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# Deliberate Belief and Digging Holes

## Joseph Conrad and the Problem of Restraint

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### I: INTRODUCTION

In an era when the liberal tradition is questioned on every side, it has become increasingly important to inquire about its prospect for theoretical renewal. In fact, this undertaking is less an academic exercise than an essential form of action—one central to a continued sense of civility and well-being. Hence, it is not surprising to find scholars looking across traditional disciplinary lines in an effort to address the current problems in liberal theory. And while much profitable work has already been done by those willing to ply economics, sociology, and the allied social sciences, it is nevertheless true that literature has much to offer as a tool for reorienting the liberal tradition.

The is particularly true when the literature under consideration is of the caliber of Joseph Conrad's *fin-de-siècle* novella, *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>1</sup> For in Conrad's tale one finds not only a masterfully crafted story, but also a powerful evocation of one of liberalism's recurring theoretical dilemmas—the problem of constructing the grounds for self-restraint within a system of selfish atomism. One finds something else as well; one discovers in Conrad's treatment of Marlow the hint of a solution to this preeminently liberal dilemma. It is, moreover, a solution that not only echoes ideas articulated by Aristotle and Kant, but also one that foreshadows the arguments of such contemporary liberals as James Fishkin and William Galston.<sup>2</sup> In view of this, the point of this paper is threefold: to explore the nature of Conrad's case for restraint, to compare his case with those proffered by earlier liberal theorists, and, finally, to ask what relevance Conrad's conclusions have for contemporary liberals.

### II: LIBERALISM AND RESTRAINT

There is, of course, nothing uniquely "liberal" or especially modern about the task of restraining passionate man. The Greeks were well aware of this

1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer* [New York: New American Library, 1950]. All page references included in the body of this paper are from this edition of Conrad's work.

2. James Fishkin, *Beyond Subjective Morality* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984]; William Galston, *Justice and the Human Good* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980].

chore, as were those working within the republican tradition. The fact remains, though, that the need for restraint became more pressing with the advent of liberalism. For, at least in its Anglo-American guise, liberalism abandoned the traditional means of containing passionate man—or, more to the point, these means were perceived to be inefficacious. In other words, liberalism's rejection of a moral, teleological vision of man, its assault on practically all forms of value-cognitivism, and its promotion of a radically hedonistic psychology combined to make the task of restraining man both pressing and arduous.

It is not surprising, then, that so much of liberal thought can be read as an effort to find a way of reining in the passions. Hobbes, of course, proposed to do this by creating an external power.<sup>3</sup> Since it was passion-driven, masterless men who made life “nasty, brutish, and short,” restraining them necessarily took the form of constructing a political master. Though less blunt about the matter, Locke saw his responsibility in much the same light.<sup>4</sup> He, too, sought to create a political body that could adjudicate the conflicts to which passionate men were prone.

But the Hobbesian approach to restraining the passions proved less than satisfactory. On the one hand, it was not clear that Hobbes' sovereign—confronted by subjects in the full possession of their right to self-preservation—was up to the task demanded of him. And on the other hand, the moral state in which Hobbes left men was rather uninspiring. After all, the sovereign did not so much eliminate or alter men's passions as he manipulated them. It was men's passionate fear for their own lives that kept them in their place. And this, as Rousseau noted, meant that Hobbes' sovereign turned his subjects into hypocritical and alienated slaves.

In view of this, it is understandable that other thinkers would seek a different means of taming the passions. Most noteworthy in this regard are the efforts of those, such as Adam Smith, who sought to redirect and transform the passions. Smith, of course, suggested that is man's passionate self-regard could be channelled into economic pursuits, then several distinct benefits would ensue.<sup>5</sup> First, the arbitrary will of Hobbes' sovereign could be replaced by the neutral and impersonal constraints of civil society. Second, society's pressures would induce men to produce, quite in spite of themselves, those things which served the common good. Third, and most pertinent in the present context, their pursuit of material wealth would transform men. In the place of unruly and unpredictable passions, men would acquire “interests.” And while these interests were not as grand as the classical ideal of virtue, they did, at least, lead men to behave with moderation and civility. In short, interested men, though not heroic, would be sociable, reliable, and restrained.

3. T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson [New York: Penguin Books, 1968].

4. J. Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. T. P. Peardon [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952].

5. A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [London: Penguin Books, 1974].

An analogous tack was taken by Madison in the *Federalist Papers*.<sup>6</sup> Recalling both the republican practice of pitting the passions against one another and the Scottish-Realist efforts at transforming the passions, Madison spoke for a regime which, in setting "ambition against ambition," would produce something better than the agglomerated willfulness of individual citizens. It would, in short, be a regime which might produce a few citizens sensitive to matters of greater moment than those of unalloyed greed.

If Smith and Madison expected their institutional schemes to contain the passions and produce a more humane populace, others were not so sanguine. Rousseau's *First Discourse* suggested that the pursuit of "interests" not only tamed the passions but also belittled men.<sup>7</sup> In short, there was nothing ennobling about the quest for material gain, nor was there anything virtuous about a politics devoted to parcelling out the GNP. More troubling, though, was the possibility, intimated by Rousseau and pursued by his successors, that liberal, interested men would produce a society that was not only predictable and banal but also dangerous. In this regard, both de Tocqueville and J. S. Mill were concerned that the liberal social order, based on interest, would become so powerful and pervasive that it might overwhelm liberalism's isolated man.<sup>8</sup>

So by the late 1890s, when Conrad began his career as a writer, the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism was under pressure on at least two fronts. On one, it was pressured by those who doubted the adequacy of the eighteenth-century compromise with Hobbes. What this challenge amounted to was a repudiation of liberalism's early assumption, as A. Hirschman has put it, that a "counterveiling theory of the passions" in combination with the workings of some "invisible hand" was sufficient to harness self-seeking, hedonistic men.<sup>9</sup> In short, many suspected that neither Hobbes' reliance on the restraining capacity of political power nor Smith's faith in the inhibiting force of civil society were justified.

On the other front, some saw the threat to liberal society differently. Following Rousseau, Tocqueville, and J. S. Mill, these observers did not so much fear that liberal atomism would lead to social disintegration as that it would produce a kind of moral compression. For followers of this persuasion, the problem with liberal individualism was not just that it bred selfishness, but that it encouraged a social isolation which, when it occurred in the context of a society increasingly subject to bureaucratic organization, created the conditions for mass tyranny. With his usual acuity, de Tocqueville framed this issue very clearly: the danger liberal society confronted was a "servitude" of [a] regular,

6. A. Hamilton, J. Madison, J. Jay, *The Federalist Papers* [New York: New American Library, 1961].

7. J. J. Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger Masters [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964].

8. A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. R. D. Heffner [New York: New American Library, 1956]; J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978].

9. A. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977].

quiet and gentle kind," the preconditions for which were (as Rousseau had presciently suggested) the successful invasion and organization of the personality by society itself.<sup>10</sup>

### III: FAILED POLITICS AND CORRODED SOCIETY

Given the variety of challenges to liberalism at century's end, the question arises as to how to locate Conrad on such a spectrum of discontent. How, in other words, is one to interpret Conrad's depiction of madness and mayhem at the fringes of empire? And what, in turn, does that depiction tell us about his preoccupation with the idea of restraints? Although a cursory review of the plot would seem to suggest some straightforward answers to these questions, optimism of this kind does not survive a close reading of the text. For example, at first glance, Conrad's story appears to be a riveting, if not wholly unfamiliar, treatment of the theme of society's manifold susceptibility to collapse. Certainly there is much in the novel to justify such an interpretation. For one, the story's narrative moves between the conditions of "civilization" and the realities of savagery. In doing so, it invokes contrasts which are impossible to ignore. Moreover, Conrad underscores these contrasts by having his main character, Marlow, explore such related issues as the historical terrors of empire and the policing function of society. But we need not conclude that this is all that Conrad has in mind. For even as Conrad reminds his readers about men's fatal tendency to take the "solid pavement" of society for granted (p. 122), and heaps scorn on those residents of "sepulchral" cities who live mindlessly in the "assurance of perfect safety" (p. 150), it is clear that Conrad has other business to conduct in the *Heart of Darkness*. In other words, while Conrad, like Hobbes, is interested in alerting his readers to the vulnerabilities of organized social life, this is not the only theme at work in the book. There is, for example, the disturbing problem raised by the often-neglected last part of the story, the problem raised by Conrad's curiously late development of the character of Kurtz.

Kurtz, of course, is the frenzied center of Conrad's tropical *heart of darkness*. Yet the reader learns only at the end of the story some of the unsettling "facts" about him. The reader learns, for example, that Kurtz is not simply an ordinary man gone bad on account of prolonged isolation from the saving influence of the metropolis. There are such men on the road to the *heart of darkness*, but Kurtz is not one of them. On the contrary, we are told that Kurtz is *not* ordinary, just as nothing that he does in the interior of Africa is "ordinary." Kurtz is, Marlow reports, a particular kind of man—he is a creature that "[a]ll Europe contributed to making" (p. 123). He is, in short, a preeminently social being.

10. De Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

Of course, it does not take either Marlow or the reader much time to realize how little this actually means, how pitifully few resources this special status actually confers on Kurtz. For what makes Kurtz extraordinary is not just his special status as society's darling, or his prodigious lack of restraint, but rather his total lack of substance. Kurtz, it turns out, is "hollow at the core" (p. 133). In fact, he closely resembles Rousseau's nightmare vision in the *Second Discourse*. He is socialized, civil man, but with one supreme talent. Kurtz has a genius for role-playing; he is the ultimate chameleon. To one man, Kurtz is one thing, to another, another. He is perceived by different people at one and the same time as a poet, a painter, as a musical genius and a formidable, if wholly ecumenical, political talent. ("He could," a journalist reported to Marlow, "get himself to believe anything" (p. 151).) In short, he is what Kant might have termed a completely heteronomous being. Both motivated and constituted by things outside himself, Kurtz becomes, to the partners of the trading company, one of the "best and the brightest," one of the new breed. To his Intended, Kurtz is simply "great." He is, she adds, a man who "[draws] men towards him by what [is] best in them" (p. 155).

Clearly Kurtz's Intended offers the most telling description of him. Yet luckily for her, Marlow tells us, she does not see the irony or the implications of it. However, if she cannot imagine the harrowing things this emptiness might sponsor in one who is obsessed with "immense plans" and who tries to execute them in a stunning "solitude" (p. 133), Marlow does. He has seen the calamity that a man "hollow at the core" can generate and he has been able to contrast that with the elementary restraint exercised by the cannibals, by "mere" savages. In light of this portrait of Kurtz, then, it would seem premature to suggest that the *Heart of Darkness* is simply about the failure of society to make its rules of civility hold under the conditions of nominal savagery. Rather, the *Heart of Darkness* is also about society's potential for creating a certain kind of man—a type of man now become all too familiar. In other words, for Conrad, Kurtz seems less a symbol of the failure of social norms to hold in a moral void than evidence of society's (all too perverse) success in emptying him of substance. What is tragic about this, of course, is that the man whom all Europe helps to make and to whom it hands its favors is both the most banal of men and the most unrestrained and ferocious of savages.

What, then, does all this imply about Conrad's view of restraints? What are we to make of his several examples of the exercise of restraint—in particular, those illustrated by the accountant on the coast, by the cannibals on the steamer and, finally, by Marlow throughout the tale? What is immediately clear is that Conrad wants to discourage us from understanding his depictions of restraint in orthodox terms. Consequently, when he engages in a literary variant on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century strategy of social deconstruction, his dramatic act of social annihilation does not yield the usual theoretical result—namely, a pure, if hypothetical, state of nature for which a clear set of correc-

tive measures can be imagined. Rather, Conrad makes more ambiguous use of this staple of the liberal imagination.

In the first place, the “state of nature” which emerges out of the pages of the *Heart of Darkness* does not follow any of the models established by the preeminent liberal, contract theorists. Conrad’s Belgian Congo is neither Hobbes’ condition of unrelieved personal danger, nor Locke’s state of rude, but lawful, community. Nor is it Rousseau’s haven of natural ignorance and equilibrium. On the contrary, Conrad’s Congo is a fetid ruin: an attenuated, wreckage-strewn string of outposts stretched along miles of dense jungle river. It is, in fact, a depraved mix of violated nature and decayed society. Consequently, although the *heart of darkness* has many of the hallmarks of a wilderness, it is, finally, an environment tainted and transformed by societies and cultures which have not so much collided or informed one another as they have, first, corrupted and, then, collapsed in on one another.

Of course, if Conrad’s Congo is, in part, a political ruin, it follows that he cannot rely on the kinds of defensive strategies favored by his predecessors. Unlike Hobbes, Conrad cannot meaningfully contrast the natural with the political. Consequently, he cannot derive from such a contrast a set of restraints with which to circumvent the dangers, the insecurities, or the amorality of man’s nature. Moreover, if politics is not the solution to the special kind of “demoralization” in Conrad’s Congo, neither is “civil society.” For, like politics, it is society—understood in the eighteenth-century sense of the organized pursuit of economic self-interest—which has helped create the *heart of darkness*. No one who is not indigenous to Conrad’s Congo is there for any reason other than a hope for gain. (Marlow may, of course, be the exception here, as may the beardless Russian boy. However, everyone else, Conrad intimates, has come to cash in on the ivory which trickles out from the interior.) In fact, the whole place, Marlow tells us, has about it the “taint of imbecile rapacity” (p. 89).

But, quite clearly, rapacity and economic self-interest, those old liberal panaceas for disorder, are not enough to make the center hold. In other words, even greed is not motivation enough to urge men to labor in the jungle’s stillness. On the contrary, everything Marlow sees along the river is a “muddle” (p. 83). Men make a “show of work” (p. 91), he tells us, but, in actual fact, nothing is done. Or, when something is done, like the blasting for the railway line on the coast, it is done to no effect. What is real here, Marlow suggests, is not work but simply the desire to “earn percentages” (p. 91). Hence, the suspicion emerges that in the *heart of darkness* greed is overwhelmed by inertia. In short, the quest for material gain fails to be what eighteenth-century liberals hoped it was—namely, a passion that would first stir men to meaningful action and then lead them to a restraining dependence on other men.

By extension, then, what emerges from all this is the realization that the conditions of Conrad’s Congo can neither be evaded nor transcended in any of

the usual ways. Neither Hobbes' political order nor Smith's economic institutions suffice to channel the passions that are loose in the *heart of darkness*, for Conrad's Congo is not an ordinary, liberal condition. And so, it cannot be overcome in an ordinary way. In fact, the climate depicted by Conrad in the *Heart of Darkness* is nearly that described by Rousseau in his *Second Discourse* as the logical outcome of the evolution of social inequality. It is a condition in which denatured men are suddenly forced back on their own resources, in which social creatures, habituated to a life of externals, are made to perform without reference to an external context, to external rules, or to the censorious eyes of others. This is, of course, a perilous condition, and it explains why Conrad makes so much of the issue of restraint. Restraint, under these circumstances, becomes the very essence of endurance—the key to sanity and survival, both moral and physical. What men have in the face of utter collapse—in the face of failed politics and corroded society—are, Conrad concludes, two things: "deliberate belief" and "digging holes." The problem, of course, is deciding what Conrad means by them.

#### IV: WORK AND BELIEF

Among the forces for restraint which Conrad has Marlow discuss in the novella, work—or "digging holes"—is the easiest to understand. And yet, even work is not without its ambiguities. For certainly one of the first things which becomes clear in the *Heart of Darkness* is that Marlow does not value work primarily as an economic activity. In other words, although economic desires abound in the *heart of darkness*, and although they explain why men have come to be there, Marlow discovers early on that, in the Congo, there is no necessary relation between work and the hope for gain, the chief stimulus to civil society's economic activity. Indeed, after a while, he comes to suspect that there is an inverse relationship between them. After a short stint inland at the Central Station, for example, Marlow declares that, on balance, men do not like to work (p. 97). Most men would rather "laze about and think of all the fine things that can be done" (p. 97). In fact, Marlow observes, work, the mere act of "accomplishing something" (p. 83), is the exception in the *heart of darkness*—and this is true in spite of an atmosphere of rampant greed. What is more, the greediest, the "sordid buccaneers" of the Eldorado Exploring Expedition, seem to have the least aptitude for work. Even by the modest standards of the jungle, Marlow notes, these men appear incapable of doing anything. Mere dilettantes and thieves, greed has unfitted them even for survival. Unable to summon up hardihood, audacity, courage, or serious intention—any of those qualities "wanted for the work of the world" (p. 99)—they become the jungle's victims. Their unfitnes costs them their lives.

However, if an inability to work is fatal to the truly rapacious and the cause

of dissipation in the merely greedy, a proven ability to work, to “do something,” is clearly the source of whatever safety there is for men in the *heart of darkness*. The question, of course, is how anyone there comes to engage in this saving form of action. The answer, if we are to take Marlow’s account of things seriously, is simple. Men either work reflexively for the sake of survival, or they work consciously for virtuosity’s sake.

Very early in the story, Marlow, fresh from the continent yet already rattled by the trip down the coast and his first grim impressions of the Coastal Station, meets the accountant. Although he has not been “in-country” very long, Marlow has been there long enough to recognize that a “great demoralization” pervades the *heart of darkness* and that this “demoralization’s” first casualty is the capacity to act. He has also been there long enough to recognize a “miracle” when he sees one (p. 83). The accountant is, Marlow tells us, a “sort of vision”: a starched, ironed, and brushed creature whose “got-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character” (p. 83). Three years at the station, Marlow declares, and the man still observes the amenities. Moreover, his books, like his person, are the object of scrupulous and undistracted attention (p. 83). If he looks like a “hair-dresser’s dummy,” Marlow decides, he is nevertheless worthy of respect. For in the middle of a general “muddle,” he has “verily accomplished something” (p. 83).

Marlow has good reason to mention this early encounter with the accountant. For he learns something from this man that will help him survive the trip inland. Specifically, he learns the value of uninterrupted, reflexive attention to something, anything. He learns, too, about the diversionary value of work. That he comes to see the accountant’s fastidiousness as evidence of “backbone” is the result, finally, of his coming to appreciate just how improbable it is to care about clean cuffs and accurate accounts in the jungle. And so, while the accountant may not be one of Marlow’s more significant acquaintances in the *heart of darkness*, he has, nevertheless, a special claim on Marlow’s memory of that place. He is the first person to show Marlow how an unreflective attention to surface details can help one elude the ravages of reality (pp. 83–84, 103).

If Marlow himself has occasion to fall back on work as a saving diversion, he is not terribly particular about the actual form which this work takes. On the contrary, what concerns him is the way in which it is conducted. Like Kant, and like J. S. Mill, Marlow is especially concerned with the frame of mind one brings to one’s work.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Marlow finds that work must be informed by a “singleness of intention”—one which relieves the worker of the burdens of self-consciousness. The accountant’s work, for example, is neither immediately useful (to anyone other than himself) nor, it seems, particularly self-conscious in character. Less a virtuoso performance than a mad parody of

11. Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

business as usual, it has about it the flavor of habit. Yet in its very routineness, in its singleminded dismissal of the reality of life on the coast, it is an effective strategy of survival. Much the same thing can be said of the work done by the natives aboard Marlow's steamer. The cannibals, Marlow tells us, are "men one could work with" (p. 104). They work steadily at keeping the boat afloat and at cutting dead wood for fuel. They eat lumps of lavender dough when their store of hippo meat spoils, and, although starving, they observe an unimaginable restraint in the face of their fellow passengers. They do not, Marlow observes, "eat each other before my eyes" (p. 104) nor, he marvels, do they eat the "pilgrims" onboard. They are, simply enough, men of routine, useful and, seemingly, unafflicted by elaborate consciousness.

So too, until his untimely death, is the steamer's helmsman, Marlow's native "partner" (p. 124). He too does something. Very simply, he steers. And if this capacity for work does not save him, it is because, for an instant, the helmsman abandons his concern for the "mere incidents of the surface" (p. 103). He loses his "singleness of intention," his reflexive sense of the "right way of going to work" (p. 108). For this momentary lapse from routine, for a single moment's conscious satisfaction with a Martini-Henry rifle, he pays with his life (p. 117). Seized by a sudden fit of self-consciousness, the helmsman opens himself up to the "creepy thoughts" of the jungle (p. 107). Inadvertently, he fronts a reality which, Marlow has assured us, is beyond the power of "meddling" (p. 109). In doing so, he relinquishes the saving, the restraining diversion of the surface and becomes "just like Kurtz—a tree swayed by the wind" (p. 124).

What we learn from all this, then, is that work need not have economic value to be life-sustaining. Rather it need only be a routine which keeps men "off the streets"—a routine capable of holding men's attention to some purpose. In a sense, what Conrad has Marlow tell us about work is reminiscent of what Voltaire had Candide tell his little household at the end of the eighteenth-century satire of the same name.<sup>12</sup> Work is a diversion, a way of circumventing the unsavory or "creepy" consequences of meddling beyond one's depth. It is, in short, a way of relieving men of the burden of themselves by diverting their gaze from the horror around them and by keeping their shoulders planted firmly against the wheel.

And yet, in the novella, Marlow himself is an exception to this simple rule about the diversionary character of work. Like the accountant, the cannibals, and the helmsman, Marlow too works: he is absorbed in a surface routine. But unlike them, he *knows* that he is and he knows why. In other words, work for Marlow is not simply a reflexive routine which happens to save, it is a saving diversion undertaken consciously. For him, work is a virtuoso performance, undertaken both for the chance it offers to "find" himself and for the opportu-

12. Voltaire, *Candide* [New York: Modern Library, 1956].

nity it affords him to construct his own reality (p. 97). Sometime during his stay at the Central Station, Marlow decides to work, and to make of his work something more than a surface routine. And the way he goes about doing this, ultimately, invests his work with “deliberate belief”—his approach makes work the expression of a conscious judgment about what it means to be human. In short, in a moral wilderness variously inhabited by common thieves, “flabby devils” (p. 86), weary “pilgrims,” by defeated and domesticated savages, and finally, of course, by Kurtz, Marlow works to be a civilized man—a man of self-restraint (pp. 106, 122).

What is immediately striking about Marlow’s view of work as a conscious performance is, of course, the special kind of danger it involves. Unlike the accountant, the cannibals, or the helmsman, for example, Marlow cannot escape the “vengeful aspect” of the *heart of darkness*. On the contrary, the demands of virtuosity require that he be keenly aware of the jungle’s “treacherous appeal” (p. 102). In the midst of his routine, he confesses, he can “feel its mysterious stillness watching” him (p. 103). And it is this unremitting presence, one must suppose, which makes Marlow grateful for the surface-truth of work and which persuades him that, over the long haul, routine alone is not enough to save a man.

As if to confirm this, he speaks bluntly about the jungle’s unexpected blandishments. As his steamer toils inland to Kurtz, for example, both the river’s brooding quiet and Marlow’s finely-honed routine are suddenly shattered by the frenzied ululations of natives along the banks. What is at first a horrible and “unearthly” episode, though, soon becomes the occasion for rapturous insight (p. 105). The cries, Marlow tells us, provoke from within him the “faintest trace of response.” Initially the “terrible frankness of that noise” and the natives’ savage contortions unnerve him; they seem ugly and “inhuman.” Yet soon enough, this first impression gives way to the feeling that all this is not inhuman, but, rather, eminently human. And that possibility, in turn, is positively riveting to Marlow. “[J]ust the thought of their humanity—like yours —” he admits, “thrilled you.” It raises the “dim suspicion of there being a meaning in (that noise) which you . . . could comprehend” (pp. 105–6). And that, he concludes, is what is dangerous about conscious apprehension in the *heart of darkness*.

Yet in spite of the provocative nature of this incident, in spite of what he comes to understand from it about the “mind of man,” Marlow resists the impulse to “go ashore for a howl and a dance” (pp. 105–6). Unlike either the unfortunate helmsman or, more terribly, Kurtz, he neither abandons the surface-truth of his work (p. 106) nor breaks faith with the “deliberate belief” that informs his virtuoso performance. Of course, the fact that he does not break his concentration raises the question of what it is that keeps Marlow to his work. It raises the question, too, of what Conrad, and hence Marlow, mean when they speak of “deliberate belief.”

Considering the occasions in the novel which give rise to Conrad's discussion of "deliberate belief," two things about the nature of Marlow's belief should be clear almost immediately. First, "deliberate belief" is Conrad's way of injecting some basis for meaningful action into the utter relativity of the *heart of darkness*. What he settles on in this regard is hardly novel, yet it is demanding enough. It is simply that it is a belief in the need for restraint which makes men human, just as it is the exercise of restraint under adverse conditions which distinguishes men from fools and from angels (p. 122). What should be equally clear, given the fact that the *heart of darkness* is a condition void of law or "external checks" (p. 98), is, second, that the actual restraints which men observe do not derive automatically from either received values or natural impulses.

On the contrary, when the "deliberate belief" which informs Marlow's virtuous performance is examined closely, it proves to be one consciously erected in the painful isolation of the Central Station. It is a response to "solitude without a policeman." For in such condition, Marlow assures us, the familiar moral notations of society "simply won't do" (p. 106). Without the "warning voice of a kind neighbor," or the "whispering of public opinion," without the "holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums" (p. 122), without, in short, the power of the Leviathan or the pressures of "civil society," fine sentiments, like "[a]cquisitions and clothes," become chimeras. "They fly off at the first good shake" (p. 106). Put bluntly, fine sentiments can never sustain the man who "knows" what the mind of man is capable of and "can look on without a wink" (p. 106). That man, Marlow argues, needs something more than "fine sentiments." He needs "deliberate belief"—he needs an "inborn strength."

The reason for this is clear. Unlike the fool whose glance is timid and oblique, a man is someone who can look squarely into the *heart of darkness*, who can see its "hidden evil" (p. 102), and yet act in spite of it. He is also, Marlow reports, someone who knows that, under these circumstances, he cannot rely on the restraining influence of dimly remembered rules from another, more secure place or time. He knows that he requires a less perishable ground for action—one born not of externals, but of his own sense of self. A man is, therefore, someone who cultivates the self-knowledge which comes through a devotion to "obscure, back-breaking work" (p. 122). What such work yields a man is a presence which emanates in a "voice" whose speech is truly human and, therefore, unable to "be silenced" (p. 106). That it cannot be silenced, Marlow concludes, stems from the fact that it derives its authority not from chimeras or dreams or hollow egotism, but from something real. For "good or ill" then, it is a compelling sense of his own reality and voice, a private conviction of purpose born out of fidelity to the modest lessons gleaned from actual work in the world, which permits Marlow to exercise restraint. Because of this, he can hear the "fiendish row" which the *heart of darkness* throws out to him, he can feel its fatal attraction and yet reject its spectacular promise of a "howl

and a dance” for the less dramatic, if saving, act of tending his “leaky steam-pipes” (p. 106). Certainly, the same cannot be said of the novel’s only other virtuoso: the same cannot be said for Kurtz.

#### V: DELIBERATE BELIEF

There is, of course, something circular in Conrad’s having made belief the function of work, work the active expression of belief, and both the basis for whatever conscious restraint is to be found in the *heart of darkness*. But if it is discouraging to find a circular argument at the bottom of Marlow’s virtuoso performance, it is still more discouraging to consider the alternatives. Certainly Conrad’s straggling cast of characters in the novella suggests that there are strikingly few options for those who have no wish to be fools, no hope of becoming angels, who would act in the world and yet not become Kurtz. Yet, if it is true, as Marlow (like Aristotle) tells us, that fools and angels are in no danger of being “assaulted by the powers of darkness” (p. 122), that it is only *men* who are susceptible to contamination by the “sights, sounds and smells of the earth” (p. 122), how are we to understand Conrad’s use of the word “man” in this context? Moreover, in the face of formidable differences in his characters’ response to the moral wilderness of the jungle—differences which range from the weary pilgrims’ “insane ineffectualness” to the accountant’s busy routine, from Marlow’s impressive resistance to the “sights, sounds and smells of the earth” to Kurtz’s lavish passage “beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations” (p. 144)—can we, finally, believe that “digging holes” and “deliberate belief” are enough to keep a man from going “terribly wrong”?

What seems to be the case is that Conrad neither cedes all his characters equal weight as men nor permits work informed by belief to serve everyone equally well. Throughout the story, for example, Marlow makes a fundamental distinction between the status of the “weary pilgrims” and that of almost everyone else. Even after the calamitous events at the Inland Station, when the pilgrims throw him into an “unwanted partnership” with Kurtz, Marlow does not recoil from their feeble slander. Rather he accepts it, grateful, as he says, to be offered his “choice of nightmares” (pp. 138, 146, 141). One can infer from this that Marlow, at least, views the pilgrims as something less than “men.” What they are instead, we learn, are “flabby devils,” a species of counterfeit men. Moreover they are counterfeit men who practice a counterfeit form of restraint—one whose essence is a certain vague attention to “appearances” (pp. 94, 113).

In Marlow’s opinion, the pilgrims are creatures incapable of any sincere belief. Their specialty is the superficial observance of accepted social forms. In public, for example, they engage in polite displays of concern for Kurtz—a

man whom they fear and envy. In private, they subject his name to extravagant calumny (pp. 91, 99–102). What this kind of hollow pretence produces at close range, Marlow implies, is simply a feeling of revulsion, its long-range effect, however, is quite different. The pilgrims' inability to generate or express sincere conviction or to engage in an honest day's work, Marlow decides, leads less to an atmosphere of vileness than one of insane ineffectualness. Indeed, from the first to the last, the sight of them at their "business" invokes from him a sense of "lugubrious drollery" (p. 38). Having no real purchase on their situation nor any way of acquiring it, the "bewitched pilgrims" operate within a narrow band of behaviors. They either wait for something to happen—a "special act of creation perhaps"—or they fill the empty spaces of the *heart of darkness* with an aimless barrage of shells. That Conrad perceives the "weary pilgrims" to be less men than "small souls" seems perfectly clear. That he believes the accountant, the cannibals, and the helmsman to be men, but men who lack that self-consciousness which might make them fully human, seems equally clear. The problem, of course, is to decide what Conrad thinks of Kurtz.

What we discover is that Kurtz, unlike Marlow, is someone who has tried to confront the awful reality of the *heart of darkness* without benefit of conviction. His capacity for choice and his exercise of judgment are radically impaired. And they are, Marlow would have us believe, because Kurtz's character is based not on something real or palpable, but rather on raw "devotion . . . to [self]" (p. 122). What makes this especially problematic, Marlow continues, is that Kurtz's "devotion to self" is less a reflection of actual achievement than the product of popular approval (p. 119). In other words, his egotism is a hollow sham, little more than the unstable extension of his ability to reflect others' images of themselves through his own "gift of expression" (p. 119). Because he is so thoroughly a creature of opinion, he is less a virtuoso performer than a talented actor. He is simply someone adept at assuming roles and at learning lines. Consequently, what brings him to the Inland Station is less a studied conviction about or practical plan for combining trade and philanthropy than an ability to make himself the instrument and voice of those in the trading company who wish to promote their African interests in this way.

The tragedy of this, Marlow observes, is that in the jungle Kurtz's eloquence finds no suitable audience. Quite literally, his moral sentiments fall on deaf ears. And since he is a man "hollow at the core," someone who possesses no "real presence" outside of the approval which others give him, he proves quite incapable of generating any convincing "voice." Lacking an audience, he simply cannot translate his own words into a meaningful plan of action. In short, Kurtz is defenseless against the terrors of the *heart of darkness*. Having once "taken counsel with the great solitude," having once heard its "fascinating whisper," Kurtz responds by playing his strong suit. He "kick[s] loose of the earth" (p. 143), and passes "beyond the bounds of permitted aspiration" (p.

144). Society's darling becomes the jungle's darling. He becomes, until his last act of judgment, not a man, but a reflection of the jungle, its voice and servant—an "initiated wraith from the back of Nowhere" (p. 133).

What Marlow's story makes clear, then, is that while work is a necessary part of what makes a man a human being, it alone is not sufficient. Equally important is conscious or deliberate belief. To be fully human, in other words, involves both action and choice. However, if Conrad believes that men must necessarily work to some conscious end, there must be some "small matter" (p. 133) which enables a man to act on a meaningful belief. In short, just as work alone cannot save a man from going "terribly wrong" in the *heart of darkness* neither can work informed by just any kind of belief. Without a real, substantial belief, Conrad seems to imply, one either labors dumbly with an almost animal-like patience to keep up appearances, or one succumbs to an all-encompassing corruption. To act meaningfully, then, one must be in possession of an animating idea, an "unselfish belief" that goes beyond the mere promotion of self (pp. 69–70). In short, one must have a principled and moral will.

Although Conrad is never explicit about what makes for such deliberate belief, one can infer from his portrait of Marlow that it is a certain independence of mind. What seems to be the case is that it is the self-constituted nature of Marlow's belief which makes it the fit basis for work and, therefore, the key to restraint in the face of a moral wilderness. The question of why Marlow, almost alone among the jungle's sad residents, possesses this disposition toward independence is left singularly unresolved. One senses from the comments of the story's anonymous narrator that Marlow's background has prepared him to embrace and act on some substantial idea. But Conrad never tells us this directly, nor ought we to assume that Marlow is the exemplar of any particular social group. Rather, all the reader knows for sure is that unlike Kurtz, the pilgrims, or Marlow's coworkers who are variously enslaved to their boundless passions, to "lying fame, . . . sham distinction [and] all the appearances of success and power" (p. 146), or to unthinking routine, Marlow is a decision-taker capable of an elementary act of restraint. That he is the only such man is, perhaps, one of the telling points in this *fin-de-siècle* novella. It may also be, along with his portrait of Kurtz, Conrad's chief warning to a new age of organization, bureaucratic routine, and an exotic and lethal unrestraint.

## VI: CONCLUSION

What relevance, then, does Conrad's tale have for contemporary liberals? In what ways does the *Heart of Darkness* shed light on our condition? At one level, the answer to these questions is that Conrad's novella forcefully reiterates the warnings of others. For example, Conrad, like Rousseau, thinks the commercial nexus of civil society is an inappropriate brake on the passions.

Following Mill, he is also concerned with the moral compression that attends liberalism's susceptibility to the force of opinion. But most importantly, Conrad, like de Tocqueville, suspects that liberal societies may generate a whole new breed of men. He is afraid, in other words, that passionate, self-interested men, when they operate in an environment devoid of a secure moral ethos, will lose any sense of themselves. He is frightened, in short, of the specter of Kurtz, by the vision of "hollow men."

What makes all this especially provocative is that the very conditions which define the *heart of darkness* are, with growing frequency, being attributed to liberal societies in general.<sup>13</sup> These societies, too, it is said, are characterized by the prevalence of greed. And though this motive is surely built into the liberal vision of man, it is also one that has, in the past, been contained. Now, however, the moral restraints which once tethered the passions have decayed.<sup>14</sup> The authority of the state has been enfeebled by challenges to the legitimacy of any public force. So, too, have men's ethico-religious sentiments lost much of their capacity to restrain. For though these sentiments still abound, they speak discordantly. Even the purportedly "neutral" constraints of civil society no longer confine. Rather, they are seen as constraints to be manipulated in the service of self. In short, many observers allege that the ethical and political capital of liberalism has been spent. Hence, liberalism, left to its own devices, is unable to rely upon the passion-restraining authority of either the state's laws, the gods' commandments, or the economy's invisible hand. In such a situation, liberal society takes on a forbidding and foreboding aspect. It becomes rather like a *heart of darkness*.

But Conrad does more than simply reprise in dramatic form the concerns that others laid out in sociological or philosophical analyses. And he does more than create an imaginary condition that happens to mirror the character of contemporary liberal societies. For with his portrait of Marlow, Conrad depicts a man who survives the *darkness*. Marlow overcomes its dangers: his moral sensibilities are not overwhelmed. Nor is he left empty and hollow. Seen from this perspective, what Conrad has provided is a model of survival in the liberal world. Sadly, though, Conrad fails to supply an etiology for Marlow's restraint. Perhaps none can be given. Nonetheless what is telling is the degree to which Marlow's restraint, ineffable as it may be, looks like a Kantian act of will. It partakes, too, of Aristotle's sketch of the virtuous man. For like each of these paradigms of rational, moral agency, Marlow realizes that, "[f]irst, he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and, third, he must also do them from a

13. In this regard, consider Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* [Boston: Beacon, 1973]; and William P. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982].

14. Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976].

firm and unchanging state.”<sup>15</sup> The foundation for Marlow’s restraint does, after all, rest within himself. It is his own will which withstands the natural and passionate hedonism of the jungle, the self-interested, economic attractions of the ivory, and the social flattery of the pilgrims. So, too, is his restraint practiced without regard for external reward. Not utility, but self-control, is his aim. And he pursues this aim relentlessly. Thus, when Marlow acts in accord with Conrad’s standards for “humanity,” he also conforms to the expectations of Kant and Aristotle. He behaves as a rational and moral being.

Yet there is more to it than this. For in Marlow, Conrad has not only delivered a figure confronting all the failed or failing forms of liberal man. He has also described Marlow in the profoundly empirical way. As such, the example of Marlow can be used to invest Kant’s moral agent and Aristotle’s “great-souled man” with a concreteness that enlivens these philosophic ideals. This is no mean achievement, for Kant’s rational agent has always seemed rather distant and abstract. So much so, in fact, that more than one thinker has been prepared to dismiss Kant’s scheme as simply an idealist’s fantasy. And Aristotle’s virtuous man, while never so abstract, has remained a figure hard to place in the here and now. But if Kant’s ideal appears unduly refined, and Aristotle’s somewhat anachronistic, the same cannot be said of their “empirical” realization in the *Heart of Darkness*. There is, in short, nothing unreal or incredible about Marlow. Nor is there anything about him which is remote or untimely.

What Marlow’s journey to the *heart of darkness* suggests, then, is that there are safeguards for a liberal universe. However, these can only be found within the moral reserves of individual human beings. Of course, it is also clear that these safeguards are hard to establish, and they are even harder to sustain. For though work and routine will often deflect the passions, and though commerce and public opinion can channel the behavior of interested men, none of these restraints is completely reliable or sufficient. In short, neither society’s conventions nor the polity’s laws will adequately restrain liberal man. Ultimately, then, the security of a liberal society depends on the sense of purposiveness and autonomy of those who inhabit it. In this respect, at least, the durability of the liberal political universe rests on the presence and vitality of values and mores which are themselves *not* the products of liberalism.<sup>16</sup> Some other commitments, be they to a “categorical imperative” or to a *telos* of virtuous action, must undergird liberal man.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that Conrad’s tale should imply such a conclusion. For by the time Conrad wrote, liberalism was, as we have seen, under considerable outside pressure. What is noteworthy, though, is the frequency with which Conrad’s judgment is reiterated today, and reiterated by self-professed

15. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985], p. 40.

16. A similar point regarding liberalism’s need for both an empirically situated and extratomistic moral vision is central to the argument of Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982].

liberals. Setting aside such obvious, substantiating examples as John Rawls and Alan Gewirth, each of whom grounds his liberalism on a Kantian, deontological base, or the examples of Robert Nozick and Bruce Ackerman, who, in turn, invoke either the notion of “rights” or the “technology” of a “perfect justice” to sustain their views, it seems especially appropriate to look at the liberalisms of James Fishkin and William Galston.<sup>17</sup> In *Beyond Subjective Morality*, Fishkin addresses the task of finding a minimally “objective” basis for ethico-political decision-making—one that will restrain us from succumbing to the nihilism so apparent in the *heart of darkness*. Stymied in his quest by liberalism’s too-frequent association with a thoroughgoing value noncognitivism, Fishkin asserts the need for a transformation in the character of metaethical judgment.<sup>18</sup> He calls, in short, for a revolutionary change in the way liberalism deals with moral issues. Only such a step beyond the traditional parameters of liberal thought will both preclude a dangerous ethical subjectivism and protect liberalism from its detractors. In short, liberalism is to save itself by incorporating extraliberal norms.

Similarly, William Galston sets out, in *Justice and the Human Good*, to discover the bases for a sound, liberal conception of justice. What he concludes with, however, is a neo-Aristotelian appeal. Galston finds that any sensible understanding of justice rests upon an antecedent appreciation of the human good; in short, it rests on a conception of the *telos* of man. Without such a conception, Galston avers, there can be no feel for the appropriate direction for human action. Nor can there be any sense of the necessary boundaries on behavior. Hence, a just and good polity needs citizens possessed of a purpose and capable of a self-restraint that only an agreed upon *telos* can foster.

Here again one finds an echo of Conrad’s conclusions. For both Fishkin and Galston’s arguments call for the development of citizens who are able to look beyond themselves, who can recognize the need for self-restraint, and who are prepared to structure their own way of acting in the world. Of course, if they are to create that “small matter” which will allow them to be fully human, then such citizens must, as Conrad suggested, look beyond the traditional boundaries and premises of Anglo-American liberalism. In fact, they might do well to look at Marlow. After all, it is Marlow’s sense of himself, his cognizance of the world about him, and his commitment to working within it that restrains and saves him. Only by nurturing this way of being in the world—only by developing citizens who can meet these standards of purposive and humane agency—can liberal societies hope to secure themselves against the *heart of darkness*.

17. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971]; Alan Gewirth, *Human Rights* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982]; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* [New York: Basic Books, 1974]; Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970]; James Fishkin, *op. cit.*; William Galston, *op. cit.*

18. Fishkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 153–57.