disturbing, for conscious hypocrisy entails the recognition of the truth. But what we see is a credited lie, a sincerity in the use of purposive jargon for destructive action. In the case of the manager's assessment of Kurtz's "methods",[5] we can see the man groping to formulate jargonic official euphemisms and believing them as they come to formulation – a Kafkaesque malady; and repeatedly we are shown men for whom the world is re-created in the image of the falsehoods that sanction destruction and callousness, and whose falsehoods cohere in a logical structure – like the "sane box" which, according to the narrator of *The Shadow-Line*, would continue to be made throughout the madness of the carpenter who believed himself to be King of Jerusalem.[6]

Too often the follies of twentieth-century history are the gauge of the durable wisdom of Conrad's fiction. During the American involvement in Vietnam, for example, murdered civilians were, officially, "wasted" merely; the poisoning of the land was "interdiction" and "defoliation"; commanders were "advisers"; bombardment was "reconnaissance"; and the war was just a series of "protective measures", since officially the United States had declared no war. Similarly, such titles as "People's Republic" or "Democratic Republic" are now customarily applied to their opposites – to tyrannies of one kind or another. History plagiarises Conrad's Orwellian intuitions.

As Conrad recognised, the appropriate response to jargon is irony: for the aim of jargon is to lull one into rejecting reality for appearance, whereas irony constantly alerts one into discriminating between appearance and reality, word and fact; and hence the appropriateness of a narrator with Marlow's temperament. However, as we saw when

examining Marlow's descriptions of the Intended, and as we have been reminded by the phrasing of Pound's statement, certain risks are run by the writer whose themes include that of the degeneration of language into cliché or jargon: stylistic lapses will be the more prominent and more damaging than in a work without such a theme. Marlow's tendency towards occasional rhetorical over-insistence is the more conspicuous in a work in which he himself has said of Kurtz's report, "It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think",[7] and in which a journalist has said of Kurtz: "Heavens! how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings. He had faith – don't you see? – he had the faith. He could get himself to believe anything – anything."[8] Nevertheless, this example reminds us of how greatly Conrad's successes in pursuing a rather perilous theme outweigh the failures. The possibility that Kurtz could through self-crediting eloquence have become "a splendid leader of an extreme party" is made the more plausible by our having encountered previously so many characters whose lives are guided by credited nonsense. And in suggesting via the journalist that Kurtz might have been a successful extremist "on the popular side", Conrad is not sneering at socialism, but rather offering a warning against the most oppressive of Cæsarisms: one which through written or spoken demagogy – possibly sincere demagogy – is able to manipulate in its support the broad masses of the populace.[9] Even on his stretcher, Kurtz, rather like the gaping politicians in Francis Bacon's portraits, "open[s] his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind". When Conrad was writing the tale, Hitler was a nine-year-old schoolboy.

ii. ATAVISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND "SATANIC MYSTICISM": NORDAU AND RUSSELL

It is possible that the initial idea of Kurtz's psychology was prompted by a section of Max Nordau's *Degeneration.* In 1898, Conrad received from Nordau a written tribute to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and commented:

> Praise is sweet, no matter whence it comes. ..... The expounding attitude is funny, – and characteristic too. He is a Doctor and a Teacher, – no doubt about it. But for all that he is wondrous kind.[10]

The guarded quality of this comment ("no matter whence it comes") strongly suggests that Conrad had read *Degeneration*, Nordau's most controversial work, which had been published only three years previously. Some of his literary views were anathema to Conrad: for example, Nordau condemned not only Ibsen, Ruskin, Morris and Wilde, but also the "realists" and "impressionists", among whom he included Flaubert, for displaying, in their works, pernicious, corrupting, "degenerate" tendencies: better *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he felt, than *Madame Bovary*.

Nordau preferred the Lamarckian theory of evolution to the Darwinian, but, as with Freud's Darwinism, Nordau's Lamarckism encouraged him to seek for the lingering survivals of the savage, primitive and pre-moral within the natures of "civilised" men.[11] I have cited Nordau's linkage of the *fin du globe* feeling with the *fin de siècle*: and his gloom had there been occasioned by his supposed discovery of the abominable extent and influence of atavistic "degeneracy". He devoted particular attention to the "highly-gifted degenerate":

> "The degenerate," says Legrain, "may be a genius. A badly balanced mind is susceptible of the highest conceptions, while, on the other hand, one meets in the same mind with traits of meanness and pettiness all the more striking from the fact that they co-exist with the most brilliant qualities." ..... "As regards their intellect, they can," says Roubinovitch, "attain to a high degree of development, but from a moral point of view their existence is completely deranged ..... A degenerate will employ his brilliant faculties quite as well in the service of some grand object as in the satisfaction of the basest propensities." Lombroso has cited a large number of undoubted geniuses who were equally undoubted mattoids, graphomaniacs, or pronounced lunatics. ..... The "higher degenerate" ....., just as he occasionally exhibits gigantic bodily stature ....., has some mental gift exceptionally developed at the cost, it is true, of the remaining faculties, which are wholly or partially atrophied. ..... I do not share Lombroso's opinion that highly-gifted degenerates are an active force in the progress of mankind. They corrupt and delude; they do, alas! frequently exercise a deep influence, but this is always a baneful one. ..... They, likewise, are leading men along the paths they themselves have found to new goals; but these goals are abysses or waste places. They are guides to swamps like will-o'-the-wisps, or to ruin like the ratcatcher of Hammelin.[12]

Just as Nordau's character-study of the "ego-maniac" later influenced the characterisation in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*,[13] so this moralistic account of the hypothetical "highly-gifted degenerate" seems to have suggested a psychological basis for the character of Kurtz. In a way that is much more reminiscent of Nordau than anticipatory of Freud, Conrad emphasises an atavistic response to man's evolutionary heritage (rather than some complex resulting from traumas in his upbringing) as the key to Kurtz's decline. Kurtz, true to type, has the "traits of meanness and pettiness" co-existing with "brilliant qualities"; he has the salient quality of "genius" without moral stability; and he even appears to have the "gigantic bodily stature" that Nordau mentions, for, to Marlow, he "looked at least seven feet long".[14] Above all, Kurtz signally possesses the Pied Piper ("ratcatcher of Hammelin") attribute of this proto-Hitlerian type, fascinating Marlow and the savages, the Intended and the harlequin.

However, if Nordau provided the "psychological" basis, Conrad has in his treatment of it criticised the moralistic confidence implicit in such punditry, chiefly by the tale's hints that a quality of irrationality inheres even in what the Nordaus of this world would regard as civilised normality. In this respect, a cogent commentary is provided by a philosopher compared with whom Nordau is an ephemeral polemicist. In 1961, Bertrand Russell, who had once been a close friend of Conrad's, told me:

> I think I have always felt that there were two levels, one that of science and common sense, and another, terrifying, subterranean and chaotic, which in some sense held more truth than the everyday view. You might describe this as a Satanic mysticism. I have never been convinced of its truth, but in moments of intense emotion it overwhelms me. It is capable of being defended on the most pure intellectual grounds – for example, by Eddington's contention that the laws of physics only *seem* to be true because of the things that we choose to notice.

Russell added:

> I suppose that the feeling I had for Conrad depended on his combination of passion and pessimism ..... but the experience, while it lasted, was too intense for analysis.[15]

We may notice the connection (even in imagery) between Bertrand Russell's somewhat Kurtzian "Satanic mysticism" and the acuteness of his comment in 1956 on *Heart of Darkness*:

> I felt ..... that [Conrad] thought of civilised and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooled lava which at any moment might break and let the unwary sink into fiery depths.[16]

And the full ambiguity of Russell's view of the "fiery depths" is shown by the imagery with which he describes his friendship with Conrad:

> We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, till gradually both reached the central fire. It was an experience unlike any other that I have known. We looked into each other's eyes, half appalled and half intoxicated to find ourselves together in such a region.[17]

The "volcanic" paradigm (safe-but-fragile crust over dangerous-but-powerful depths) is an intriguing one, because just as destructive lava can cool to form a surface which is safe for walking and possibly fertile for crops, so, by analogy, the features of social and moral life which seem least barbaric can be considered to have developed from a primitive tribe's most elemental urges to combine for attack and defence. In this way it is a more seductive paradigm than that implicit in the cliché that civilisation is a mere veneer over savagery (which invites the response: Who did the veneering, and how?), though in both cases there is a clear ascription of greater "substantiality" or "truth" to the uncivilised than to the civilised. We can elude seduction, however, by alertness to the genetic fallacy, the fallacy (which would tempt no carpenter) of assuming that because the oak tree grew from an acorn, the oak tree is "essentially" only an acorn. The child is father of the man, but no jury will exonerate me from assaulting my neighbour if I plead that I am essentially a large child. I may, of course, be less likely to assault my neighbour if novelists suggest that such conduct is childish rather than virile; and nations may (infinitesimally) be less likely to act barbarically if they are reminded that imperial conquest has analogies with tribal warfare.

Nordau had contemptuously compared "highly-gifted degenerates" to the ratcatcher of Hammelin; and Russell's readiness to avow himself a "Satanic mystic" draws attention to a paradoxical source of the power

that a Pied Piper called Kurtz exerts over Marlow and over the tale's commentators: the paradox of the virtue of evil.

iii. THE VIRTUE OF EVIL

In a deservedly notorious judgement of Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot said:

> In the middle nineteenth century, ... an age of bustle, programmes, platforms, scientific progress, humanitarianism and revolutions which improved nothing, an age of progressive degradation, Baudelaire perceived that what really matters is Sin and Redemption. ..... To a mind observant of the post-Voltaire France ..... the recognition of the reality of Sin is a New Life; and the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living. .....
>
> It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors, from statesmen to thieves, is that they are not men enough to be damned. Baudelaire was man enough for damnation.[18]

The argument has a speculation-provoking paradoxicality. Would God perhaps, after reading the essay, send to Heaven the man who is "man enough for damnation"? Or, since that man has blasphemously put secular salvation ("significance") before heavenly salvation, would God send him to a region of Hell appropriately replete with "the ennui of modern life"? Since Sloth and Gluttony are deadly sins, would a manly devotion to either of them guarantee us the glory of man's capacity for damnation while redeeming us from the ennui of, say, a devotion to humanitarianism?

To an agnostic, Eliot's claims may seem as speciously entertaining as some sophistical Wildean *jeu d'esprit*; but they are an index to Eliot's most earnest preoccupations, and they provide a commentary on much of *The Waste Land* and of Eliot's early mature poetry, pervaded as those works are by his feeling that with the secularisation of morals and with the consequent absence of a sense of sin and virtue ("Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over"),[19] meaninglessness pervades human experience as surely as ennui haunts lust. The comments on Baudelaire reveal an

unholy union between the Christian and the Romantic traditions. Dante's God sent the morally nondescript (those who lived without praise or blame) to the most ignominious of dooms: Hell proper was too good for them – that was for real sinners – so they had to congregate dismally on the fringes of Hell, in the dreary Vestibule. From the Romantic tradition comes an over-valuation of sincere, intense, single-minded, passionate experience: better a bow of burning gold and arrows of desire than a prudential (or humane) reluctance to be the owner of lethal weapons.

The comments on Baudelaire can also be applied to much of the writing of Graham Greene, who in *Brighton Rock*, for example, suggests that the guilty copulation of Rose and Pinkie, fraught with a sense of sin, is better (by "virtue" of its sinfulness, which makes it more significant) than the secularly hedonistic copulation of Ida and Phil Corkery. To scourge God is to recognise Him; to ignore Him is to turn life into a limbo.

As we can see, one reason for the admiration of both Eliot and Greene for Conrad lies in the extent to which Conrad's presentation of Kurtz anticipates their preoccupation with "the virtue of evil". Kurtz's "stress and passion" make him seem more alive than the morally less corrupt, and his "incredible religion"[20] gives him a Satanic prestige by contrast with the mere colourless and undramatic figures of corruption. If one wished to pursue family resemblances, one could say that Kurtz's distant relations include Melville's Ahab, Byron's Cain and Milton's Satan (certainly the Satan that Blake perceived), and that his descendants include Sartre's Goetz and Camus's Clamence; but a more pressing task is, I think, to isolate the fallacies which are central to Eliot's judgement of Baudelaire and which have had continued currency. In an essay published in 1962, for example, David Daiches (who is assuredly no Anglo-Catholic) made a comment on *Heart of Darkness* which closely echoes the phrasing of Eliot's judgement. Discussing Marlow's decision not to reveal the truth to the Intended, Daiches wrote:

> The truth "would have been too dark – too dark altogether" because it would have revealed the desperate paradox at the heart of civilisation and of moral life generally – that only a truly moral man is capable of real depravity and that most men have not principle enough to be damned. This makes nonsense of the principles on which civilisation is supposed to be run ..... [21]

Here is an admirably paradoxical comment on a part of a designedly paradoxical text; but if, instead of mirroring paradox with paradox, we look closely at some of the assumptions and terms that are involved, we may partly resolve some of the confusions which perennially attend the judgement of "attractively evil" characters in literature and in life.

We sometimes overlook the fact that we habitually use the word "moral" in two distinct ways, one being morally neutral and the other being morally favourable. Suppose that an angler has just got a bite and is starting to reel in a fish from a lake. At the same moment, a child who is swimming in the lake shrieks for help and disappears under the surface. The angler stands, scratching his head in a worried manner, glancing now at the bending rod in his hand and now at the distant swirls where the child has vanished. We infer that he is making a "moral" choice: meaning that whatever the outcome may be, the man is in the process of choosing between different courses of action. But if the man now throws down the rod, dives into the water and swims towards the child, we may infer that he has made a "moral" choice: meaning in this case that he has not only chosen between different courses of action, but also chosen a course of which we approve. If the man had decided not to go to the rescue, then we could without contradiction call this decision "moral" in the former sense but "immoral" in the sense that we disapprove of it. The statement that "only a moral man is capable of depravity" is a seeming paradox which, as we differentiate between these meanings of "moral", dwindles into the mere tautology that only a man who chooses is capable of a bad choice. Since it is also true that only a man who chooses is capable of a good choice, there seems no reason to conclude that the statement "makes nonsense of the principles on which civilisation is supposed to be run".

Daiches' phrasing, however, seems to require a further stage of analysis. "Only a *truly* moral man is capable of *real* depravity ....." (my italics). If "truly moral" means "morally good, not merely with a capacity for making choices between good and bad", then the statement may still be resolved into tautology if we take "capable of real depravity" to mean "eligible for transformation from a morally good to a morally very bad state"; and the consolatory counterpart-tautology is "but then, only a truly moral man is capable of real virtue".

Daiches' paradox concludes: "..... most men have not principle enough to be damned." So a third stage of analysis is required. We could re-phrase his whole statement like this: Damnation is the punishment of

an evil man; an evil man is one who, having an intense awareness of good and evil principles, deliberately chooses the latter; the majority of men, however, not having this strong awareness, or using criteria of the relatively good and relatively bad rather than of Good and Evil, are unfit for damnation. In this reading, Daiches' case about Kurtz coincides neatly with Eliot's about Baudelaire, and here we need to filter out two fallacies.

The first fallacy is that of "the virtue of intensity": a fallacy which operates in the words "an intense awareness" in our paraphrase. Like Jonson's Volpone, Kurtz has an intensity, an emotional vividness, which is lacking in many of the other corrupt characters we see. A man may be intensely, passionately bad, or intensely, passionately good. Passionate intensity is in itself morally neutral: neither good nor bad, although – and because – it may augment good or bad qualities. (It may, of course, be mistaken for a virtue by men in tedious sedentary occupations or by spectators who over-value the spectacular. Furthermore, an extreme romantic may choose to reject all conventional usages of "good" and "bad" and ascribe the term "goodness" only to passionate or intense experience of any kind: but with him, we know where we are; whereas the judgements that now engage us draw their paradoxical force from their attempt to ascribe some conventional sense of "good" to actions which in some other conventional sense are "bad".)

The second fallacy is that of "the virtue of evil" itself. The examples of Baudelaire, Eliot and Greene suggest that it has particular appeal to those who, oppressed by a sense of ennui and meaninglessness, yearn for faith; and since they yearn for passionate intensity to relieve the ennui, this fallacy is usually intertwined with the previous one. If I refer to a man as "evil", I may only be saying in an emphatic way that I disapprove strongly of him; but since the word is a key-term in the Christian religion, I may be taken to mean that the man is not merely to be considered bad in secular terms but also to be considered as a participant in the supernatural badness emanating from Satan. If one is persuaded of the existence of the latter form of badness (let us call it "Evil", with a capital), it follows, tautologically, that one is persuaded of the existence of God. Thus, if one is searching for faith, a crucial step may be acquisition of a sense of Evil: a consolatory contrast to the sense of the secularly bad. The man of Evil can be regarded as moving in a dimension of moral absolutes and metaphysical entities: he is watched over by a God whose wrath may be tempered by the reflection that it is less wounding to be defied than to be ignored. Better to be Evil than

merely bad – or even merely good – in the dimension of the lower, secular morality. (It appears that this creed may more profitably be preached than practised, though Rasputin found it a means to seduction.) The fallacy, aided and abetted by the possibility of confusing "evil", in the secular sense of "very bad", with "Evil", lies in attributing goodness to Evil rather than to the metaphysical scheme which the word "Evil" tautologously implies.

So, far from yielding the conclusion that "this makes nonsense of the principles on which civilisation is supposed to be run", Daiches' paradox yields rather the conclusion that elements of the Christian and Romantic traditions, some tautologies and some ambiguous terms can make imaginatively persuasive a double standard for the assessment of conduct. However sophistical its logical basis, this double standard has an inexhaustible variety of literary uses.

Through contrast with Kurtz, Conrad can emphasise the lack of emotional, imaginative and moral intensity in the experience of the pilgrims; and through the antipathetic fallacy and the association of the "haunting" power of Kurtz with imagery of darkness, Conrad can create an intermittent, almost Manichean, sense of the metaphysically oppressive; but through Marlow, Conrad can provide a point of balance, a moral centre of gravity for want of which *The Waste Land* and *Brighton Rock*, in their scourging of the deficiencies of secular experience, can sometimes appear contrivedly misanthropic. For Marlow has intensity without egotism, imagination without mania, secularity without irresponsibility, and compassion without sentimentality. However, the degree of awe he experiences before the phenomenon of Kurtz is partly due to recognition of the deepest source of that double standard: the sense that when secular man came of age, he disinherited himself from eternity, and that when men alone are moral arbiters, the assumed dignity of the office entails the indignity of extinction.

iv. THE "NIGHT JOURNEY" THEORY

In *Conrad the Novelist*, Professor Guerard claimed that *Heart of Darkness* described a "night journey", and he explained that by this term he referred to "the archetypal myth dramatized in much great literature since the Book of Jonah: the story of an essentially solitary journey involving profound spiritual change in the voyager. In its classical form the journey is a descent into the earth, followed by a return to light."[22] He proceeded to call this myth "a dream": "Very often the dream

appears to be about the introspective process itself: about a risky descent into the preconscious or even unconscious; about a restorative return to the primitive sources of being and an advance through temporary regression."

At its primary and most profound level, he said, Conrad's tale is an account of "the night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self. ..... It little matters what, in terms of psychological symbolism, we call this double or say he represents: whether the Freudian id or the Jungian shadow or more vaguely the outlaw."[23] Marlow has two confrontations with this "double and facet of the unconscious". The first is on the steamboat. "The incorporation and alliance between the two becomes material, and the identification of 'selves'." The second is when Marlow follows Kurtz ashore. And finally, in the sepulchral city, the identification can be completely broken when Marlow lies to the Intended. Professor Guerard concludes: "If the story is not about this deeper region [of the mind], and not about Marlow himself, its length is quite indefensible."

Now any reader would gladly concede, I think, that the tale is strongly "archetypal", that it is in some sense a psychological odyssey, and that there is some correspondence between a perilous journey into a dark region and the exploration of one's unconscious mind as described by both Freud and Jung. The reader may also feel, however, that Professor Guerard's application of his theory recalls unintentionally an archetypal legend about one Procrustes, who mutilated his guests to make them fit his bed. Let us, then, re-consider the elements of this "night journey" theory.

An archetypal pattern is one which is found in protean guises in many narratives of different types. For example: a man makes a perilous journey into a region which is strange and remote from the everyday world (perhaps a region of jungle or forest, a waste land or an underworld), and there he has a testing encounter with some alien being before returning; as a consequence of the encounter, he carries back some sort of trophy: a talisman, or some important knowledge, or a fellow-being. We can find this pattern in the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Admetus and Alcestis, in *The Æneid*, in *Gawain and the Green Knight* and legends of the Grail quest, in popular fiction like Verne's *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, in folk-tales like 'The Devil's Three Hairs', in Ernest Jones's account of Freud's self-analysis, and in jokes cracked in pubs. All the versions are about a quest, but neither a patriotic Roman reading *Æneid* Book 6 nor a bereaved husband reading

the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is likely to feel that the quest is essentially one of psychological self-exploration. The essence of an archetypal pattern is that it has protean adaptability: in different times by different writers it can be related to a diversity of experience and can be fleshed conceptually in many different ways. Unlike other plot-patterns, it will have then a strong *déjà-vu* evocativeness: it will readily remind us of other works, some of which may have great literary merit. But this may lead to comparisons which are not to the work's advantage. *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* will seem more and not less puerile if we remember Dante's journey to the centre of the earth.

As we have noted in an earlier section, commentators can damage an allusive but non-allegoric work by letting the suggestiveness of analogy harden into an inflexibly allegoric exegesis. The better the interpretation of the text, the larger the number of salient narrative facts that interpretation will, in principle, accommodate. The prime weakness of Guerard's theory is that we lose more than we gain by it. For example, if Kurtz is essentially an id-like force within Marlow's psyche, we should gain by electing to refer to Kurtz as "it" rather than "he": but in the act of doing so we deprive Kurtz of almost all moral and emotional significance – and, indeed, of almost all psychological significance too, since what makes Kurtz so interesting is not that, like the id, he has a schematic continuousness of nature, but rather that, like a much more complicated mere man, his character has undergone such important changes during his time in the Congo. If we boldly attempt to press Guerard's interpretation upon all the salient facts of the tale, then the tale rapidly flattens into a senseless monodrama: for if Kurtz is part of Marlow, the Congo along which the latter travels to meet him should, for consistency, be part of Marlow: consequently, the character Marlow has to be regarded as an ego-like facet of some greater Marlow, who in turn contains everything within the narrative, from the jungle and the river to the hippopotamus and the Intended, and accordingly, for want of contrast, vanishes as a significant entity. On the other hand, Guerard cannot consistently support the more modest claim that only in those parts where the writing is most effective is the tale one of psychic self-analysis, for Guerard himself describes as "wearisome" the emphasis on unspeakable rites and unspeakable secrets which he regards as an inevitable outcome of the fact that Conrad is presenting a confrontation with a "facet of the unconscious".[26] Finally, the *point* of the psychic encounter that Guerard postulates seems remarkably nebulous: clients of psycho-analysts may indignantly note that Marlow, if judged by the

account of his return to Brussels, seems to be much closer to neurosis *after* the hypothetical course of analysis than he was before it.

The tale presents as organically interrelated the political and the psychological issues, but in Guerard's interpretation they tend to become alternative, irreconcilable "levels", mutually impoverished through schematic divorce. H.-R. Lenormand has recalled that late in life, Conrad "spoke of Freud with scornful irony" and urged Lenormand to write a novel on "the decline of men who had arrived at certainty".[27] His recollection may deter us from interpreting Marlow's complex narrative in terms of an unproblematic psycho-analytic schema. A further chastening irony is that in criticising Guerard's interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* I have been repeating the warning that Guerard himself gave when discussing *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: "The natural impulse to find single meanings, and so convert symbolism into allegory, must be resisted" (*Conrad the Novelist*, p.110). *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

C. S. Lewis once suggested that in a tale, the plot, which is sequential, is "only ..... a net whereby to catch something else. The real theme may be, and perhaps usually is, something that has no sequence in it, something other than a process and much more like a state or quality. Giantship, otherness, the desolation of space, are examples."[28] We may object that something that has no sequence in it will consequently have little moral life in it. Perhaps, however, we may guardedly adopt his suggestion to the extent of saying that the state caught in *Heart of Darkness* is that of exploring the unknown, or, more particularly, a state of awareness that many different sorts of "darkness" tempt men to exploration, conquest – or into ambush. The tale creates analogies between the following sorts of exploration or attempted conquest: the exploration of the African darkness; the exploration of the geographically unknown in general; the attempted conquest of the savage by the civilised; the exploration, by the conscious mind, of man's unconscious or instinctive nature; the attempt to subordinate to moral order the pre-moral, lawless aspects of man's being; the attempt to subordinate to artistic order the turbulent materials of the artist's imagination, where "there are no policemen, no law, no pressure of circumstances or dread of opinion to keep him within bounds; who then is going to say Nay to his temptations if not his conscience?";[29] and the attempt to catch the nature of things in a net of words. Through the naturalistically-presented personality of Marlow, Conrad is able to co-ordinate the analogies that an archetype can so prolifically breed; and the

reader, observing Marlow, is obliged to sense as integral with the narrative's meaning this very act of co-ordination itself.

v. SOLIPSISM AND DETERMINISM

In talking of the tale as though, centrally, it were about Marlow's unorthodox psychotherapy upon Marlow, Professor Guerard was perhaps encouraged by a misreading of the function of the narrative's solipsistic hints. "We live, as we dream – alone", Marlow tells his audience; the tale often conveys a dream-like, phantasmagoric quality in events; and many of the characters, although fully substantial as fictional creations, seem "not quite real". As Marlow's assertion brings to mind some of Conrad's most characteristic descriptive effects, I propose to look closely at its implications.

Now, the statement "We live, as we dream – alone" has two meanings, which we could call, respectively, the hard option and the soft option. For dramatic impact, of course, Marlow phrases the statement so that the former will be more immediately evident. The hard option is the claim that the world perceived by each man has exactly the same ontological status as the contents of that man's dreams: the apparently objective world is an illusion generated by entirely private experiences. The soft option is the claim that although living and dreaming are common experiences of men, our sense of a community of experience should not lead us to forget that just as no person's dream is exactly, in all its detail, like any other person's, so no man's life-experience is exactly, in all its detail, like anyone else's: given the uniqueness of each living individual, it follows that a given word or thing or event can never mean to one man precisely what it means to another. The hard option is totally subversive; but the soft option can readily be accommodated by the common-sensical position that perfect communication, or utter community of experience, is neither possible nor even desirable: it is sufficient that there should be the generally-viable level of communication and intercourse that common sense assumes to be prevailing. This is a consolatory interpretation of the soft option, and it receives some support from the tale when we reflect that for all Marlow's emphasis on the difficulties of communication, he seems to have communicated his experiences quite forcefully, via the intermediate narrator, to us. There is also, however, a subversive interpretation of the soft option. This interpretation is implicit whenever the tale suggests

that the amount of communication, understanding and community of perception between individuals is far less than the common-sensical man complacently supposes. The more we are reminded that our knowledge of the world depends on senses which have greater fallibility than we often suspect, the more the soft option hardens and may lend support to the hard option.

In the eighteenth century, David Hume was filled with "philosophical melancholy and delirium" by the idea that empiricism leads logically, via the argument from illusion, to solipsism;[30] and in the last hundred years, the idea has beguiled many writers who nevertheless manage, like Hume, to dine and be merry with their friends. The argument goes like this. We rely on our senses for all our knowledge of the external world. Optical illusions, such as the apparent bending of a straight stick in water, remind us that our senses can deceive us. If our senses deceive us some of the time, it is conceivable that they delude us all the time. Therefore we cannot be certain of the objective reality of the world around us; we can be certain only of our subjective cluster of sense-data. This argument has been a mainstay of existentialism, and it has had a venerable variety of literary exponents, though by the nature of the case none of them maintains it with much consistency. Before writing *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad had read Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), in which Marius reflects

> that ..... all that is real in our experience [is] but a series of fleeting impressions: ..... that we are never to get beyond the walls of this closely shut cell of one's own personality; that the ideas we are somehow impelled to form of an outer world, and of other minds akin to our own, are, it may be, but a day-dream.[31]

And in 1893 F. H. Bradley wrote in *Appearance and Reality* the passage which has since become well-known through its citation in the footnotes of *The Waste Land*:

> My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. ..... In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul.

The argument from empiricism to solipsism has been abundantly fruitful,[32] but it is also abundantly illogical. In the first place, my faith that the world is substantially and adequately as common sense assumes it to be rests not on any naïve belief in the infallibility of my senses but rather on the value-judgement that it is good to have one's predictions fulfilled. I know, for example, that predictions based on the assumption that my desk is as objective, hard and heavy as it appears to be have constantly been fulfilled, whereas if I base predictions on the assumption that it is essentially "private" or phantasmagoric they are not fulfilled. Furthermore, the solipsist case thrives on a confusion of terminology. One may talk of the self and the world, and one may talk of sense-data: but since the "sense-data" terminology has the function in philosophical or scientific discourse of permitting descriptions which do not beg the questions entailed by the "self and world" type of terminology, it is as illogical to combine the two terminologies as it would be to attempt simultaneously to wrap and slice a loaf of bread. One may consistently say, "I see such-and-such an object"; one may consistently say, "There is a sense-datum or sense-impression with such-and-such qualities"; but one cannot consistently say, "I have a sense-datum or sense-impression with such-and-such qualities." As A. J. Ayer points out:

> If we agree to say that the objects of which we are directly aware are always sense-data, then we are deciding to treat them and not minds or material things as the units in terms of which we are to describe our perceptual experience. ..... It is already a mistake to suppose that they can be phases of any substance, or anywhere in physical space, at all.[33]

So, if Pater's Marius elects to talk of "fleeting impressions" rather than of material objects, he cannot logically talk in the same passage about the "cell of one's own personality"; and if, following the argument reviewed by F. H. Bradley, a man elects to talk of "sensations" rather than of sticks and stones, he should not in the same breath use the term "my self". In this respect, solipsism is a vice of style rather than a plight of man.

In Conrad's letters to Cunninghame Graham, there is a very interesting contrast between two imaginative cosmologies that he cites in order to support his pessimistic viewpoints. The first is of the type which, three paragraphs previously, we described as the "subversive interpretation of the soft option", and if we look again at the letter of 14 January 1898, we see how readily it approaches the "hard option" of

solipsism. Referring loosely to both life and the universe as "shadowy illusions" and "the machine", Conrad writes:

> One may ask whether scorn, love, or hate are justified in the face of such shadowy illusions. The machine is thinner than air and as evanescent as a flash of lightning. ..... The ardour for reform, improvement[,] for virtue, for knowledge, and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances as though one were anxious about the cut of one's clothes in a community of blind men. Life knows us not and we do not know life – we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever ..... Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore .....[34]

Here the individual is a fluctuating centre of a dismal flux. But in the very same paragraph of this letter, Conrad, without any apparent awareness of the anomaly, refers to the machine of the universe as though it were just as objective and remorseless as the word "machine" implies:

> The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about.

In the previous month, Conrad had likened the universe and nature (again, there is a certain looseness of reference) to "a knitting machine", saying:

> And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight ..... You can't interfere with it ..... and it is indestructible!
>
> It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time[,] space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.[35]

On the one hand, the individual is a centre of flux; on the other hand, the individual is a consciousness trapped in the wheels of an all-too-remorseless machine. It is peculiarly symptomatic of modern social and economic stresses that so many writers of the last hundred years or so

have meditated two quite contrasting ontological paradigms, one being solipsistic, in which the individual engulfs the world, and the other being mechanistic, in which the individual is the puppet of the world. Both have their rationale in illogical appraisals of empiricism. The illogical basis of the mechanistic paradigm is the assumption that if any event can have a causal explanation, the event can be regarded as the predestined consequence of causal "laws". So in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) the narrator claims that, given what reason says about the all-embracing laws of nature, "the direct, legitimate fruit of consciousness is inertia".[36] Man may, however, he continues, place his faith in will rather than reason, and regain a sense of autonomy by acting in apparent defiance of causal laws – by using will wilfully, whether capriciously or Satanically, seeking "another difficult, absurd way, seeking it almost in the darkness".[37]

> It is just his fantastic dreams, his vulgar folly that he will desire to retain, simply in order to prove to himself ..... that men still are men and not the keys of a piano, which the laws of nature threaten to control so completely. ..... He will contrive destruction and chaos ..... only to gain his point!"

By this reasoning, one may, presumably, become a Wilde, an existentialist, a Hitler or a Kurtz. Dostoevsky actually continues, as though prophesying Kurtz's coming, "It may be at the cost of his skin, it may be by cannibalism!"[39]

Dostoevsky's argument will remind us, again, of Conrad's dictum in *Nostromo* that action alone offers "the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part"; and it will remind us of our discussion of the antipathetic fallacy, and of the third and fourth of the absurdist descriptive techniques we listed. The feeling that men can be regarded as puppets of the laws of material causality and that they therefore assert their human autonomy most effectively by wilfully lawless or "irrational" action is clearly one of the factors complicating Marlow's judgement of Kurtz. We may criticise the logic of determinism by saying that causal "laws" are merely working hypotheses or statistical probabilities, or by saying that synthetic propositions are in principle refutable; but this does not reduce the imaginative validity with which Conrad, in the tale's deterministic hints, conveys the sense of man's littleness before nature, and thus also conveys a carefully-circumscribed respect for a Kurtz who can partly be intuited by Marlow as an – albeit blundering and inchoate –

existentialist. Though Kurtz may strangle himself in the puppet-master's strings in the attempt to break free from them, he emulates Dostoevsky's "wilful man" to the extent of entangling others in the flail of his unforgettably perverse individuality.

7

CONCLUSION

IN THE YEAR after the appearance of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad published *Lord Jim*. Jim is in some ways a counterpart to Kurtz, for Jim lives among and leads a community of natives in a remote jungle, and his fortunes and destiny become inextricably interwoven with theirs. Unlike Kurtz, Jim preserves standards of paternalistic responsibility and humane justice in his dealings with those who come to regard him as a leader; nevertheless, partly because of Jim's sense of complicity with a corrupt Englishman who comes to pillage the settlement, the community is shattered and Jim submits to death at the natives' hands. The extreme oscillations in Marlow's judgement of Kurtz have their counterpart in his oscillating judgement of Jim: and Jim, like Kurtz, remains the enigmatic focus of radically conflicting criteria (now those of a worldly-wise sceptic, now those of a "glamour"-seeking romantic) in Marlow's nature. As in the case of *Heart of Darkness*, we sense Conrad's attraction to a cyclical or non-finite form: *Lord Jim* grew far beyond the author's originally-intended length as Marlow happily gathered from character after character a kaleidoscopic diversity of assessments of Jim; and, notoriously, bringing the narrative at last to a dramatic and "tragic" climax seems to have entailed the suspension of many of Conrad's powers.

There are also evident connections between *Heart of Darkness* and Conrad's most ambitious novel, *Nostromo* (1904). A central figure is Gould, the determined mine-owner who, like Kurtz, has ventured boldly in the idealistic belief that by developing the material resources of the land he would be bringing the torch of humane progress to it: he would simultaneously be conquering the recalcitrant material environment and the recalcitrant force of human lawlessness. Like Kurtz, however, he becomes the victim of the environment. Instead of mastering the mine he is mastered by it; and though for a while prosperity and stability are brought to the land, anarchic feudalism has given way to subtly oppressive capitalism, and the seeds of a further revolution are being sown. As with *Heart of Darkness*, many of the narrative's most striking effects are dependent on the inter-play of perspectives, temporal and

spatial, and on the deployment of intermediary narrators: techniques which offer a therapy for the human myopia that the book portrays. Again, a symptomatic weakness occurs in the romantic material of the "climactic" final chapter.

The fourth of Conrad's major works, *The Secret Agent* (1907), extends *Heart of Darkness*'s theme of "the butcher and the policeman" with its analysis of the bases of moral and social order in an urban society; and the omniscient author – or rather the invisible narrator who in his august mordancy is a sustained characterisation – sardonically illustrates the extent of the parallels between the apparently law-abiding and the law-breakers, displays a panorama of spiritual enervation and mutual incomprehension, and shows that even when good things are done, they are variously unappreciated, uncomprehended, or dubiously motivated. It is almost as though the novel had been written by the Marlow who, in the "sepulchral city", had found the everyday lives of men "offensive ..... like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend", and who had remarked: "I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces ....."

In short, I think it could be demonstrated that wherever in these and in later works Conrad is writing most originally and effectively, very close moral, thematic and technical connections could be established with *Heart of Darkness*; and it is a sad irony of literary history that when, in the period 1914-24, a new generation of writers made "innovations" that had been diversely anticipated in that tale of 1899, Conrad himself was producing nostalgically old-fashioned novels like *The Arrow of Gold* and *The Rover*. The uneven but gradual decline in the quality of Conrad's work in his later years seems generally (as Albert Guerard has shown) to be a consequence of the "stabilisation" or "normalisation" of his imaginative temperament; and the relative conventionality of much of that later work can partly be explained by the very effectiveness with which the early mature writings had expressed and given artistic resolution to his imaginative tensions and conflicts. While *The Rover* seems dated and archaic, *Heart of Darkness* retains its contemporaneity.

Marlow does not tell the Intended the truth about Kurtz, because "it would have been too dark – too dark altogether". At the end of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, published 55 years later, Ralph weeps for "the darkness of man's heart". Conrad, recalling both the jingoistic fiction of Kipling and the horrors of the Belgian Congo, showed the various corruptions of a group of Europeans in testing conditions of exotic isolation; and in particular he showed how a promising musician could

there revert to savagery and cannibalism. Golding, recalling both the jingoistic fiction of Ballantyne and the horrors of the second world war, showed the various corruptions of a group of English children in testing conditions of exotic isolation; and in particular he showed how a promising choirboy could there revert to savagery and cannibalism. Like Kurtz's Intended, the officer who "rescues" the boys, and who wears a modern equivalent to war-paint, gives us an initial sense of a reassuring contrast between the civilised and the savage, and a disturbing after-sense of continuity between them. Both writers rebuke sentimentalists by pointing out that modern Europe can produce a Kurtz or a Jack; both writers rebuke cynics by pointing out that it can also produce a Marlow or a Ralph. The humane are warned of the fragility of humane morality, but they are also reminded of its preciousness. Conrad's equatorial jungle is a place of predatory struggle between the very creepers; oppressive, bewildering, monotonous. Golding's tropical jungle has a strange, colourful, rhythmic beauty; there are flowers with "delicate" tips; and it is alien not in an oppressive way, but rather as an ignored miracle or an uncomprehended incarnation is alien. The snake in Conrad's wilderness is part of that wilderness: the serpentine river. The snake in Golding's wilderness is man-made: the snake-clasp on Ralph's belt. In both tales the natural environment encompasses and may eventually obliterate the vandalistic arrogance of man.

These thematic similarities help to demonstrate the continuing historical cogency of the issues that Conrad was exploring in the late nineteenth century; but there is one marked difference which gives Conrad's tale an important dimension lacking from Golding's. The island of *Lord of the Flies* has a reassuring constancy and stability under our feet, whereas Marlow interrupts his narrative to question the very substantiality of the world and to say:

> "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."

His words bring me appropriately to a conclusion. In discussing contextually the various parts of *Heart of Darkness* I have attempted to resolve the paradoxes listed in the introduction. In some cases they were resolved by analysis of ambiguous key-terms; in other cases, by relating their components to speaker and occasion. Generally, the paradoxes

were translatable into highly-qualified moral recommendations. The language of moral recommendations, however, is inevitably limited in its rendering of the "life-sensation" of experiencing the tale. The finest recommendation is implicit in the tale's exemplary totality: exemplary in its sustained, adroit and searching attention to life.

It is characteristic of *Heart of Darkness* that Marlow's narrative should appear to refute Marlow's assertion of "impossibility"; and my immodest length is perhaps defensible as a tribute to his modesty.

1971

NOTES

All quotations from *Heart of Darkness* are taken from the authoritative edition by Robert Kimbrough (Norton, New York, 1963).

Quotations from other works of Conrad are from the Collected Edition (J. M. Dent and Sons, London, 1946-55).

A row of five dots indicates an editorial ellipsis. I preserve the errors in Conrad's French.

The following abbreviations are used in the footnotes:

Guerard = A. J. Guerard: *Conrad the Novelist* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1965).

Sherry = Norman Sherry: *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1971).

CG = C. T. Watts (ed.) : *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge University Press, London, 1969).

In cases where the place of publication is omitted from a citation, the place is London.

CHAPTER 1 (pp. 1–5)

1 Chap. 4: 'Minor Works and *Nostromo*'.
2 Guerard, pp. 35ff.
3 *Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Mouton, The Hague, 1969), chap. 2.
4 Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1966.
5 Guerard, pp. 57-8.
6 Zdzisław Najder (ed.): *Conrad's Polish Background* (Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 240.
7 Joseph Conrad: *A Personal Record*, p. 44.
8 *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, p. 30.
9 See *CG*, pp. 18-22, 39-42

CHAPTER 2 (pp. 6–18)

1 Robert Graves and Laura Riding: 'William Shakespeare and E. E. Cummings' in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (Heinemann, 1927).
2 *CG*, p. 65.
3 The name is an abbreviation of the Italian phrase, *nostro uomo*: our man. *Nostromo* also means "bosun" (and Nostromo had indeed been a bosun on his arrival in Sulaco), but the main ironies surrounding his name depend on the reading "Our Man", as does the force of Teresa's denunciation: "People ..... have given you a silly name – and nothing besides – in exchange for your soul and body" (p. 256).
4 *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 167.
5 *The Time Machine: An Invention* (Heinemann, 1895), pp. 139, 140-1.
6 *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 13-14.
7 *CG*, p. 65.
8 *Ibid.* p. 89. Translation: "And the words fly away; and there remains nothing, do you hear? Absolutely nothing, O man of faith! Nothing. One moment, one blink of an eye, and nothing is left – except a blob of mud, of cold mud, of dead mud hurled into black space, revolving around an extinct sun. Nothing. Neither thought, nor sound, nor soul. Nothing." (To the discomfiture of those seeking a consolatory peroration, "Nothing" re-echoes as the final word of Conrad's novel *Victory*.)
9 See Andrew Gray: *Lord Kelvin: An Account of His Scientific Life and Work* (Dent, 1908), pp. 139-42 and 232-4.
10 Revised edition (Cassell, 1925), 1, 10.
11 *CG*, pp. 82-3. The quotation gives an instance of Conrad's characteristic and somewhat Schopenhauerian partiality for referring to ideals, ideas, hopes, events and objects as "illusions". (Max Beerbohm's tale 'The Feast' parodied this Conradian *penchant* acutely in the sentence: "In his upturned eyes the stars were reflected, creating an illusion of themselves who are illusions.") Sometimes Conrad makes a broad distinction between illusions and facts, the former being "subjective", the values, ideals and emotions with which man invests the world, and the latter being "objective", empirical matters; and sometimes, when he makes even more lavish application of the word "illusion", his assumptions are implicitly solipsistic. See chap. 6, section v. Nietzsche had claimed that "beliefs are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions" (*The*

Dawn).

12 Dent, 1948, pp. 195-6, 219-20.

13 Heinemann, 1895, p. 6.

14 P. 108.

15 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872-1914* (Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 225.

16 *Philosophical Essays* (Longmans, Green, 1910), pp. 60-61, 67-8. The essay was written in 1902.

17 Cf.: "I suffered in a very intense form the loneliness which I had perceived a year before to be the essential lot of man ..... I tried to take refuge in pure contemplation; I began to write *The Free Man's Worship*. The construction of prose rhythms was the only thing in which I found any real consolation." (*Autobiography ..... 1872-1914*, pp. 149-50.)

18 Chapman and Hall, 1903, p. 280.

19 *Op. cit.* p. 70.

20 It is pervasive in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; it supports Sartre's reasoning that man should courageously accept the burden of lonely responsibility which results from man's "abandonment" by a non-existent God (*Existentialism and Humanism*); and in the essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus', Camus's Sisyphus, exactly like Russell's "Atlas", enjoys the noble experience of "scorn" for and "rebellion" against those who have "condemned" him – the gods which never were. Shelley's Prometheus appears to have sired a large progeny.

CHAPTER 3 (pp. 19–40)

1 Sherry, p. 122.

2 *Youth*, pp. 32-3.

3 Pp. 48-9. The ellipses represented here by trios of dots are Conrad's.

4 Max Beerbohm cordially accepted the imitation. Cf.: "Creepers that clutched ..... with tendrils venomous, frantic and faint"; "With a gesture brusque but flaccid he plucked aside the net". ('The Feast' in Beerbohm's *A Christmas Garland*, Heinemann, 1912, pp. 125, 126.)

5 Conrad's purposes in comparing Marlow, with his still, cross-legged posture, to "an idol" (p. 3), "a Buddha preaching" (p. 6) and "a meditating Buddha" (p. 79), are partly ironic: for this "Buddha" is "in European clothes and without a lotus-flower" and offers no road to Nirvana. Like the eastern idol to the eyes of a western tourist, Marlow may seem the possessor of more knowledge than he can

express. However, a few positive connections are the following. Like Buddha, Marlow instructs by means of paradoxes; he offers eloquent warnings against eloquence, while describing the snares of the appetites; and he indicates the impermanence and possible illusoriness of the phenomenal world.

> Our melodious words in which notes high and low are mingled,
> The link of causes and effects which now have brought us here together –
> They are like the sound of echoes, the sport of a game of illusion.
>
> (*Buddhist Scriptures,* tr. Edward Conze, Penguin, 1959, p. 92.)

6 *Tales of Unrest*, p. vii.
7 *Ibid.* p. 117.
8 *Ibid.* p. 108.
9 *Ibid.* p. 89.
10 David Daiches (ed.): *White Man in the Tropics: Two Moral Tales* (Harcourt, Brace & World, N.Y., 1962), p. 17.
11 *Cosmopolis* (London), 7, p. 81 (July 1897).
12 P. 5.
13 In *Lord Jim*, Marlow says: "There is something haunting in the light of the moon ..... It is to our sunshine, which – say what you like – is all we have to live by, what the echo is to the sound: misleading and confusing whether the note be mocking or sad. It robs all forms of matter – which, after all, is our domain – of their substance, and gives a sinister reality to shadows alone." (Dent, 1946, p. 246.)
14 Such commentators include Jocelyn Baines (*Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960, p. 224) and Stewart C. Wilcox ('Conrad's "Complicated Presentations" of Symbolic Imagery', *Philological Quarterly* 39, pp. 10-11, January 1960).
15 P. 7.
16 P. 7.
17 P. 155.
18 *CG*, p. 116.
19 Baines, *op. cit.* p. 224.
20 Critical distinctions between a writer's conscious and unconscious intentions may often be less useful than is the distinction between imaginative intentionality and imaginative unintentionality, for which a basic criterion is this: an apparently anomalous part of a text is imaginatively intentional if predictions based on the assumption of its intentionality are fulfilled within the work.

CHAPTER 4 (pp. 41–57)

1 J. I. M. Steward: *Joseph Conrad* (Longmans, Green, 1968), p. 85.
2 R. Curle (ed.): *Conrad to a Friend* (Sampson Low, Marston, 1928), p. 142.
3 *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 111.
4 *Ibid.* p. 107.
5 *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859] (Penguin, 1970), p. 143. (Alan Sinfield and Martin Monks drew my attention to this allusion.)

The rôle and nature of the knitters in Conrad's tale resemble those of another fateful initiator, the traveller encountered by Aschenbach near the beginning of Mann's *Death in Venice*, 1912. (He too is a synthesis: a fusion of an ordinary hiker, Charon, and, as the allusions to Euripides' *Baccchae* confirm, a tigerish Dionysus.)

6 *Ibid.* p. 203.
7 The importance, in Conrad's works, of the opacity factor (and of "delayed decoding") was emphasised in an early, acutely perceptive essay by Ramon Fernandez: 'L'Art de Conrad' (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, new series 135, pp. 730-7: 1 December 1924). Fernandez said: "Catching a glimpse is the best way of seeing because it is the best way of preserving the human element as if embalmed in our impression and at the same time respecting its living impenetrability ..... The psychological commentary ..... remains tangential to reality; it follows that the opacity of the individual ..... is never completely dissipated ....." (I quote the translation by Charles Owen in R. W. Stallman, ed., *The Art of Joseph Conrad*, Michigan State U.P., Michigan, 1960, pp. 10, 11.)

Cf. Sartre's comments on Camus's Meursault: "The character ..... retains a real opacity ..... He is there before us, he exists, and we can neither understand nor quite judge him. In a word, he is alive ....." ('Camus' *The Outsider*' in *Literary and Philosophical Essays,* Hutchinson, 1968, p. 32.)

8 In 1923, T. S. Eliot said when reviewing *Ulysses* that Joyce's "mythical method" was "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". ('Ulysses, Order and Myth': *The Dial* 75, p. 483: November 1923.)

Parodic and burlesque versions of the Infernal Journey have, of course, a venerable literary ancestry: examples include Aristophanes'

The Frogs, Jonson's 'The Famous Voyage' and 'The Voyage Itself ', and Pope's *Dunciad.*

9 Eliot regarded the passage (from "Did he live his life again ..... ?" to "The horror!") as "much the most appropriate ....., and somewhat elucidative", but deleted it after Pound doubted that Conrad was "weighty enough to stand the citation". (D. D. Paige, ed.: *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, Faber, 1951, pp. 236 and 234.)

Incidentally, Eliot signed one of his poems "Gus Krutzsch", which, as Hugh Kenner observes, is "a portmanteau name of which Kurtz seems to be one of the components". *(The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot,* Methuen, 1965, p· 127.)

10 James Rhoades (tr.): *The Poems of Virgil* (World's Classics, Oxford, 1921), p. 152.

11 'Marlow's Descent into Hell', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley) 9, March 1955, p. 291 (© 1955, University of California Press).

12 'Conrad's Underworld', *Modern Fiction Studies* (Purdue) 2, May 1956, pp. 60-61 (© 1956, Purdue Research Foundation, West Lafayette, Indiana).

13 G. Jean-Aubry (ed.): *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (Heinemann, 1927), II, 205.

14 P. 12.

15 Quoted by Kimbrough, p. 86. (Marlow distrusts Carlyle: see *Youth*, p.7.)

16 *Last Essays*, p. 161.

17 H.M. Stationery Office: *Accounts and Papers* (1904) 62, p. 402.

18 Z. Najder: 'Conrad's Casement Letters', *Polish Perspectives* (Warsaw) 17, December 1974, p. 29.

19 *CG*, pp.148-9.

20 Deletion of the promise entailed – or was entailed by – deletion of Stephen's bitter observation that the deficiencies of factory legislation demonstrated the parliamentary impotence of the workers compared with the capitalists. See G. Ford and S. Monod (ed.): *Hard Times* (Norton, N.Y., 1966), p. 252.

21 P. 30.

22 *Past and Present* (Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 170.

23 Sherry, esp. pp. 63-7; see also pp. 43-4, 51-2 and 70-71.

24 H. M. Stanley: *The Congo and the Founding of Its Free State: A Story of Work and Exploration* (Harper, N.Y., 1885), I, 517.

25 *Ibid.* p. 96.

26 *Ibid.* p. 95.

CHAPTER 5 (pp. 58–109)

1 Pp. 13-14.
2 See A. H. Basson: *David Hume* (Penguin, 1958), pp. 133-5.
3 Alcan, Paris, 1900, p. 30. Translation: "The postures, gestures and movements of the human body are comical precisely to the extent that they make us think of a mere mechanism."
4 See Huxley: 'On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and Its History', *Collected Essays*, I, Macmillan, 1894 (the quotation is from p. 244); and Schopenhauer: *Essays and Aphorisms*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1970), p. 143.
5 *Notes on Life and Letters*, p. 109.
6 P. 16
7 P. 17
8 Pp. 18-19.
9 *Last Essays*, pp. 169-70.
10 *Ibid.* p. 16.
11 P. 20.
12 Pp. 27-8.
13 P. 25.
14 P. 21.
15 P. 23.
16 P. 33.
17 The few include J. I. M. Stewart (*Joseph Conrad*, p. 79), who, however, overlooking the way in which the manager is singled out, sees a general conspiracy of the traders to drive Kurtz to a breakdown; and Norman Sherry (*Conrad's Western World*, p. 47), who points out that "the death of Kurtz is laid at the manager's door".
18 Pp. 34-36.
19 *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (Murray, 1859), pp. 488-90.
20 *CG*, p. 70.
21 P. 92.
22 P. 30.
23 To define by contrast the pessimistically Darwinian aspects of *Heart of Darkness*, notice how the ichthyosaurus, which splashed briefly into the consciousness of Marlow, flounders into the consciousness of Birkin in Lawrence's *Women in Love* [1920]. In one of his conversations with Ursula, Birkin says:

> "Man is one of the mistakes of creation – like ichthyosauri. If only he were gone again, think what lovely things would come out of the liberated days; – things straight out of the fire ..... The ichthyosauri were not proud: they crawled and floundered as we do."

And in the novel's last chapter, Birkin reflects:

> God can do without man. God could do without the ichthyosauri and the mastodon. These monsters failed creatively to develop, so God, the creative mystery, dispensed with them .....
>
> It was very consoling to Birkin to think this. If humanity ran into a cul-de-sac, and expended itself, the timeless creative mystery would bring forth some other being, finer, more wonderful ..... The game was never up ..... (Penguin, 1960, pp. 142-3 and 538.)

Appropriately, against Conrad's family motto, *Usque ad Finem,* stands in opposition Lawrence's elected emblem, the infinite phoenix.

24 *The Time Machine,* p. 43.
25 P. 34.
26 *The Great Tradition* [1948] (Penguin, 1962), pp. 196-7.
27 Speech reported in *The Times*, 5 May 1898, p. 7.
28 When the Boers inflicted a surprising defeat on General Buller's troops, Conrad remarked to Cunninghame Graham: "I should think Lord Salisbury's dying nation must be enjoying the fun" (*CG*, p. 128).
29 Pp. 34, 35. Alliteration and assonance richly interweave here.
30 Pp. 34-5.
31 P. 497.
32 P. 37.
33 P. 42.
34 P. 37.
35 In *Poets of Reality*, Miller attributes to Conrad the beliefs that "a man obeying an ethical code is trying to lift himself by his own bootstraps, and by bootstraps which have only an imaginary existence"; that "the ..... darkness is the basic stuff of the universe"; that "there is nothing true about any action or judgement except their relation to the darkness, and the darkness makes any positive action impossible"; and that, though "writing is the only kind of authentic action", "all literature is necessarily a sham" (pp. 18, 28, 35, 38). Inevitably, Miller's nihilistic interpretation of *Heart of*

Darkness neglects the nobility of Marlow's humanity and of Conrad's moral and political indignations.

36 Pp. 37-8.

37 *Selected Short Stories* (Penguin, 1958), p. 187.

38 Conrad's and Cunninghame Graham's sense of rivalry to Kipling is discussed in *CG*, pp. 19-22.

39 Pp. 38-9.

40 P. 39.

41 *CG*, p. 57. Cf. Schopenhauer's dictum: "You can also look upon our life as an episode unprofitably disturbing the blessed calm of nothingness. In any case, even he who has found life tolerably bearable will, the longer he lives, feel the more clearly that on the whole it is a disappointment, nay a cheat." (*Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 47.)

42 Pp. 41-3.

43 J. M. Cohen (tr.): *Michel de Montaigne: Essays* (Penguin, 1958), pp. 108-9, 113.

44 Lines 129-30. Cf. Conrad's "L'homme est un animal méchant" (*CG*, p. 117), and Schopenhauer's remark: "Gobineau (*Des races humaines*) called man *l'animal méchant par excellence*, which people took very ill ..... But Gobineau was right: for man is the only animal which causes pain to others with no other object than causing pain." (*Essays and Aphorisms*, p. 139.)

45 P. 43.

46 *Typhoon*, p. 224.

47 *A Personal Record*, pp. 31-5.

48 *CG*, p. 117.

49 Pp. 60-61.

50 *The Complete Prefaces of Bernard Shaw* (Hamlyn, 1965), p. 181.

51 P. 48.

52 P. 50.

53 Pp. 45-7.

54 P. 9.

55 Camus admired Conrad's work: and there is clear continuity in principle between Conrad's presentation of an extremely problematic and paradoxical Kurtz (and, later, of Lord Jim) and Camus's technique, in *L'Etranger*, of contrasting the "private" or "inner" Meursault with the "publicly-perceived" personality of Meursault.

56 P. 32.

57 P. 60.
58 P. 59.
59 P. 224.
60 P. 50.
61 P. 59.
62 P. 51. (Cf. the ideas and writings of a recent descendant of Kurtz: John Thompson in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, Heinemann, 1968, pp. 62-5.)
63 *CG*, p. 154.
64 P. 50.
65 P. 49.
66 P. 62.
67 P. 67.
68 P. 63.
69 Pp. 50, 67.
70 Pp. 71, 72.
71 P. 72.
72 Pp. 68, 72.
73 P. 75.
74 'From *Heart of Darkness* to *Nostromo*: An Approach to Conrad' in B. Ford (ed.): *The Modern Age* (Penguin, 1961), p. 132. (Copyright © Penguin Books 1961, 1963, 1964.)
75 P. 63. Cf. also: "This lot of ivory now is really mine. The Company did not pay for it. I collected it myself at a very great personal risk" (p. 75).
76 P. 51.
77 P. 72.
78 *Joseph Conrad: Discovery in Design* (University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1957), p. 55.
79 *Op. cit.* p. 137n.
80 P. 55.
81 P. 56.
82 P. 79.
83 P. 78. Lilian Feder (*op. cit.* p. 288) points out that the gesture is reminiscent of Virgil's shades, who stretched out their hands ("tendebantque manus") in their yearning to be taken aboard the ferry of Acheron.
84 P. 76. The prose sings with assonance, alliteration and internal rhyme.
85 P. 74.

86 By this stage of the tale, the polysyllabic privative adjectives ("inconceivable", "unspeakable") and the abstract nouns in the oxymoronic "X+(−X)" pattern ("of ..... triumph and of ..... pain") have become all too familiar: they seem facile and automatic. Consequently, the imaginative impact of the statement is not much greater than if Marlow had said "She uttered a remarkably impressive cry, I assure you!"

87 *The Shadow-Line* (1916), with its becalmed and cursed ship, its "spectral" crew and its presence of "grace" in a man named Ransome, often seems to echo Coleridge's poem.

88 Gordon S. Haight (ed.): *The George Eliot Letters*, II (Yale U.P., New Haven, 1954), 324.

CHAPTER 6 (pp. 110–130)

1 Cf. this comment on Kayerts and Carlier in 'An Outpost of Progress': "Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines." (*Tales of Unrest*, p. 91.)

2 Macmillan, 1890; I, 121.

3 Harmsworth, 1931, pp. 17-18.

4 David Pears: *Wittgenstein* (Collins, 1971), p. 13.

5 P. 63.

6 *The Shadow-Line*, p. 101.

7 P. 50.

8 P. 74.

9 Conrad's cherishing of rational liberty animates both his contempt for the demagogue and his hatred of the censor. In 1905 he made these predictions about the coming Russian revolution:

> It cannot be anything else but a rising of slaves. ..... [Russia's] soul, kept benumbed by her temporal and spiritual master with the poison of tyranny and superstition, will find itself on awakening possessed of no language, a monstrous full-grown child having first to learn the ways of living thought and articulate speech. It is safe to say tyranny, assuming a thousand protean shapes, will remain clinging to her struggles for a long

time ..... ('Autocracy and War', *Notes on Life and Letters*, pp. 102-3.)

10 G. Jean-Aubry (ed.): *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* (Heinemann, 1927), I, 255. Letter of 22 November to Mrs. Bontine.

11 *Degeneration* (Heinemann, 1895), pp. 261 n, 261-6.

12 *Ibid.* pp. 22-4.

13 See Sherry, pp. 267-8, 430.

14 P. 60.

15 Letter to me dated 3 October 1961.

16 *Portraits from Memory and Other Essays* (Allen & Unwin), p. 82; also *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872-1914*, p. 208.

17 *The Autobiography ..... 1872-1914*, p. 209.

18 'Baudelaire' (1930), *Selected Essays* (Faber, 1951), pp. 427, 429.

19 *The Waste Land*, line 252.

20 *CG*, p. 154.

21 *White Man in the Tropics: Two Moral Tales*, p. 14.

22 P. 15.

23 P. 39. By using the term "double", Guerard brings recollections of the *Doppelgänger* tradition to the aid of psychoanalytic theory. We have noted that Conrad was interested in the theme of the "secret sharer". In presentations of this theme, a strange complicity is established between apparently contrasting characters: and this statement will serve also as a definition of the theme of the *Doppelgänger*, or Double, which has extensive literary currency in the nineteenth century. "*Doppelgänger*" and "secret sharer" are not quite synonymous, however. The former term can refer (*a*) to works in which the "strangeness" of the complicity is solely the strangeness of the occult or supernatural; or (*b*) to works in which there is a fully adequate natural explanation; or (*c*) to works which balance the supernatural and the natural explanations as viable alternatives. The term "secret sharer", however, naturally invokes primarily the theme as treated by Conrad (e.g. in the tale 'The Secret Sharer' itself); and Conrad characteristically uses method *b*; occasionally uses method *c* – in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *The Shadow-Line,* for example; and never uses method *a.*

In supernatural versions of the *Doppelgänger* theme, the two characters involved, although appearing physically separate, are essentially symbiotic: they are manifestations or aspects of one

being, and it is therefore a convention of this category *a* that if one of the two dies, the other must automatically die. Thus, in Poe's tale 'William Wilson' (1839), the immoral hero is constantly pursued and impeded in his profligate activities by a remarkably virtuous man (Wilson, his namesake) who has close physical resemblances to the hero – with the exception that, like conscience (which he evidently represents), he speaks in whispers. Infuriated by this whispering pursuer, the hero mortally stabs him – only to learn that by that act he has murdered himself.

Now in *Heart of Darkness* there are vestiges of the supernatural version of the *Doppelgänger* theme, as when Marlow's almost-mortal illness soon follows Kurtz's mortal illness, or as when Marlow says that the "shadow" of Kurtz seemed to be entering the Intended's house with him. But just as the latter is a familiar hyperbolic way of referring to the vivid and troubling memory of a person, so the former has the ample explanation that disease is common in equatorial Africa: perhaps Marlow caught Kurtz's virus. When Kurtz's downfall is being analysed by Marlow, the "occult" terminology ("apparition", "wraith", "shade", "spectre") is too prolific to be dismissed as solely a matter of hyperbolic figurative diction (though it is largely such a matter); but where the actual complicity between Kurtz and Marlow is the subject, natural explanations are amply, evidently and exhaustively available.

In short, the theory which proposes that Kurtz is essentially a facet of Marlow's unconscious mind draws strong but illicit support from the very use of the term "double", whose connotations include all variants of the *Doppelgänger* theme; and this illicit support dissolves if we distinguish between the natural and the supernatural extremes of that theme.

24 P. 41.

25 P. 42.

26 P. 42.

27 'Note sur un Séjour de Conrad en Corse' (*Nouvelle Revue Française*, December 1924) translated in R. W. Stallman, ed.: *The Art of Joseph Conrad: a Critical Symposium* (Michigan State U.P., 1960), p. 7. It is salutary to recall the naivety with which Freud defines the "true artist" as one who merely knows "how to elaborate his day-dreams" so that his "phantasy", by offering enjoyable "day-dreams" to others, can win him "what before he could only win in phantasy: honour, power, and the love of women". (*Introductory Lectures on*

Psycho-Analysis, Allen and Unwin, 1929, pp. 314-15.) Against Freud's claims to be speaking with the authority of empirical science, we may place this remark of Conrad's:

> Art ..... is superior to science, in so far that it calls on us with authority to behold! to feel! Whereas science at best can only tell us – it seems so! And thats [*sic*] all it can do. (D. B. J. Randall, ed.: *Joseph Conrad and Warrington Dawson: the Record of a Friendship*, Duke U.P., Durham, N.C., 1968, p. 159.)

28 'On Stories', *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (Bles, 1966), p. 18.

29 'A Familiar Preface', *A Personal Record*, p. xviii. An interesting essay on this subject is Elsa Nettels' ' "Heart of Darkness" and the Creative Process itself ' (*Conradiana* 5, no. 2, pp. 66-73: 1973). She argues that *Heart of Darkness* offers "a paradigm of the creative process itself ", and that the ambivalence of Conrad's attitude to Kurtz stems from the analogy between Kurtz's perilous isolation and that of the creative writer, beset by moral, imaginative and linguistic temptations. In *A Personal Record*, pp. xvi-xvii, Conrad says: "I, too would like to hold the magic wand ..... Only, to be a great magician one must surrender oneself to occult and irresponsible powers, either outside or within one's own breast."

30 *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Penguin, 1969), p. 316.

31 Macmillan, 1892; I, 158.

32 It has recently been argued that the modern writer's quest for extreme descriptive vividness is a compensatory reaction to solipsistic fears. "It is strange how many modern writers betray real anxiety in their efforts to give a rich, felt 'substance' to the things they describe ..... Perhaps, in short, the romantic and post-romantic stress on 'impact' is *compensatory*". "If a man feels the real world slipping from him, he tightens his grip upon it ..... The modern hunger for vividness is a symptom of the epistemological malaise. Hume's desperate reliance on 'vivacity' and the modern reader's need to break his skin upon the real are closely related." (A. D. Nuttall: *A Common Sky*, Sussex University Press, 1974, pp. 146, 262.) Although Nuttall did not say so, Conrad's work, with its extreme combination of solipsistic intuitions and descriptive concreteness, is a perfect illustration of this thesis.

33 *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (Macmillan, 1958), p. 78.

34 *CG*, p. 65.

35 *CG*, pp. 56-7. There is probably an associative connection between this cluster of ideas and the "knitting ladies" of *Heart of Darkness*.

36 Constance Garnett (tr.): *White Nights and Other Stories* (Heinemann, 1918), p. 62.
37 *Ibid.* p. 65.
38 *Ibid.* p. 73.
39 *Ibid.* p. 73.

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