Conrad and the American Empire

Debra Candreva

Joseph Conrad offers some of the most notoriously contested writing on imperialism in nineteenth-century literature. In this article, I use two of his stories ("An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness*) to argue that his critique of imperialism is as relevant today as it was in his own time.

Conrad's critique of imperialism is twofold. First and most simply, he condemns it as an economically exploitative endeavor. Second, and more importantly, he rejects the "idealistic" claim often invoked to justify imperialism as the bearer of progress, enlightenment, and other supposedly universal liberal values. This second critique causes Conrad the most difficulty, largely because his rejection of idealism is only partial. I argue that the most controversial aspects of his work are manifestations of a philosophical struggle between universalistic idealism on the one hand, and relativistic skepticism on the other. In this, Conrad contends with a problem that historically has challenged both liberalism and its conservative critics alike. Moreover, it continues to challenge both perspectives today, particularly in the debate over so-called American imperialism.

The idea of an "American Empire" has become one of the most widely and contentiously debated subjects in American politics in recent years. For many, determining our proper role in the world order requires that we find firm philosophical ground on which to claim the universality of values like freedom and democracy.[1] Certainly, the political rhetoric of the Bush administration drew heavily from an array of ideas and images implying that such firmness had already been achieved.[2] The stakes of such an assumption are high, particularly if the supposed universality of the values associated with American democracy is viewed as justifying the use of military and other power to defend or to spread those values.

Such an argument has become newly salient, but its substance is not new. Rather, it is a direct outgrowth of liberalism's history. Liberalism's commitments include the ideas of natural human equality and individual liberty and individual rights not only as foundational but as universal. In its classical form, this rests on a view of human nature as a set of characteristics or tendencies universally shared by all human beings, and an optimistic view of human rationality as the basis for consent and the key to progress.

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The paradox is that the universalistic elements in liberalism can lend themselves especially well to some highly illiberal practices. The tendency in the nineteenth century to justify imperial conquest on the grounds of a so-called "civilizing mission" is a manifestation of this problem. The premise that one's own society and culture are the result of progress, reason, and enlightenment can lead to the conclusion that any person or society not conforming to one's own standards may be justifiably compelled to do so. J. S. Mill, in his "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," offers a striking example of this. Although Mill was passionately devoted to individual liberty and toleration, he posited a fundamental difference between "civilized" societies and "barbarians." This allowed him to draw the surprising conclusion that "conquering and subjugation will be good for uncivilized peoples."[3] As this example suggests, the tension between liberalism and its universalistic currents is particularly pronounced in the context of imperialism, and thus was a particular problem in the nineteenth century when imperialism was at its peak.[4]

Of course, not all imperialistic endeavors were really motivated by such idealistic (if also seriously misguided) impulses: many justified imperialism primarily as a commercial endeavor. It is indeed possible to claim, as many have, that even the most profit-driven imperial endeavors can bring with them beneficial features, from technological improvements to political institutions to artistic developments.[5] Such an argument does not necessarily deny the possibility of exploitation, but it maintains that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

In this article, I argue that Conrad recognized and was highly suspicious of both lines of argument. While he strongly and clearly rejects the commercially exploitative

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aspects of imperialism, however, he had much more difficulty with the question of imperialistic idealism. Although he ultimately chooses skepticism as the preferable alternative, he was unable to fully resolve the tension between the two extremes. A brief look at the contours of contemporary debate about so-called American imperialism reveals that the same tensions continue to animate debate about the role of the United States in the world today.

To make an argument such as this, using Conrad as the centerpiece, it is necessary to think about the connections between politics and literature more broadly. One way to look at it is to say that we can see in literature the same benefits Aristotle perceived in "poetry," specifically, that it concerns the probable or the plausible rather than the actual. On Aristotle's view, history depicts the way specific individuals have spoken or acted. In contrast, poetry depicts the way a particular character in a particular situation might speak or act.[6] In so doing, poetic writing invites and indeed requires us to use our judgment in order to determine what words or actions would be reasonable, likely, or praiseworthy—or unreasonable, unlikely, or disgraceful—in a given set of circumstances. In this way, Aristotle's view of poetry shares something in common with his view of the practical science of politics. Each one combines practical and theoretical reflection in which one considers not only what is ideal, but also what is appropriate and what is actual in order to determine what is best for a particular situation.[7]

To some extent, Conrad shares the basic premises of this view, as his fiction serves precisely the function identified by Aristotle: that is, to paint portraits of particular situations and particular characters, to show how they might act under given circumstances, and to invite our judgment about those actions. Indeed, Conrad was explicit in his view that fiction ought to begin from a practical rather than theoretical standpoint. The "first virtue" of the novelist, he writes, "is the exact understanding of the limits traced by the reality of his time to the play of his invention. Inspiration comes from the earth, which has a past, a history, a future, not from the cold and immutable heaven."[8]

Such statements express a clear preference for the tangible over the metaphysical. Nevertheless, Conrad causes much confusion on this point by repeatedly hinting at the existence of universally binding ideals and principles. Not unlike Plato's Socrates, Conrad intimates such universals without ever fully substantiating them. Indeed, some of Conrad's own contemporaries even saw in these hints a very explicit connection to Plato's theory of Forms, although Conrad chafed at the comparison. After reading one such argument about himself, Conrad complained to his friend Edward Garnett, "there is even one . . . creature who says I am a neo-Platonist. What on earth is that?"[9]

The ambiguities in Conrad's writings have led to intense debate about whether he is a critic of or an apologist for imperialism, but to present the problem in this way is to misstate the alternatives. Ultimately, Conrad defends Western culture and values without concluding that those values are universally valid. Like both the conservative critique of liberalism expressed by Burke and the more radical version advanced by Rousseau, Conrad's fiction explores the benefits of embracing the values and commitments of a particular culture as well as the inevitable limitations and drawbacks of doing so. His position is at times a difficult one to maintain, and it cannot be said that he fully and successfully reconciles the tension between the problematic alternatives he explores. His importance instead consists in the way he calls our attention to a dilemma that continues to characterize contemporary political debate.

Interpreting Conrad

Conrad has a number of stories that all focus on a similar theme in somewhat different contexts, of which I have selected two: "An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness.*[10] Perhaps the most obvious difference between them is in their popularity. *Heart of Darkness* is widely read among academics and students alike, and is so widely critiqued that to contribute to this literature is a daunting enterprise. "An Outpost of Progress," conversely, has received very little attention in comparison, and the responses it has received have differed greatly from one another. V. S. Naipaul declared it the "finest thing Conrad wrote," but the more common view is that it is a lesser work.[11] Indeed, Conrad himself expressed some ambivalence about it, declaring his unhappiness with it on one occasion and citing it as his favorite among his short stories on another.[12]

Both works exhibit a deeply ambiguous attitude toward imperialism, a fact that has generated diametrically opposed interpretations of each. According to some critics "An Outpost of Progress" is a powerful critique of imperialism, while others see it as concrete evidence of imperialism's worst aspects. Ian Watt offers one example of the former view. In "An Outpost of Progress," he writes,

> Conrad was primarily concerned with the colonizers, and there the general purport of his fiction is consistent and unequivocal: imperial or colonial experience is disastrous for the whites; it makes them lazy; it reveals their weaknesses; it puffs them up with empty vanity at being white; and it fortifies the intolerable hypocrisy with which Europeans in general conceal their selfish aims.[13]

As in most of Conrad's works, however, even the sharpest critiques of European hypocrisy have a dangerous double edge. On the one hand, they show the falseness and the folly of the Europeans' attempts to impose their ideals on other peoples in other places. At the same time, as many have noted, Conrad's critique consistently draws from a racially charged vocabulary that is intertwined with

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a number of racist assumptions, including the designation of Africa and of Africans as primitive, savage, uncivilized, and dangerous.

The most famous articulation of this critique is Chinua Achebe's denunciation of Conrad (particularly in *Heart of Darkness*) as a "thoroughgoing racist."[14] To those who maintain that Conrad's real goal is to critique Europeans, Achebe replies that this is part of his point. Conrad's critique of Europe, he contends, rests on the construction of Africa as a foil, a negation, and a prop, devoid of humanity or even of its own individuality. Worse still, he continues, this attitude is not confined to *Heart of Darkness* or even to the works of Conrad. Rather, the racist assumptions are part of a prevailing attitude with very tangible political and social consequences in the real world. In Achebe's view, to "celebrate" these attitudes in fiction, even under the guise of critiquing them, is to further entrench them in reality.

Applying a similar observation to "An Outpost of Progress," A. J. M. Johnson has rightly noted that this story's clear indictment of European imperialism is also grounded in a racially charged set of dynamics. As he puts it, however foolish, thoughtless, misguided, and ignorant the Europeans may be in this tale, they are still portrayed as superior to the Africans.[15] For Johnson, as for Achebe, Conrad's critique of European imperialism still rests on the problematic African foil that serves as its backdrop.

Conrad's use of racist categories and language, well documented by Achebe and others, can make him difficult to defend and often leaves those who try to do so with an air of desperation about their attempts. They claim, for example, that Conrad's use of racist images are a parody rather than a true expression of his views, and that he only uses this type of imagery and vocabulary in order to critique it.[16] Others refer to Conrad's political views, citing things like his opposition to the Boer War as evidence that he was a strong critic of imperialism and of the racism it fostered, regardless of what one might find in the content of his stories.

Edward Said's well known analysis of Conrad strikes a middle ground, arguing that Conrad does expose the contingency of imperialism, but that he nevertheless fails either to get beyond this contingency or to point to an alternative.[17] Without denying that he opposed the policies of imperialism because of the racism and violence they engendered, Said's view suggests that Conrad remained stuck within a vocabulary that re-inscribes the very things he sought to critique.

Yet another way to look at it is to say that Conrad was less concerned to write about specific individuals than he was to reflect on a particular situation: that is, the experience of the European expatriate. Indeed, some have suggested that this theme so dominates Conrad's work that he "very nearly wrote the same book over and over again." As Lloyd Fernando puts it, Conrad's stories repeatedly examine the range of responses individuals might have, whether rightly or wrongly, justifiably or otherwise, to a particular kind of experience: the encounter with another culture.[18] This experience, stated more philosophically, is in essence the experience of confronting the limitations of one's own values. The significance of the "expatriate" experience in Conrad's rendering of it is the challenge of determining whether the beliefs that apply in one's own political, social, and historical context also hold true beyond that context. In other words, it is the question of whether one's values are universally valid, or only locally and contingently so.

Conrad's fiction struggles to choose between a problematic universalism on one side, and relativism on the other. Relativism, as Berlin famously put it, is the view that "I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said."[19] As a political statement, such a view is dangerous indeed, in that it undermines the grounds on which to condemn practices of another culture that one finds objectionable or morally abhorrent.[20]

The basic problem of universalism, as Conrad was well aware, is that it can actually restrict our ability to appreciate particular details and hence to properly understand—and to act in—the world. At the same time, he is unwilling to adopt an extreme form of relativism that would accept all cultures as equally valuable. In his view, all people—Western and non-Western alike—are the product of their histories, both individually and collectively. The real difficulty is caused by the fact that he clearly prefers one set of historical experiences and values over the other: he prefers European culture to that of non-Western peoples, and British culture to that of the rest of Europe.[21] This, as recent debate about multiculturalism has pointed out, is the downside of local attachments: they are local precisely because they are not universal, and as such they are exclusionary.

For this reason, both sides of the debate about Conrad described above are in some sense correct. Those who defend him as a critic of imperialism respond to the currents in his writing rejecting the universalism that would justify imposing one's values forcibly onto others. Those who critique him as racist respond to the exclusionary current, in which his embrace of particularity also entails strong and clearly hierarchical distinctions among differing sets of values.

Although Conrad's fiction exemplifies this problem in a specific way, the difficulty isn't Conrad's alone. Rather, as I will argue, in his writings he grapples with—but does not fully resolve—the fundamental philosophical tension between universal and particular in liberal thought. This tension, which troubled both critics and defenders of enlightenment thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to a large extent remains unresolved, and continues to cast a shadow over political thinking today.

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The Limits of Universalism

To explore Conrad's fiction in light of its philosophical influences is a difficult task. While there are many elements in his stories that seem to express this or that philosophical perspective, few of these references are explicit enough to trace confidently back to their sources. Moreover, Conrad explicitly rejects the attempt to find a philosophy in literature. "Liberty of imagination should be the most precious possession of a novelist," he writes. "To try to voluntarily discover the fettering dogmas of some romantic, realistic, or naturalistic creed in the free work of its own inspiration is a trick worthy of human perverseness."[22]

Still, much in Conrad's writing seems deeply philosophical. Ian Watt summarizes the problem nicely. "But if Conrad disclaims being a thinker," he writes, "he strikes us as very thoughtful; and if we cannot call him a philosopher, the intimations of his fictional world steadily invite ethical and even metaphysical response."[23]

In pursuit of these intimations, some commentators have sought to find the direct influence of particular philosophers on Conrad's writing, while others have highlighted the way he expresses currents of thought influential in his day. One of the most interesting of this latter type of interpretation comes from Avrom Fleishman. Fleishman situates Conrad "squarely within the organicist tradition" informed by Romantic, Victorian, and German idealist influences.[24] Fleishman's interpretation is particularly strong in its recognition of the importance of Burke and Rousseau both to this tradition and to Conrad as well; however, there are ways in which his analysis does not go far enough.

First, there is the matter of evidence. According to Fleishman, Conrad "formed himself, consciously or unconsciously, in the 'great tradition' of nineteenth century British fiction," which in turn followed in tandem with the philosophical currents he discusses. He concludes that there is "no need to establish that Conrad read" any of the philosophers to whom he compares him, as their influence was "so pervasive. . . as to affect anyone who grew up in their shadow."[25] While there is merit to this claim, it understates the extent to which some knowledge of these thinkers on Conrad's part is very likely. As others have suggested, Conrad's references to a variety of philosophical thinkers—including Plato, Rousseau, Carlyle, and others—in both his stories and his personal letters indicates more than a passing awareness of their works.

Second, and more importantly, although the links between Burke and Conrad are abundant, there are also some significant differences. Conrad was deeply divided over the degree to which local traditions and practices might be said to contain a universal element. On the one hand, he wanted to avoid the pessimistic conclusion that there is no metaphysical support for our most fundamental beliefs and values.[26] On the other hand, he is often more skeptical even than Burke in the extent to which he thinks it is possible to avoid such a conclusion.

The subject matter of Conrad's writing invites even more speculation. This is especially true of works like *Heart of Darkness* in which Africa appears to have the status of an imaginary past, pre-social condition rather than that of a specific location. "Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. . . . We were wanderers on prehistoric earth," reflects Marlow.[27] It is no surprise that commentators would be tempted to read this and other passages like it as an argument about the "state of nature." Those who do so find it pessimistically Hobbesian, hinting at seething undercurrents of "frenzy" and unrestrained passion beneath the trappings of culture and civilization human beings since have given to themselves.[28]

Hobbes of course is infamous for having described life outside civil society as necessarily "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[29] This, like any view of the state of nature, is essentially a device for making claims about supposedly essential or fundamental and hence universal human characteristics. For Hobbes those characteristics include, first and foremost, an overriding impulse toward one's own self-interest, and second, a basic equality among all individuals. According to Hobbes's well known view, human beings are relatively equal not only in their self-interested character but also in their ability to get what they want, whether through their physical strength or their intellectual capacities. This essential equality—a nominally liberal element of his thought—is for Hobbes both the cause of conflict and the reason that human beings must establish a powerful authority. Thus, he offers a universalist premise with a correspondingly universal conclusion.

If Conrad does indeed have a view of "human nature," it is articulated only incompletely. In his view, if humans share anything in common, it is unspecified, "mysterious," and "inscrutable," without clear meaning and containing a combination of positive and negative attributes. Further, what distinguishes Conrad from Hobbes most fully is his refusal to draw any universal conclusions from his premises. On this point, Conrad is much more similar to Rousseau. For Rousseau, the progression from the natural to the civilized state is not guided by any causal or predictable chain of events. Where Hobbes, in contrast, identified the basis of the social contract in the laws of nature—that is, a series of universally consistent rules found out through reason—Rousseau posits no such laws. Instead, he continually indicates that the real reasons for our passage into civil society are haphazard, and in some ways quite unfathomable. "Man is born free," Rousseau writes at the beginning of the *Social Contract,* "and everywhere he is in chains. . . . How did this change take place? I have no idea."[30]

In fact, it isn't entirely true that Rousseau has *no* idea about this; what he is really saying is that he believes there is a significant element of chance, unpredictability,

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and particularity to human development. Each of our civilization's creations—ideas of justice, property, or morality, for example—is both artificial and accidental. He describes property, for example, as the product of one person's decision to appropriate land by uttering those infamous and fateful words, "*this is mine.*"[31] But even this, he continues, required a variety of previously formed ideas;[32]; moreover, those ideas required language;[33] and language developed arbitrarily and unevenly, in response to natural circumstances.[34]

Thus, for Rousseau as for Conrad, there is actually very little connection between our "nature" and the civilizational artifacts layered upon it. Where they diverge most sharply, however, is in their judgments about those artifices. In short, Rousseau believes that civilization—particularly European civilization—corrupts. Reason, in his view, intensifies rather than relieves conflict; the sciences destroy virtue; the arts have replaced integrity with the desire for praise; and decadent luxury enfeebles humanity while so-called norms of "justice" oppress it.

Rousseau is equally critical about what he perceives as the gradual loss of heterogeneity, again mostly a European ailment. He writes, "a vile and deceitful uniformity reigns in our mores, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold."[35] Travel to other places—what today we might call globalization—only worsens the problem. Through "commerce, voyages and conquests," argues Rousseau, European countries have continuous and increasingly close contact with one another and consequently become more and more alike.[36] Those who travel more distantly, continues Rousseau, do no better; just as Hobbes attributed society's qualities to his allegedly "natural" man, so too do travel writers with more exotic destinations see only themselves in other peoples. Woefully inattentive to differences, this "philosophizing rabble" erroneously concludes "that men are everywhere the same; that, since everywhere they have the same passions and the same vices, it is rather pointless to seek to characterize different peoples."[37]

Although Conrad and Rousseau share the basic view that human development is haphazard and heterogeneous, Rousseau is far more adamant in his call for drastic reform, particularly in the *Social Contract.* Conrad, conversely, prefers preservation to renovation. This preference is one he shares strongly with Burke, who likewise has a deep appreciation for the particular traditions, practices, and inherited values in a society. For Burke, the most important thing about "prejudices"—our specific inherited beliefs and traditions—is that they foster our attachment to local identities. Burke famously puts it this way: "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind."[38]

Despite the clear emphasis on local attachments in this quote, it is striking that Burke justifies these attachments with reference to a more universal standard: that is, the love of mankind.[39] The direction suggested in this quote is important: for Burke, one must always proceed from the particular to the general, and never the other way around. This is the basis of Burke's critique of abstract philosophy in the *Reflections.* In his view, the French revolutionaries erred in ignoring the norms generated by their specific history and its particular practices. Instead, he argues, they attempted to apply abstract ideas (like the "rights of man") onto practice in a way that threatened to destroy the existing fabric of society. Abstractions of this sort may be "metaphysically true," but because they also may be "morally and politically false," they are not an appropriate basis for practice.[40]

For Burke, if there is anything universal to be discovered, it can never be found through metaphysical speculation. Instead, elements of it can be found only through the processes of history that would generate and reveal those elements. This at least partly teleological element is present in the *Reflections,* but even more clearly so in his speeches on British policy in India.[41] In these speeches, Burke criticizes the activities of the East India Company in general, but he also focuses specifically on the abuses he believed had been perpetrated by Warren Hastings, former governor of Bengal.

Strikingly, much of Burke's attack on Hastings appears to draw on principles that stand above and beyond contingent practices—in other words, precisely the kind of universals we might expect him to reject. Hastings, in Burke's opinion, has not only breached British law; he has committed crimes against "eternal laws of justice."[42] He condemns Hastings and the others in the East India Company for abandoning real moral principles in favor of a "Geographical morality," which wrongly would suggest that "when you have crossed the equinoctial line all the virtues die."[43]

In Burke's view, the benefits of longstanding traditions and practices are not merely that they provide stability. More importantly, he believes they act as the source of the moral principles that transcend geographical and other local boundaries. These are precisely the grounds on which he defends Britain's "constitution" early in the *Reflections*: they have generated important ideas and institutions, including "an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties." In Burke's view, these are demonstrably better than other alternatives, and they provide a kind of "wisdom without reflection" that yields a standard—indeed, the only standard—by which to measure conduct.[44]

Burke believes that what is best in Britain's "inheritances" will be consistent with what is best in other traditions as well. In the speeches on the Hastings trial, Burke

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examines the historical foundations of Indian government, and concludes that it rests on precedents and principles that in his view are very much like those of the British Constitution. Citing among other things the Koran, the "Fetfa" (*fetwa;* "sentence of the law"), the "Kanon" (*Kanun;* "regulations to supplement. . . *Sharia*"), and the "Rage ul Mulk" (*Ravaj al Mulk;* "custom of the state"), he argues that "they have laws from more sources than we have, exactly in the same order, grounded upon the same authority, fundamentally fixed to be administered to the people upon these principles."[45] Though Burke may overstate the parallels between the two systems of law, this overstatement reveals the partly universalistic element in his thinking.

This aspect of Burke's thought creates a challenge for those who would draw comparisons between Conrad and Burke. While Conrad sometimes hints at similarly teleological elements, he does not go nearly as far as Burke in identifying a clear set of standards that might be applied across cultures. To clarify this difference, it is useful to compare Conrad to a second and later strand of conservatism, best expressed by Michael Oakeshott. Like Burke, Oakeshott emphasizes the importance of traditions and practices; and again like Burke, he is opposed to the pursuit of philosophical abstractions in political life.

Oakeshott, though, does not object to these things because he fears that they would violate universally valid norms, or that they would interrupt our progress toward such norms. Instead, his opposition is based primarily on his view that those abstractions threaten stability.

Oakeshott famously uses the analogy of a ship to illustrate his view of the activity of politics. "In political activity," Oakeshott writes, "men sail a boundless and bottomless sea: there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel."[46] Significantly, in denying the possibility of either a concrete starting point or an arrival, this view denies precisely the kind of teleology strongly intimated by Burke. Oakeshott's skepticism runs even deeper than that of Burke, in that he rejects the idea that our histories and practices can reveal any substantive norms of right or wrong, good or bad.

Many of the tensions in Conrad's fiction stem from the fact that he is essentially caught between these two alternatives. On the one hand, he is suspicious of universalism and of the many negative consequences that follow from it. On the other hand, however, he is also concerned about the loss of ideals as a problem for individuals and society alike.[47] Those who identify Conrad as conservative are partly correct, but they fail to note the way he occupies a position between the two kinds of conservatism described above.

In "An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness* Conrad takes up the problem of universalism not through the nautical imagery one might expect, but rather through the metaphor of sight. In so doing, he emphasizes that universals can create a kind of blindness. To view the world through universalistic lenses actually limits understanding; their generality limits the scope of what can be "seen." This metaphor runs throughout his writing, and extends even to his view of the task of the literary artist. He describes this task as follows: "by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see.* That . . . and no more, and it is everything."[48]

In the stories addressed here, Conrad is concerned with two types of blindness in particular. One is that which results from the failure to recognize the contingent character of one's own beliefs. As the following sections will show, Conrad plainly criticizes this in some ways, but he is not always perfectly consistent in this critique. Indeed, he even indicates that there are certain circumstances in which this type of blindness is not only acceptable, but is even potentially beneficial.

The second type of blindness is a more extreme version of the first. Here, Conrad rejects not merely the failure to perceive limitations, but the desire to treat as universal what is in fact particular. This is something about which Conrad is far more consistently critical, though again we will see that there are cases in which he believes this error is actually preferable to its alternatives.

Ultimately, Conrad is best understood in light of these philosophical currents, as they illuminate the way in which he sought to negotiate between the claims of particular, local norms and more universally applicable moral standards. In "An Outpost of Progress," Conrad illustrates the defects of an imperialistic outlook that is unable to see its own limitations. In *Heart of Darkness,* he shows the limits of an even more damaging imperialistic tendency to promote an excessively universalizing idealism.

"An Outpost of Progress": Looking without Seeing

Like many of Conrad's tales, the basic plot of "An Outpost of Progress" is quite simple. It is the story of two Belgians who are left to run a remote and ineffectual ivory trading station, with a staff consisting of an African bookkeeper named Makola and a number of unnamed slaves. As the two Belgians await the return of the steamship that brought them there, a crisis occurs in which Makola sells their slaves in return for a large batch of ivory. After this incident, the nearby tribe which had previously given them assistance ceases to do so, and the men deteriorate physically and mentally until one day, in an absurd accident, one kills the other. The very next day, the steamboat arrives, and the Director of the "Great Company" for which they work finds the dead bodies of the two men. One has been shot, and the other has hung himself from the cross marking the grave of the station chief who had preceded him.

The opening pages of the story, which Conrad intended to convey an "artistic simplicity," offer a most economical—perhaps even stingy—description of two of the key

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characters, Kayerts and Carlier. "There were two white men in charge of the trading station. Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs."[49] Conrad uses the same style to describe the two men's surroundings. The reader is told in very simple language that their residence is a three-room hut; that it is made of reeds and has a plank floor; that it is not far from the off-kilter cross marking the grave of the previous station chief.

These descriptions are most remarkable for how little they offer: they are terse and shallow, providing a few superficial details without suggesting any underlying meaning, and giving minimal information without a trace of insight. A short way into the story, the reasons for this become clearer. By limiting his descriptions in this way, Conrad effectively places the reader in the same position as Kayerts and Carlier, who are defined almost entirely by their shocking lack of insight. Shortly after they arrive, the latter glances around and, wondering if there is money to be made at their new post, mutters "We shall see."[50] In reality, though, the opposite is true: everything else Conrad will tell us about these characters indicates their blindness and their shortsightedness.

At this point in the story, the reader should already suspect that Kayerts and Carlier are decidedly lacking in character. This suspicion is confirmed by the director of the "Great Trading Company" for whom they work. Conrad says almost nothing of this figure apart from his assessment of the two he leaves behind. "Look at those two imbeciles," the director says. "They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. . . . I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station!"[51]

Not only do the director's remarks indicate Kayerts' and Carlier's defects, but they also suggest that the station itself is an ill-conceived project. The director's lament is that of a person told by superiors, who know little about what they authorize, to do something he knows is foolish. In this story, the inability to see consequences and meanings is the hallmark of the whole imperial enterprise, and of all those characters involved with it as well. Conrad writes of the two main characters in this story that they "lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things."[52] Like the global travelers described by Rousseau, they reach "the end of the world" but "understand only what it was for them to notice without leaving their street."[53]

Their myopic perspective renders their surroundings meaningless to them. When they look into the forest, which the reader knows to be populated by others in this story, Kayerts and Carlier see only emptiness. They read some "wrecks of novels" left behind by their predecessor, and respond to these fictions more strongly than they do to reality. Gossiping about the imaginary characters as if they were actual people, Kayerts and Carlier "discounted their virtues, suspected their motives, decried their successes."[54] In perhaps the greatest confusion between fact and fiction, the two come across an old newspaper, which "spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work." Kayerts and Carlier treat this fiction too as a reality, and they speculate vaguely and dreamily about the honor that their work at the outpost will supposedly bring them one day.[55]

All of these observations are made in a single paragraph; but if the point were not yet clear, Conrad definitively drives it home in the last few sentences. Carlier, in a fit of uncharacteristic industriousness, repairs the cross at the grave of the previous station chief, dangling from it to be sure it is secure. Not only is he blind to the future significance of that cross; his actions illustrate how little he and his counterpart think about the past as well. Kayerts is under the impression that the previous station chief had died of fever; Carlier thinks it was from exposure to the sun. They are aware of, but never question, this discrepancy. When Carlier hangs obliviously from this ominous symbol, it dramatizes their failure to recognize any but the most superficial things about their actions.

Given that Conrad attributes so much import to the power of sight, by which he really means insight, his portrayal of their blindness is intended as a damning critique. Yet at the same time, there is another sense in which, for Conrad, blindness of a particular type is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, he even suggests that a form of blindness is the prerequisite of any culture. Conrad writes,

> 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.[56]

Like Burke, Conrad believes that a society's beliefs and values are largely the product of belief rather than of truth. The connection to Burke's idea of "prejudices" as societal anchors is unmistakable. Burke argues in the *Reflections* that a society's prejudices may be illusory, but they are no less necessary as a result. Indeed for Burke as for Conrad, such "pleasing illusions" require a degree of "blindness" as the more they are scrutinized, the more they will be revealed as contingent and thus undermined.[57]

Similarly, Conrad indicates in "An Outpost of Progress" that the real power of a culture's values stems from interpretation rather than truth. For Conrad, an individual's beliefs are not a static artifact; rather, they are the product of one's interpretation of his or her environment, and whether it is seen as protective and stable or not. The disappearance of that perception—that is, when one no

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longer believes oneself safe—results in the apparent confrontation with "pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man," which "brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart."[58]

This confrontation, however, is always only imagined. As the quote above and the trajectory of the story both illustrate, the decline experienced by Kayerts and Carlier comes not from their actual contact with Africa, but from their lack of contact with it or indeed, with anything else. On the one hand, they are removed from the European context which gave them their identity (such as it is); on the other hand, they live in Africa "like blind men," who see nothing other than what is already in their heads. Ultimately, it is this two-fold isolation that leads to their decline.

> To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations—to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike.[59]

Of course, there is also a significant difference between Burke and Conrad on this point. For Burke, the real danger comes from an excess of reason.[60] This, however, is hardly the problem with Kayerts and Carlier. Instead, it is that their inheritances are insufficient to carry them through; they lack character, they lack depth, and most of all they are in a situation which cannot compensate for these defects. It is their isolation—from their own society, from their current environment, and from each other—that ultimately renders their values ineffectual and worthless.

For Conrad, this is not only a critique of the way imperialism destroys the contexts that give societal values their significance. It also conveys strong skepticism about the validity of a society's beliefs, indicating that the authority of any given set of principles and institutions derives only from their context—from the "crowd" that believes blindly in them. For Conrad, there may indeed be safety in the habitual and the customary, but unlike Burke he does not explicitly identify any transcendent goodness in these things.

While he eschews any vision of transcendent goodness, however, Conrad does judge some things as universally wrong, regardless of cultural context. He does this not by dogmatic assertion but by using specific examples that invite the reader to make the same judgment. In this story, he does this by presenting Kayerts and Carlier as more than just absurd; they do things that the reader is meant to understand as explicitly wrong. The ten African "station men" left under Kayerts' and Carlier's care, for example, are ostensibly working for the Company on a temporary contract. In reality, they are little more than slaves, kept against their will at the station for more than two years, with no end to their servitude in sight. They are unhappy, ill, and poorly nourished, and their exploitation is limited only by the incompetence and laziness of the two Belgians. Though inexplicably they do not run away, Conrad describes their condition as little better than death.

In a pivotal part of the story, the bookkeeper Makola sells these men to a violent and warlike tribe passing by the station in exchange for a large load of ivory—the only ivory the station is able to procure. When Kayerts and Carlier discover this, they initially react with indignant horror, but their indignation is superficial and they quickly overcome their objections. "It's deplorable," Carlier rationalizes, "but, the men being Company's men, the ivory is Company's ivory. We must look after it."[61] Conrad makes it clear that the reaction of the two men is as deplorable as the situation itself. This is true not for contingent reasons, but due to the more fundamental inhumanity of their conduct, which Conrad suggests is wrong in any context.[62]

The conclusion of this story, in contrast to the conclusion of *Heart of Darkness,* is an odd combination of tragic and comic. Kayerts and Carlier await the belated return of the steamship in utter isolation. Having alienated the one nearby tribe that had been friendly to them, and that had been supporting them with offers of food and other items, they run perilously low on supplies and exist solely on a diet of boiled rice and coffee. One day, they begin to argue over the small remaining supply of sugar, which Kayerts has locked away in case of "emergency." As Carlier becomes increasingly threatening, Kayerts suddenly becomes aware that Carlier, with whom he has lived for eight months, seems "unknown" and "dangerous."[63] The decline in the relationship between the two men mirrors exactly the dynamic described in the quote analyzed above: it is not the actual threat posed by Carlier, but Kayerts's perception of such a threat, that sets in motion the final actions of the story.

As their argument escalates, Carlier threatens to shoot Kayerts; Kayerts grabs his gun, and they begin their final chase around and around the veranda of the house. As Kayerts runs laboriously around in circles, Conrad writes that he is "unable yet to understand what was happening to him. He saw in succession Makola's house, the store, the river, the ravine, and the low bushes; and he saw all those things again as he ran for the second time round the house. Then again they flashed past him."[64]

Kayerts' disorientation is illustrated here in the shift of perspective that Conrad takes: in his description, it is as if the scenery itself is rotating around, rather than Kayerts who is in motion. Significantly, Conrad gives no description of Carlier; the only information he offers is that which comes through Kayerts's perceptions. As it turns out, his perceptions are entirely wrong. The whole chase is driven by Kayerts's incorrect assumption that Carlier has a gun; and when the two finally collide, Kayerts assumes that he has been shot, even though it is his own gun that has gone off, killing Carlier in the process.

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As Kayerts begins to realize what has occurred, the long-awaited and long-overdue steamship arrives.[65] By the time the director gets ashore, Kayerts has hung himself. The final image of the story is the suspended body of Kayerts, "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."[66]

Conrad could have made this story even darker than it already is, but as the final image indicates, with the dead Kayerts in a gesture of petty defiance, Conrad clearly intends for it to express a darkness of a semi-comic kind. Conrad's cynically humorous touch at the end underscores the theme of blindness by ensuring the overall meaninglessness not only of what has occurred between the two men, but also of the whole enterprise. One can try to imagine what might come next if the story were to continue, but the strongest indication is that nothing would change. The director might shake his head in amazed dismay before burying the two bodies alongside the body of the first station chief. Ultimately, though, there would be no conclusion and no redemption. The death of Kayerts and Carlier would not serve as a reproach to the "Great Trading Company," because unlike the reader, the company cannot "see" the meaning of the story.

In sum, Conrad uses this story to convey two main things. First, he acknowledges that a type of "blindness" is a necessary part of any culture's inheritance: one must believe that one's values are more than arbitrary. However, what may be an advantage in one context becomes a defect in another: specifically, in the context of imperialism, in which a variety of inexperienced and ill-prepared individuals are unleashed into a context they do not understand, to undertake projects whose consequences elude control.

More specifically, Conrad criticizes an imperialism whose main purpose is economic exploitation, and rejects any ideas of "progress" attached to it as overwhelmingly self-evident hypocrisy. For Conrad, the "outpost of progress" is simply a voracious and destructive commercial enterprise, worthy of contempt and condemnation.

One might wonder whether Conrad thinks anything could have redeemed this ill fated outpost, and how the story might be different if Kayerts and Carlier had not been such obviously ignoble figures. The answer is elusive; in this story, Conrad gives us no real way to answer that question. A more extensive if still ambiguous treatment of this theme is found in *Heart of Darkness,* where we will see Conrad contend with a very different type of character: that of an extraordinary individual who becomes corrupt.

Heart of Darkness: The Excesses of Idealism

"An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness* share some similar themes, and often are compared to one another.[67] There are, however, some significant differences between the two works.[68] The latter is considerably longer and more complex, more subtle, and more ambiguous as well. Whereas "Outpost of Progress" offers a fairly straightforward critique of imperialism as an economically exploitative enterprise, *Heart of Darkness* goes further by exploring the ideals often used to justify, and in some cases to obscure, the exploitation.

This theme is established from the very opening lines of *Heart of Darkness.* It is set on the deck of a ship where four men sit listening to the central character, Marlow, tell the story of a trip he made to Africa in his youth. This tale comprises the main portion of the novella, but the initial scene is set by an unnamed narrator who reflects on the history of the Thames, in which their ship is anchored. That river, he notes, has long been a passage of enlightenment, a conduit for "adventurers" and "settlers," "generals," and "interlopers."

> Hunters of gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land. . . 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.[69]

The first time Marlow speaks in this story, it is to undercut this glowing nostalgia. Rather than praising the imperial tradition, as the narrator appears to do, Marlow instead emphasizes the contingent character of Britain's history and traditions. "And this also," he says, meaning London and Great Britain more generally, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."[70]

By this, Marlow doesn't merely mean that Britain's "greatness" has been a historical achievement. He also emphasizes the extent to which the distinction between "enlightenment" and "darkness" is an artifice, a perception rather than a reality. He draws a comparison between the contemporary British and the ancient Romans to illustrate the point. In the past, he muses, the Romans traveled the unknown parts of the world in search of fame, glory, prestige, or pure wealth. As they sailed up the Thames, he speculates, they must have felt themselves surrounded by "the savagery, the utter savagery" of a primitive and unfathomable world.[71]

The parallel is clear: just as the Romans perceived Britain as a primitive and savage place, so too do the British and other Europeans perceive Africa. Though Marlow's words foreshadow this dynamic, he is also implicated in it: he too will describe Africa in these same unflattering terms as he tells his tale. Conrad, though, does not endorse these negative views as true. Rather, he illustrates what he sees as a pronounced tendency for people everywhere to perceive whatever is outside their own culture as mysterious, unfamiliar, and consequently, as dangerous. For the Europeans, as both *Heart of Darkness* and "Outpost of Progress" indicate, the "mystery" and the "savagery" are always only perceptions, related more to the fragility of

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the beholder's beliefs than to the reality of the external world.

For Conrad, the boundary line between idealism and hypocrisy is elusive. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Marlow's infamous evaluation of the difference between British colonists and Roman conquerors. "What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency," claims Marlow. Unlike the British currently, he continues, the Romans in the past "were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. . . . They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale."[72]

Although Marlow appears to posit a firm distinction between "robbery with violence" and a loftier ideal, the distinction doesn't fully withstand scrutiny. Marlow continues his reflection as follows:

> 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.[73]

Commentators have differed widely on the meaning of this passage, but several things suggest an ironic interpretation of it is correct.[74] The first is Conrad's decision to use "efficiency" as the basis on which to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate conquering. An idea of truth or justice might hint at something that is to be valued for its own sake, but "efficiency" is more explicitly instrumental, a characteristic of means rather than of ends. Marlow's words endorse it enthusiastically, but to share this enthusiasm the reader would have to believe in the value of "efficiency" just as strongly as Marlow professes to.

This becomes less and less likely as Conrad reveals the actual consequences of this alleged virtue. A French warship sits off the coast, "incomprehensible, firing into a continent."[75] The outer ivory station is a "scene of inhabited devastation"; an overturned railway car is "lying on its back" and resembles "the carcass of some animal" amidst some "decaying machinery" and other artifacts of western industriousness broken and rusting in the grass. The "work" of the station ostensibly is to build a railroad, but no work is being done other than the "objectless blasting" of a cliff that was not obstructing anything.[76]

Kurtz's "idealism" offers one possible alternative to the idea of efficiency, but as Marlow and the reader both quickly discover. this too is problematic. Kurtz, of course, is the eccentric and mysterious station chief who forms the centerpiece of this story. One of the most notable qualities about him is his ability to make his remote trading station produce amazing quantities of ivory. Despite his display of the dubious virtue of "efficiency," the others in this story find it difficult to wholly endorse his efforts. "Ivory—. . .lots of it—prime sort—lots—most annoying, from him," grumbles the manager of the Central station.[77]

Although one might expect a more enthusiastic response, given Kurtz's extraordinary success in procuring ivory, this is not the case. Primarily, these men mistrust him because he presents a threat to their own quest for wealth. Whereas the other traders make acquisition their ideal, however, for Kurtz "efficiency" is only a secondary consideration in a larger vision, a grotesque parody of the idealism associated with the imperial impulse. As the others note in hushed tones of admiration, sarcasm, and resentment in equal parts, Kurtz sees himself as "an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else." The manager of the Central station in particular disparagingly repeats what is evidently Kurtz's self-described philosophy: " 'Each station should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing'."[78]

Faced with these alternatives, Marlow initially is more deeply horrified by the nihilistic fetishizing of material gain ("efficiency") expressed by the other ivory traders. "I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men," reflects Marlow. "But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly."[79] When given the choice between the "flabby devil" on the one hand and Kurtz's corruption on the other, Marlow fully embraces the latter.

This is only true, however, until he discovers the truth about Kurtz's activities. In one scene, Marlow discovers a pamphlet written by Kurtz as part of a report for "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs," which unsettlingly combines eloquence, idealism, madness, racism, and violence. It begins by recommending that the Europeans exercise "a power for good practically unbounded" by presenting themselves to the Africans as "supernatural beings," and ends in the infamous and terrifying postscript: "Exterminate all the brutes!"[80]

As Marlow discovers, the reference to violence is more than a suggestion, and while the details of Kurtz's nefarious activities are clear to Marlow, they are only disclosed to the reader in fragmented images. When Marlow first approaches Kurtz's house, he notices it is surrounded by fenceposts capped with ornamental knobs; on closer inspection, he realizes that these are in fact human heads. Allusions to "midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" strongly suggest human sacrifices and possibly cannibalism. A more comprehensive picture of Kurtz's plans is not given, but neither is it necessary.[81]

Marlow's discovery transforms what was previously a clear choice for him into a "choice of nightmares," as he realizes the similarities between the two alternatives. Kurtz's

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version is more shockingly dramatic, perhaps, but the treatment of the Africans forced to work at the outer ivory station is no less cruel. "They were dying slowly," Marlow recalls with horror, "nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation. . . . Brought from all recesses of the coast . . . lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest."[82]

Rather than justifying or otherwise transforming the violence, the "idea" of efficiency only masks it, and it does even this only thinly. Ultimately, Marlow will condemn Kurtz on the same grounds as those on which he condemns the other ivory traders, and it is not for a lack of "efficiency"; rather, it is for an excess of cruelty.

In each case, cruelty is a direct consequence of the restriction of vision that Conrad repeatedly critiques. For example, early in the story Marlow is horrified that the ivory traders refer to the Africans as "enemies" and "criminals."[83] He comes to realize, though, that Kurtz's messianic zeal has had the same consequence. When he inquires about the human heads around Kurtz's hut, he laughs out loud when he is told they had been rebels. "Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels! Those rebellious heads looked very subdued to me on their sticks."[84]

Conrad's assessment of idealism as dangerously blind is heavily foreshadowed in an early part of the story, well before Marlow actually meets Kurtz. Looking around the interior of one of the station houses, Marlow notices a picture that Kurtz had painted. It portrays a "woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch" against an almost completely darkened background. Quite literally, this combines the images of justice, with the blindfolded woman, and truth, with the illumination of the lantern. We might expect the light from such a figure to be benevolently illuminating, but instead Marlow describes its effect as "sinister."[85]

The image illustrates Conrad's view that ideals—even those of "justice" or of "truth"—can have potentially perilous consequences when adhered to "blindly." Just as the woman in the picture lacks context, surrounded only by a dark background, so too is Kurtz out of context, deep in the heart of the imagined "darkness" that Conrad so attentively describes throughout the story.

Initially, Kurtz appears to be distinguished from the vulgar materialists Marlow sees at the outer stations, particularly those identified as the "Eldorado Exploring Expedition." As Marlow describes these characters, they are more closely analogous to the plundering Romans than to the British:

> Their talk . . . was the talk of sordid buccaneers; it was reckless without hardihood, greedy without audacity, and cruel without courage; there was not an atom of foresight or of serious intention in the whole batch of them, and they did not seem aware these things were wanted for the work of the world. To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.[86]

The difference between the two contemporary imperialists, however, much like the difference between the Romans and the British, turns out to be quite small. Greed may be offset by audacity, but it is still greed; cruelty may be combined with courage, but it is still cruelty.

While Conrad consistently undermines the notion of universally applicable ideals, there is one thing about which he presumes an element of universal agreement: the abhorrent nature of cruelty. One might say that like Hobbes, he rejects the idea of a *summum bonum,* and posits only a *summum malum;* but where Hobbes identifies this latter as death, Conrad includes the cruel and the inhumane.

If Conrad does share with Hobbes a vision of an "ultimate evil," still he differs from him in his refusal to draw any solid conclusions from this premise. For Conrad, our "civilizing" artifices are irregular and fragile, and can inspire unease even as they demand our loyalty. This view is supported in the conclusion of *Heart of Darkness,* in which Marlow returns to Europe after Kurtz has died of fever, and he struggles to comprehend everything he has seen. Marlow himself is unmoored by his experience in the Congo, and when he tells of his return to the "sepulchral city" he describes himself as having been out of place and unwell. Most of all, he wishes he could forget; he recalls longing to commit Kurtz's entire memory to "an everlasting rest in the dust bin of progress, amongst all the sweepings and, figuratively speaking, all the dead cats of civilization."[87]

Instead, Marlow ends up preserving this memory, or at least a highly sanitized and fictionalized version of it, with the famous lie that ends the story. Back in Brussels, he pays a visit to Kurtz's fiancée, to whom Kurtz was clearly never going to return even had he lived and to whom he had not been faithful. Grieving over his death, she reminisces about that "remarkable man," who "drew men towards him by what was best in them," a man of "greatness," of "generous mind," and of "noble heart."[88] To this, Marlow can only reply in veiled remarks with double meanings, numbly repeating that he was indeed "a remarkable man," whose death "was in every way worthy of his life."[89]

Finally, after confirming that Marlow was with Kurtz when he died, Kurtz's "Intended" asks what his last words were. Marlow reels in panic as he recalls Kurtz's final, ambiguous pronouncement—"The horror! The horror!"[90] Rather than tell her this truth, and the many horrible truths that he learned about Kurtz during his time with him, Marlow resolves to tell a noble lie: "The last word he pronounced was—your name."[91]

On some level, Marlow recognizes that his lie is not just. True justice, he suggests, would have required the truth to be told about Kurtz's violence, madness, and infidelity. But that, he decides, would have been "too dark" in

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the sense that runs throughout the story: it would have too harshly extinguished the light of belief.[92] On one level, this choice suggests that the preserving belief must win in the end. Looked at from another perspective, though, this victory too is hollow: although Marlow tells the lie, he himself can never be expected to believe it.

In the end, it is not surprising that Conrad's fiction has generated as much controversy as it has. His skepticism is deep, but reluctant and often ambivalent. He is, however, decisive in critiquing at least one aspect of the tradition he otherwise defends: that is, the part suggesting that the experiences and beliefs of one particular historical circumstance may be treated as general rules to be applied with the confidence of moral conviction to all places and all times. This is a central and erroneous belief underpinning imperialism in the nineteenth century, and in large part it continues to be with us today.

Conrad's Dilemma Revisited

In the stories addressed here, Conrad oscillates between admiration for liberal ideals and skepticism about their veracity. While some aspects of his thinking are informed by the historical and intellectual milieu of the nineteenth century, it turns out that many of his observations still prove distinctly timely today.

This is especially true given the recently renewed vigor of debate about imperialism, particularly as it concerns the role of the United States. Much of this debate centers on the empirical question of what "imperialism" really is, and whether or not the term can accurately be applied to the United States.[93] For those interested specifically in this question, Conrad's fiction will be somewhat less useful: he offers neither clear definitions nor sustained analysis of the concept of imperialism. However, for those interested in the broader philosophical and normative questions surrounding imperialism, Conrad has quite a bit more to offer.

The first and most basic of his critiques of imperialism is very simply that it is a thinly disguised avenue for unleashing greed. For Conrad, in "An Outpost of Progress" and *Heart of Darkness,* this is of course dramatized most starkly through his depictions of the ivory trade in Africa. This is itself is not surprising; others in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made similar critiques as well.[94] More surprising is how little things have changed since then. Today, many critics denounce so-called American imperialism as similarly exploitative, some even drawing explicit parallels between the charter companies of earlier empires and today's multinational corporations.[95]

Even more compelling, however, is a second question to which this first point is linked: that is, whether "imperialism" more broadly construed is a beneficial or a detrimental thing. Conrad clearly rejected the economic motives and consequences of imperialism, but he was deeply ambivalent about its more idealistic justifications. To some extent, he recognized the attractions of the impulse to export one's ideals and one's "civilization" as universally consistent goods. However, he remained profoundly skeptical about the feasibility—and consequently, the desirability—of doing so.

Today, as in the nineteenth century, there is undoubtedly an "idealistic" element to American imperialism. Its current idiom is not that of a "civilizing mission" but rather that of universalism, specifically concerning the values of liberty and democracy.[96] This issue, which has historically been a problem for both liberal and conservative thought, continues to cause difficulty today.

In the years immediately after 2001, a number of conservatives and liberals alike united in idealistic support for the war in Iraq, and more broadly in favor of the idea that the United States is acting and should act as an "empire" in some fashion. For many of them, such a position was justified in terms of liberal democratic values and humanitarian concerns. This argument has been associated especially with neoconservatives.[97] However, it also gained support from "liberal hawks" and "liberal interventionists" as well. Michael Ignatieff, for example, had early on characterized the United States as an "empire lite." Trying to distinguish it from the imperialism of the nineteenth century, he argued that this empire rests not on "colonies, conquest and the white man's burden," but rather on "free markets, human rights and democracy" by people "who like to think of themselves as the friend of freedom everywhere."[98] Yet in some ways statements like this actually confirmed what they sought to deny, emphasizing the elements of liberal universalism common to both versions of imperialism.

More recently, however, confidence in this type of universalism has waned noticeably. Although some have remained as idealistic as ever, others have reconsidered their earlier views.[99] Their ambivalence is not unlike Conrad's own: while they find idealism very compelling in some ways, they are also troubled by deeply skeptical doubts, which are increasing in light of recent events. Ignatieff, for example, has retreated from his early position, most recently in an article in which he laments his former views as overly academic and as wrongly emphasizing general ideas over specific facts. He writes that "fixed ideas of a dogmatic kind are usually the enemy of good judgment," adopting a newly strengthened skepticism that Conrad would have appreciated.[100]

The question has generated similar reconsiderations among conservatives as well, and in many ways it has produced rifts that are even more striking. One of the best known neoconservatives, Francis Fukuyama, has recently announced his break from the neoconservatives on the grounds that they have become overly idealistic.[101] In his view, they have overestimated the extent to which the U.S. might use its power for moral ends, and thus have

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gone against one of their own key principles: suspicion towards "ambitious social engineering," which "often leads to unexpected consequences and often undermines its own ends."[102]

Fukuyama's ultimate recommendation of what he calls "realistic Wilsonianism" is a clear attempt to literally reconcile the two opposing extremes of pragmatism and idealism. Further, he is not alone in attempting to do this; other versions of similar attempts include Joseph Nye's "liberal realism," and even Condoleeza Rice's recent use of the term "American realism."[103] In short, these efforts to coin new terminology are more than merely linguistic developments; rather, they indicate that conservatives and liberals alike are slowly rediscovering the same problems and paradoxes that captured Conrad's attention over a century ago. Again like Conrad, though they strive to resolve these dilemmas, they are having a great deal of difficulty doing so.

If Conrad has a conclusion about imperialism, it is that imperialism brings with it a tendency toward excessive idealism, and that the dangers of this extreme are far worse than the alternative. Even this conclusion, however, carries with it an almost tragic recognition of its own limitations. In Conrad's vision, notions of absolute goods are compelling and important but fictitious nevertheless, and in practice our choices are always choices among evils.

While foreign policy "realists" have long taken a prudential approach to the problem, rejecting moral objectives in favor of strategic concerns, others have been very reluctant to adopt what they see as an overly skeptical view. They have been unwilling to abandon idealism altogether for reasons not unlike those of Conrad: that is, that such a rejection seems far too cynical, and seems to undermine the possibility of defending the values in which one believes.

This has gradually begun to change, and liberals and conservatives alike have begun to pay renewed attention to skeptical conclusions like those ultimately drawn by Conrad. In today's debate, as in Conrad's writings, the resolution is imperfect and in some ways deeply unsatisfying. The long history of the problem—and its recent revival—suggest that the tensions with which Conrad struggled are unlikely to achieve a more perfect resolution any time soon. If there is a lesson to be drawn from Conrad's fiction, it is that such perfection is attractive and compelling, but ultimately illusory.

Notes

1 A recent collection of essays illustrates the point. In it, contributors were asked to respond to the following statement: "Recent events have forced us to ask with renewed urgency if there are moral truths of a universal, or at least a highly stable, kind upon which moral, political, and legal judgments can be made and justified for purposes of public deliberations and decisions." Browning 2006, ix.
2 For a striking but by no means isolated example of universalism in recent political rhetoric, see Bush 2005.
3 Mill 1962, 406; also see Mill 2000, 13–14.
4 Pitts 2005 and Mehta 1992. Pitts argues that the link is historically contingent rather than philosophically necessary; Mehta argues that it is a combination of the two, and that the correlation owes most to Locke's and Mill's versions of liberalism than to that of Hobbes.
5 E.g., Ferguson 2002; Cowen 2002.
6 Aristotle 1961, ix.
7 Aristotle 1995, 133–34.
8 Conrad 1924, 94–95.
9 Conrad 1968, 455; qtd. in Kirby 2001, 220.
10 J.C. Hilson and D. Timms see the two stories as comparable, but they focus on the elements that make "Outpost of Progress" unique. In this, they differ from the prevailing view, which sees "Outpost of Progress" as an inferior and preliminary version of "Heart of Darkness." See Hilson and Timms 1990.
11 Naipaul 1990, 193.
12 Hamner cites an 1896 letter to Edward Garnett, in which Conrad responds to Garnett's criticism of the work, and expresses some degree of despair about its failure to live up to his own intentions. See Hamner 2001, 173. In contrast, see Tolley 1966.
13 Watt 1979, 159; quoted in Hamner 2001, 174–75.
14 Achebe 1988, 257.
15 Johnson 1996, 69. More like Said than Achebe, however, Johnson views Conrad's writing as subversive in some ways, but decidedly not in others.
16 For example, Hamner suggests that the worst characteristics of Makola, who sells other workers into slavery and lies about Carlier's death, are Western rather than African traits. Hamner 2001, 179.
17 Said 1993, 23–24.
18 Fernando 1976, 84.
19 Berlin 1990, 11.
20 These views represent far extremes in a debate that has been particularly heated in the years after 9/11. Michael Walzer, for example, explicitly rejects this view as an example of "postmodern relativism" (Walzer 2005). Stanley Fish, whom he cites as an exponent of this view, strongly disagrees and contends that this is a view to which no one subscribes; Fish 2001.
21 My basic outlook is in agreement with Parry 1983; see especially pp. 1–19.
22 Conrad 2004, 12.
23 Watt 1979, 148.
24 Fleishman 1967; see especially ch. 3.
25 Ibid., 55, 58.

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26 "It must not be supposed that I claim for the artist in fiction the freedom of moral Nihilism"; Conrad 2004, 13.
27 Conrad 1990, 30, 31.
28 Spegele 1972, 333, 328; Knapp Hay 1963, 24. In contrast, Fleishman presents Conrad as having a more benign view of the state of nature; see Fleishman 1967, 59. David Adams identifies other Hobbesian elements; Adams 2003, 170–72.
29 Hobbes 1994, 76.
30 Rousseau 1987, 141.
31 Ibid., 60.
32 Ibid.
33 "General ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through sentences"; ibid., 50.
34 Ibid., 51, 63. In his view, early technological developments illustrate similar types of variation; see ibid., 61.
35 Ibid., 4.
36 Ibid., 95. Ferguson draws an explicit parallel between early trade routes and modern "globalization," though he puts it in a much more positive light. See Ferguson 2002, xxii-xvii.
37 Rousseau 1987, 99. Though one might object that Rousseau's plan in the *Social Contract* also entails some degree of universality if not outright homogeneity, in this respect it is important to remember several things. It is true that a society formed according to the general will—if such a thing were even possible—would require our general will in some instances to override our particular wills. However, in Rousseau's view there is no universal blueprint for what this would entail, and no substantive norm by which to determine it. Instead, the general will must be specifically tailored to its circumstances. While it generates an intense form of solidarity it is also relatively fragile, and requires constant attention to preserve it. Finally, the general will points to something akin to nationalism; while it may indicate a shared bond within a society, it cannot be generalized beyond the boundaries of that specific context.
38 Burke 2004, 135.
39 Appiah 2006, 152.
40 Burke 2004, 153.
41 For a general overview of Burke's writings and speeches on India, see Burke 1991, 1–36. Pitts argues that Burke expresses a "peculiar universalism" in that he combines an insistence on the universal quality of many values (particularly those grounded in the sentiments) with "sensitive appreciation for a variety of cultural forms"; Pitts 2005, 59. Mehta reads Burke as providing a counter to liberal universalism and its tendency to embrace imperialistic outlooks. Burke's emphasis on local traditions and practices, according to Mehta, allows him to accept the unfamiliar (i.e., India) without wanting to dominate, educate, tutor, or otherwise 'rationalize' it; Mehta 1992.
42 Burke 1991, 275; 276.
43 Ibid., 346.
44 Burke 2004, 119.
45 Burke 1991, 364 and 364n2–4.
46 Oakeshott 1991, 60.
47 For Conrad, in contrast to Oakeshott, a ship that endlessly drifts without arrival would be a fearsome thing indeed. He gives a particularly vivid illustration of this concern in *The Shadow-Line.*
48 Conrad 1914, x. This was originally printed as the preface to Conrad's *The Nigger of the Narcissus.*
49 Conrad 2002, 3.
50 Ibid., 5.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 7.
53 Rousseau 1987, 99.
54 In his study of the textual history of "Outpost of Progress," Robert Hobson notes that Conrad made several changes to this passage while editing it. In the first version, he describes Kayerts and Carlier as admiring the virtues of the fictitious heroes, rather than doubting them. The effect of these changes, argues Hobson, is to transform "what originally described a naïve first reaction to literature into a sarcastic rendering of the agents' misguided confidence in their moral superiority." Hobson 1979, 150.
55 Conrad 2002, 9.
56 Ibid., 5.
57 Burke 2004, 171.
58 Conrad 2002, 5.
59 Ibid.
60 Burke 2004, 171.
61 Conrad 2002, 17.
62 As Hunt Hawkins has argued, Conrad distinguished between the imperialism of the British and that of the Belgians under Leopold, and reserved the force of his criticism for the latter; see Hawkins 1979. For an informative history of the brutality of Belgian imperialism in the Congo under Leopold, see Hochschild 1998.
63 Conrad 2002, 20.
64 Ibid., 21.
65 The ship arrives in a thick mist, reminiscent of the fog that engulfs the steamer in *Heart of Darkness.* Said interprets this mist as representative of Kayerts's confusion; see Said 1966, 143. John G. Peters takes a different approach, arguing that the fog reveals the limits of Western views. The Westerners in both stories are flummoxed by the fog, while the natives are unfazed. This, claims Peters,

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illustrates the existence of a logic inaccessible to the Western mind; Peters 1998.

66 Conrad 2002, 25.

67 Although John G. Peters situates them in Conrad's "early" and "middle" periods respectively, the two stories were written reasonably close together, with the former written in July of 1896 and the latter between December 1898 and February 1899. Peters 2006, 50–51 and 54–62; Conrad 2002, xxix.

68 Among these, as noted previously, is the difference in their critical reception. To fully interpret *Heart of Darkness* in its entirety, and to do justice to the secondary literature in the process, is a task well beyond the scope of this article. Instead, I will selectively choose the elements of the story most relevant to my argument.

69 Conrad 1990, 2.

70 Ibid., 3.

71 Ibid., 4.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Knapp Hay points out that although Conrad says the British endeavor is distinguished and redeemed by an "idea," the rest of the story strongly critiques idealism—and efficiency as well. "The cadaverous Kurtz will speak of right motives and redeeming ideas, too," Hay notes. "Marlow's words . . . must have a jarring effect if we follow his curious notion that the British 'idea' has to become a sort of idol, reducing the minds that hold it to the posture of worshippers"; Knapp Hay 1963, 136.

75 Conrad 1990, 11.

76 Ibid., 12.

77 Ibid., 28.

78 Ibid., 22, 29.

79 Ibid., 13.

80 Ibid., 57, 45.

81 Ibid., 45.

82 Ibid., 14.

83 Ibid., 11, 14.

84 Ibid., 53, 54.

85 Ibid., 21–22.

86 Ibid., 27.

87 Ibid., 46.

88 Ibid., 69, 70.

89 Ibid., 69, 71.

90 Ibid., 64.

91 Ibid., 71.

92 Ibid., 72.

93 The literature on this subject is vast, and impossible to cover fully here. Very briefly, some argue for a strict definition of imperialism as formal rule by one country over another; not surprisingly, most of those who do so either reject the premise that the United States is an empire, or argue that new terminology is needed. See for example Huntington 2005; Pagden 2004; Cumings 2003; and Cooper 2003/2004. Others take a broader view of imperialism, either as "soft power," or as economic influence and globalization. For the former view, see Nye 2004; a more popular rather than scholarly recent discussion of the positive aspects of "cultural" or "soft" imperialism is Fraser 2005. For the latter, see Hardt and Negri 2000. Although Ferguson's earlier work was highly optimistic about the possibilities afforded by the combined influence of imperialism and globalization, he has recently become noticeably more pessimistic; compare Ferguson 2002 and Ferguson 2005.

94 Hobson 1965.

95 See Johnson, who denounces contemporary imperialists as "the people who anticipate 'profitable businesses and lucrative employment' in the course of creating and exploiting an empire"; Johnson 2004, 25, 30, 28.

96 See Bush 2002.

97 Boot 2003; Hanson 2007.

98 Ignatieff 2003a, 22; and Ignatieff 2003b.

99 For a good review of some of these recent reconsiderations see Isaac 2007.

100 Ignatieff 2007, 27–29. For another example of a similar reconsideration, compare Beinart 2004 with Beinart 2007. Walzer's writing on just war theory have long grappled with a similar problem.

101 Fukuyama 2006b.

102 Ibid., 4. For a more concise statement of this argument which is presented specifically as a break from his previous association with neoconservatism, see Fukuyama 2006a. Fukuyama 2004 presents "excessive realism" and "excessive idealism" as the key extremes to avoid.

103 Nye 2007. Condoleeza Rice's attempts to bridge the gap between neoconservatives and realists was recently presented as her effort to promote a new phrase, "American realism"; see Kessler 2007.

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