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The Vietnam War and Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness

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Ten years have passed since President Nixon announced on nation-wide radio and television that a settlement had been reached in the long Vietnam conflict. After nearly twenty years of sorrow and death—it was nothing more than a settlement, an inglorious settlement that supposedly would bring “peace with honor to South Vietnam and Southeast Asia.” Never before have the American people paid so much for so little.

What remains after ten years? Grass grows thick and green over the graves of thousands of dead American young people. Wounded veterans, reduced to infirmity in their youth, grow older in the brick mausoleums for the living, managed by the

Veterans Administration. Their heads no longer filled with the dreams and fantasies of the young, they wile away their hours in therapy and crafts—looking forward to what? Slim waisted brides in pretty dresses? Sons and daughters of their own? No, life for them holds little more than a special menu on Sunday in the dining hall. The luckier veterans, those who survived the war with bodies and minds intact, often feel the subtle prejudice of the American public who regard them as drug addicts with potentially lethal personalities. No longer feeling that they are an integral part of the American body, they seek their own communion among themselves in store-front counseling centers.

Ten years, and what is left? A black and white three-by-five picture of an American serviceman young children, now in their teens, might have called "Daddy" when they first learned to talk. Memories that stay fresh in the minds of parents growing old—and tears that still come to the eyes so easily, so unexpectedly. An unforeseen second marriage for young widows—a new happiness, perhaps, to cover an old grief.

And in Washington, D.C., the place from which high officials defended their chosen course of action in Vietnam and to which thousands of people came to protest these actions—what remains there after ten years? The officials, counted among "the best and the brightest" from American academia in their day, no longer hold office. The streets of Washington, once jammed with forceful mobs of protesters, are now jammed with cars again. Nothing remains of the Vietnam era in Washington—except a recently dedicated monument: a long, low, V-shaped wailing wall of polished black granite inscribed with the names of 59,939 Americans killed or missing in action in Vietnam. The black wall is the ultimate memorial to a war known for its "body count."

How can we make sense out of the Vietnam war? Does a revelation of some sort lie hidden within the tragedies the war brought—a revelation that will give some meaning to the sorrow and death we have suffered? Using the setting of the Vietnam war to tell in a profound and new way Marlowe's story in Joseph Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, Francis Ford Coppola, director of *Apocalypse Now*, suggests that our experience in Vietnam teaches us something (however unflattering) about ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*, first published in 1899, opens on a cruising yawl named "Nellie" riding at anchor for the night in the mouth of the Thames River. Aboard the yawl five men sit quietly around the mizzen-mast in a reflective mood, watching the day turn to night—until one, Marlowe, breaks the silence to comment on the

original darkness of the English shore now dotted with the lights of civilization in the growing dusk. The scene prompts him to tell an old sea story about the time he worked for a Belgian ivory importing company in the Congo. Like the veteran who must tell his tale in order to assure himself of some significant meaning in his experience, Marlowe drones on.

I don't want to bother you much with what happened to me personally, yet to understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to place where I first met the poor chap (Mister Kurtz). It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light about me—and into my thoughts.¹

With that introduction, Marlowe's inevitable story about his trip into the heart of the Congo follows—not particularly to the delight of his shipmates.

Through his aunt, Marlowe secures employment with a Belgian company in the process of ransacking the Congo for its ivory. He is to pilot a river boat for the company along a snake-like river that initially fascinated him as a child when he saw it on a map. On the first leg of his journey to his new place of employment, Marlowe travels by French steamer as far as the Belgian "seat of government" in the Congo. Next he travels by a little sea-going steamer piloted by a Swede some thirty miles further up river to the "Company Station." Here he stays for ten days and learns about that "poor chap" named Kurtz—who becomes the obsession of his mind. Kurtz is an ivory agent different from all the others working for the company. He has deliberately gone deeper into the heart of the Congo than the rest. There he has become an embarrassing enigma to the company, having voluntarily isolated himself and created his own little

kingdom of fear among the natives. Of all the agents, he sends back the most ivory to the Company Station, but the reports of his actions are unsettling even to company officials not known for having sensitive consciences.

From the Company Station, Marlowe travels in a foot caravan of about sixty baggage-toting natives some two hundred miles further up river to the "Central Station" where he is to take command of a river steamer. He finds the steamer sunk in the mud, and spends several months repairing her. All the while his obsession with Kurtz grows. At last the steamer is ready, and he sets out—up the treacherous river with the manager of the Central Station, several company agents Marlowe calls "pilgrims," and a crew of remarkably restrained native cannibals—in order to find Kurtz and bring him back. The journey is difficult, but successful to the extent that Marlowe finds Kurtz and gets him aboard the steamer for the trip back to the Central Station. Kurtz is sick, however, and dies before the boat reaches its destination—giving the manager's insolent black servant the opportunity to announce, "Mistuh Kurtz, he dead." (It is the announcement that T.S. Eliot later uses as the epigraph to his poem, "The Hollow Men.") After Kurtz dies, there is little left for Marlowe to do but visit Kurtz' intended bride and tell her a soothing lie about the way he died.

Marlowe's story is not so much the account of a trip up a winding and largely uncharted Congo river deep into the jungle as it is the account of an inner trip—a trip that Marlowe takes deep within himself. The farther Marlowe travels into the Congo, the more he sees of the white Belgian rape of the black Congo's resources and people, the closer he gets to Kurtz—the deeper he gets into the heart of darkness. That heart of darkness is outwardly, of course, the heart of the Congo, but inwardly (and more significantly) it is the heart of the human being—including Marlowe himself. Because

the trip is ultimately a trip into himself, it is a revelation for Marlowe. He learns his "sin and misery" as surely as if he had stood before the holy law of God. "Droll thing life is," says Marlowe when the trip is over, "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose. The most you can hope from it is some knowledge of yourself—that comes too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets."²

Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* must be understood against the background of Belgium's exploits in the Congo during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. King Leopold II of Belgium saw great opportunities for his country in the Congo. Calling together a conference in Brussels in 1876, he expressed in high sounding language his intentions with respect to the Congo. He wished, he said, ". . . to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelopes the entire population." The record of the Belgian adventure in the Congo, however, later proved that King Leopold's interests were far more economic than religious.

Because other European countries also had an interest in the resources of the African continent, trouble often arose when the exploiters of one nation encountered the exploiters of another. To help maintain the peace, Bismarck of Germany called together a conference in Berlin in 1884. For some inexplicable reason, this conference granted the Congo to King Leopold as his personal property. The Belgian Parliament ratified the decision of the Berlin conference several months later in a piece of legislation that read as follows: "His Majesty, Leopold II, King of the Belgians, is authorized to be the chief of the state founded in Africa by the International Association of the Congo. The union between Belgium and the new State of the Congo shall be exclusively personal."

From 1885 to 1908 King Leopold ruled the Congo Free State in such a way as to destroy its indigenous leadership and stymie the orderly development of the country. An Ad-

administrator General, appointed by the king to be his representative in the Congo, actually carried out the day-to-day governing of the area. Because the job was found to be too much for one administrator, the country was soon divided into fifteen districts—each controlled by a commissioner who acted in the name of the Administrator General. The tribal chiefs were not incorporated into the system—but often reduced to servility instead. This, coupled with the fact that the individual commissioners possessed an almost unlimited power to decide disputes and matters of government as they saw fit, led to abuses of authority—and bloody atrocities.³

To satisfy his insatiable thirst for wealth, King Leopold made the Congo available to certain companies for the exploitation of its resources. Because these companies needed much labor in order to accomplish their mission, King Leopold designed a unique system of taxation through which the natives were effectively enslaved. The procedure was a simple one. Natives were levied a tax they could not pay—and, therefore, were required to work it off at a very low wage. This practice accounts for several scenes in Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*: scenes of black men chained together at work, or dying in a group after having been totally used up by a Belgian company.

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* follows, for the most part, the story of Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*—this time in Vietnam rather than the Congo. Instead of a Marlowe, we see a Captain Willard of the U.S. Special Forces or "green berets." He is given the clandestine mission of taking a Navy patrol boat up the winding Mekong River in order to search out and assassinate a Colonel Kurtz, also of the Special Forces. Deep within Cambodia, he has become something more than the usual officer in charge of a Special Forces camp, organizing and training indigenous militia to be anti-communist fighters. Like his namesake in *Heart Of Darkness*, Colonel Kurtz has made his camp a personal kingdom of terror and death. His

actions violate the limitations imposed by official policy and strategy—and thereby embarrass his superiors. As Captain Willard makes his way up the Mekong, he encounters the madness of the war on every side: a certain Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore who chops his men into combat to strains of Wagner blaring from helicopter loudspeakers; the torching of a Vietnamese village; the bloody massacre of some boat people; a sexually provocative USO show that makes the women-starved men go crazy with lust; a useless bridge far out in the jungle, guarded for no reason by terrified soldiers commanded by no one. When Captain Willard finally meets Colonel Kurtz, he seems to know what the Captain's mission is without being told. In a scene preceeding the Colonel's death, Coppola suddenly brings us back to Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot. Sitting in the eerie shadows of his kingdom of darkness, Colonel Kurtz recites lines from Eliot's "The Hollow Men."

The parallels between Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* and the American experience in Vietnam are so obvious as to make a film like *Apocalypse Now* inevitable. Naive idealism becomes a deadly cynicism in both Conrad's story and the Vietnam war. Marlowe first speaks of this transformation when he contemplates the lights of civilization that dot the shoreline of the darkened Thames—and remembers, long ago, Roman conquerors, motivated perhaps by a noble idea, who sailed into this territory to take it by brute force. "It was robbery," says Marlowe, "aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . ."⁴

King Leopold's idea to open the Congo to civilization and the Christian faith is perhaps the kind of idea of which Marlowe speaks. Although the idea is worshipped in the Belgian rape of the Congo, it does nothing to redeem the act. Devotion to the idea is a sham. While Marlowe spends time at the Central Station repairing his river steamer, the uncle of the station manager appears with a well-equipped group of exploiters called the "Eldorado Exploring Expedition." "To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire," says Marlowe, "with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe."⁵

Like fresh water become brackish, the transformation of idealism into cynicism is especially obvious in the life of Kurtz. Europe's "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" commissions him to write a report for the future guidance of the organization. This Kurtz does in seventeen pages of high blown theory—based on the idea that white people, because of their advanced technological developments, can present themselves as "supernatural beings" to the primitive black societies of the Congo. From such a lofty position, Kurtz argues, the whites can rule the blacks with divine benevolence. The power Kurtz is able to exercise over the nations (primarily because he possesses that development of the firearm) corrupts him—and his idea about a benevolent rule becomes the actual practice of a malevolent tyranny. Scrawled in a crude hand on the bottom of the seventeenth page of what Kurtz calls "my pamphlet" are the words, "Exterminate all the brutes."⁶

In the widely accepted opinion that the American presence in Vietnam was a wretched mistake perpetuated by stubborn men, it is often forgotten that the war had a highly idealistic (even noble) beginning. In 1960 America's youthful president, John F. Kennedy, proclaimed in his inaugural address, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship,

support any friend, oppose any foe in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge—and more."⁷

The young Americans especially, those who would later constitute *Time* magazine's "person of the year" for 1966, heard the president with enthusiasm. In increasing numbers they became a part of the growing commitment in Vietnam. And why not? It was perhaps the most unselfish war the nation ever fought. Its purpose had nothing to do with national self interest—but the moral obligation not to forsake a friend in his struggle to be free. Young people who remained at home on college and university campuses offered little opposition to the war in the early sixties. They were preoccupied with the civil rights movement—and the struggle of the black people within our own borders to be free.

Speaking at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson reiterated the reason we were in Vietnam:

We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American president has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence.

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.⁸

To keep a promise to a friend in his desperate fight to be free—that has to be the kind of idea to redeem the brutality of any war. It is most certainly the type of idea that, in Marlowe's words, ". . . you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . ."⁹

So what went wrong? The friend struggling to be free, it turned out, was not so much the people of Vietnam as it was the government of South Vietnam. The people, especially those living in the hamlets and villages of the countryside, had little time for any central government—whether from Hanoi or Saigon. But when pressed to submit to the authority of Saigon (which did not seem to have their best interests at heart anyway), they were inclined to sympathize with the opposition: the Viet Cong guerrillas supported by Hanoi.

The problem for the United States became as ridiculous as it was embarrassing. Suddenly the friend whom American soldiers had come to aid, first had to be made a friend. This led to a great deal of civic action work. In the I Corps area where I was stationed with a Marine battalion, CAPs or civic action platoons were organized to help improve the lives and fortunes of the peasants. The twelve or so men in each of these platoons would live in or near a village—often at great peril to their own safety. They offered well-received medical aid to the peasants, and even tried to improve the Vietnamese strain of pigs (small and sway-backed) by bringing in some big Yorkshire boars from the United States. The peasants, however, were embarrassed at the prospect of bringing their little sows to the CAP location in order to be bred by a big boar—to the guffaws of the Marines who found it very entertaining. The project was not successful. I remember one CAP location where the big, white boar became a lazy, fat mascot of the Marines. They called him Herman. When the CAP unit was overrun by enemy forces one night, Herman was the only one to escape without a scratch.

Civic action reached a new height of absurdity for me one day when I went to see the new battalion commander, a Lieutenant Colonel, sweating profusely in the humid heat like all the newcomers to the area. He was sitting at his desk in a hot, tin-roofed hootch. Over his door he had hung a red-lettered sign that crudely said something of a

sexually copulative nature should be done to communism. "Chaplain," he said during the course of our conversation in which he outlined the goals of his command, "I would like you to start a 4-H Club in the nearby village. When those people in the village raise their own livestock and experience the fun of competition in a livestock show, they'll love capitalism."

The purpose of all this civic action work (some good and some bad) was "to win the hearts and minds of the people." But by this time the early idealism, the noble idea that had motivated the war, had degenerated into a grim and angry cynicism—at least on the part of those who actually fought the war. That cynicism was quietly expressed on the level of the battalion headquarters when the commander would appoint perhaps the most unpromising Second Lieutenant as the battalion S-5, the officer to coordinate civic action projects. In reality he often did little more than compensate the Vietnamese people whose property had been destroyed by the Marines. The new cynicism was perhaps more forcefully expressed by the lower ranking Marines—or "grunts." Using expletives and profanity to reinforce their meaning, they would spit and scoff at the idea of winning the hearts and minds of the people. You have to get them by the testicles, they would say in a language far more graphic than mine, and their hearts and minds will follow.

The original altruistic motive for the war was lost, and the only mission for almost every U.S. soldier was simply survival. The only person worth helping was a buddy. The Vietnamese became gooks. It was a fairly common thing to hear a man say, "The only good gook is a dead gook." In a war that measured success by a body count, it was not surprising to hear, "If it's a gook and it's dead, it's V.C." Or, "The only way to win this war is to nuke it back into the stone age, flatten it out, blacktop it, and turn it into a parking lot."

In Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* Kurtz has a grandiose idea about the mission of the

Belgian companies in the Congo. "Each station," he tells a hard-nosed station manager, "should be like a beacon on the road towards better things, a center for trade, of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing."¹⁰ But the idea is swallowed up in darkness when he writes concerning the people of the Congo, "Exterminate all the brutes."

The same thing happened in Vietnam. A noble idea, hatched in the euphoric romanticism of the early sixties, degenerated into a ghastly cynicism—that sometimes found expression in atrocities.

When the noble idea fades, it becomes necessary to perpetuate a lie to give the impression that it is still alive. When Marlowe in Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* first lies in a rather indirect way to a self-serving brick-maker at the Central Station, he shows some regret. "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie," he says, "simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavor of mortality in lies—which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world—what I want to forget. It makes me miserable and sick, like biting something rotten would do."¹¹ Later, however, he lies quite easily to Kurtz' intended bride about the way he died. She insists that Marlowe repeat to her Kurtz' last words because she wants "something to live with." Instead of telling her the truth, that Kurtz saw into himself in his dying hour and cried "The horror! The horror!" Marlowe pulls himself together and says to the pathetic woman, "The last word he pronounced was—your name."¹² The lie has to be spoken and the noble idea protected so that the tea-drinking, civilized world can go on living like Marlowe's aunt—thinking that the real mission of the Belgian companies in the Congo is "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways."¹³ And so the misery continues.

It is difficult to know how long the Vietnam war would have gone on had it not been perpetuated with lies. The notorious Pentagon Papers reveal duplicity on the part of our highest officials. They show, for example,

that the mission of the Marines in Vietnam was changed from defense to offensive combat on April 1, 1965. Yet, on that same day President Johnson said publicly, "I know of no far-reaching strategy that is being suggested or promulgated."¹⁴

Lies too came from the field. When fighting was fierce, a commander sometimes gave exaggerated counts of enemy dead. After all, the kill-ratio was important to his future career. If he lost ten men in a fight, he had to say that he had killed around forty of the enemy in order to make the skirmish a victory. One could always plead that the intensity of the fire power used, artillery and perhaps tactical air strikes, made the actual counting of enemy dead impossible. No commander, however, could lie quite like the ordinary "grunts" whose objective was not a military career, but simply to stay alive. They had no trouble counting the enemy dead after a hard fight to take a useless hill—especially if they knew that when the commander was satisfied that enough enemy had been killed, they would get some rest and good food. It was just a matter of finding a comfortable place to sit down in the jungle and call in by radio discoveries of enemy remains. Week after week these figures were tabulated, and ultimately they reached American television screens—always showing that far more enemy soldiers died than friendlies. The truth became harder and harder to find—and the war went on and on.

The most significant parallel between Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* and the Vietnam war is a painful one to relate—for I cannot do so without revealing something unflattering about myself and the other men with whom I served. But the fact is: just as the jungles of the Congo revealed the Belgians to be hollow men, so the jungles of Vietnam revealed that we Americans are hollow people.

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!¹⁵

If a man is hollow, spiritually and morally hollow, there is nothing inside of him to restrain his behavior. The sudden absence of all external restraints makes him a dangerous man when he is sent away from home to a strange, new place. Marlowe mentions this in Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness*. Speaking of the manager of the Central Station, he says, "Perhaps there was nothing within him. Such a suspicion made one pause—for out there there are no external checks."¹⁶ Such a man can become extremely dangerous when the vacuum is filled with the wildness of the jungle.

This is precisely what happens to Kurtz. When Marlowe finally reaches Kurtz' kingdom of darkness deep within the Congo, he is horrified to see human heads mounted on poles around Kurtz' hut. I want you to understand, Marlowe tells his listeners, that

. . . there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. Whether he knew of this deficiency himself I can't say. I think the knowledge came to him at last—only at the very last. But the wilderness had found him out early. . . . I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core. . . .¹⁷

Marlowe, honest with himself, knows that he has the potential to be Kurtz. For him too the wilderness holds a seductive

fascination. What is there to restrain the hollow man like himself in a place where anything is permissible? "Principles?" Marlowe asks, "Principles won't do. Acquisition, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No, you want a deliberate belief."¹⁸

Because Marlowe is forced to look into the vacuum within himself by looking at Kurtz, he can feel some sympathy for the man. He warns his listeners aboard the yawl not to condemn Kurtz too quickly—for they will never understand what Kurtz faced.

You can't understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman, in the holy terror of scandal and gallows and lunatic asylums—how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the difference. When they are gone, you must fall back on your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness.¹⁹

A remarkable and mystifying irony remains for Marlowe. Kurtz, the man with the noble idea, is hollow—and, lacking all internal restraints, creates a personal kingdom of terror and death. Yet the hungry, native cannibals who serve as the ill-paid crew on Marlowe's river steamer restrain themselves from eating the few whites aboard the craft. The irony becomes more striking when Marlowe considers the fact that the whites added to the hunger of the blacks by throwing overboard the rotting hippo meat on which they fed—and the fact that there is nothing like hunger to make

a man desperate.

The popular image of the American serviceman is that of a man with a kind heart—quick to give the chocolate from his C rations to the kids. To a large extent that image remained true in Vietnam. I found servicemen who were capable of great loyalty, devotion, and self-sacrifice. In spite of the fact that the enemy was indistinguishable from the civilian population, the men were surprisingly generous in their gifts of money for the purpose of relief work among the civilians after the devastation wrought by the Tet offensive in 1968. When there was an opportunity for some of the men to help in the distribution of blankets and clothes sent to me by some of the churches around my home, they were quick to volunteer. The men were always eager as well to be part of a "medcap"—a roving medical clinic that dispensed soap, hygienic advice, and medicine for minor ailments. A few of the men even made attempts to adopt children orphaned in the war. I remember a Marine gunnery sergeant in particular. He and his wife were without children of their own and wished to adopt a boy in the care of a Catholic orphanage. I tried to help him through the bureaucratic jungle in order to get the child—but to no avail. Because he was a man of love and compassion, his disappointment was deep.

Still one of my greatest concerns as a chaplain even now has to do with the effects of combat on the average American soldier who, like the culture in which he lives, is largely secular. Religion to him is eccentric—lying on the edge of his life and not at the center. His knowledge of the Bible is minimal. He does not practice a daily devotional walk with God, but reserves prayer and the desperate cry to God for those moments of intense crisis. In his heart of hearts he is an empty house with an abandoned look. If there are any religious articles or things pertaining to the Christian faith lying around the house, they have sentimental value only—hardly any practical significance. There has been no spiritual

growth in the man to accompany his physical and mental growth. He is spiritually stunted and hollow. Take him out of his community with all its written and unwritten laws that restrain his behavior, give him a lethal weapon, put him in a combat situation for a prolonged time—perhaps a Vietnam war where the only mission is the attrition of the nearly unidentifiable enemy (Kill Cong!)—and you have a dangerous man, capable of horrible things.

By filming Conrad's *Heart Of Darkness* within the setting of the Vietnam war, Francis Ford Coppola does much more than make a political statement about the war. He shows us what happens to the secular man, the hollow man, in combat. Because of the vacuum in his soul, the powers of darkness fill him and he embraces them. The results are the bloody atrocities that took place in My Lai and shocked the home-bound American people, many of whom are hollow themselves, and are able to maintain the illusion of their own decency simply because, in Marlowe's words, they have "the solid pavement beneath their feet." They are cognizant of the "warning voice of a kind neighbor (which) can be heard whispering of public opinion."

The man Conrad describes in *Heart Of Darkness*, the man T.S. Eliot portrays in "The Hollow Man," the man Coppola shows us in *Apocalypse Now* is not a fictitious man. He is the man of our culture. He lives among us, and we are part of him. He also served in Vietnam.

Anyone who doubts this ought to read the book *A Rumor Of War* by Philip Caputo, a young "gung-ho" Marine Lieutenant who landed in Danang in 1965 with the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He spent a grueling and not so illustrious year in Vietnam which culminated in a court martial. Caputo was charged with ordering some of his men to enter a village at night, seize two young men suspected of being Viet Cong, and kill them. The deed was done. Caputo got off with just a letter of reprimand. He left the Marine Corps shortly thereafter and later

became a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* which sent him to Saigon to cover the fall of that city to the North Vietnamese. He was one of the last people to be rescued by helicopter from the U.S. embassy compound in Siagon.

In the prologue to the book Caputo says,

There is also the aspect of the Vietnam War that distinguished it from other American conflicts—its absolute savagery. I mean the savagery that prompted so many American fighting men—the good, solid kids from Iowa farms—to kill civilians and prisoners. . . . My purpose (in writing the book) has not been to confess complicity in, what for me, amounted to murder, but using myself and a few other men as examples, to show that war, by its nature, can arouse a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses.²⁰

Caputo tries to account for that savagery and violence by offering several reasons. Remember, he says, that the Vietnam war “combined the two most bitter forms of warfare, civil war and revolution, to which was added the ferocity of jungle war. Twenty years of terrorism and fratricide had obliterated most reference points from the country’s moral map long before we arrived.” The “comradeship” which Caputo calls the “war’s only redeeming quality” was the cause of “. . . some of the worst crimes—acts of retribution for friends who had been killed.” Besides the “greed for survival” which can make a man lay waste to anything which poses a threat to him, there was also that awful “strategy of attrition.” The pressure put on commanders and hence also their soldiers to produce enemy bodies led to the grisly rule of thumb, “If it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s Vietcong.” In addition, the jungle climate and terrain took their moral toll on the soldier, says Caputo, rendering him indifferent to what he saw and did.²¹

In spite of his rationalizations, however,

Caputo also admits that it was the hollow man who was most susceptible to the savagery and violence. In words much like those spoken by Marlowe about Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart Of Darkness*, Caputo says,

It was the dawn of creation in the Indochina bush, an ethical as well as geographical wilderness. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man’s inner moral values, the attribute that is called character. There were a few—and I suspect Lieutenant Calley was one—who had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering in their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there.²³

Caputo speaks the truth when he says that the combat soldier could sink into a “brutish state” and that he sometimes lacked a “net . . . of inner moral values.” I too have seen this in the Marines who talked with me privately, somehow driven to reflect upon themselves. How often I heard the line, “Chaplain, my mind is all screwed up.” I have seen it in the display of an enemy officer’s body which was supposed to encourage a fighting spirit, especially among the battalion clerks. I have seen it in a Marine who was convinced that the loss of one of his legs and the severe damage to the other were expressions of God’s wrath brought upon him because he had killed a small boy for no reason. His feelings, he said, had turned to cement. (The damaged leg was later amputated.)

In the last analysis, of course, Marlowe’s trip into the Congo’s heart of darkness was a trip deep within himself. So it was with the Vietnam war. The war turned out to be nothing more than a self-revealing trip that we took inside of ourselves—as veterans and as a nation. This too makes Conrad’s novel

the appropriate vehicle by which to understand our experience.

Marlowe, sitting cross-legged against the mizzen-mast aboard the "Nellie" with palms upturned like the enlightened Buddha, is also the Vietnam veteran. No doctor like the calipers-carrying crackpot in *Heart Of Darkness* need tell him that a profound change took place inside of him through his experience of Vietnam's heat, rain, mud, and blood. He is well aware of the awful change—the change that occurs when a man first discovers who he is, and the discovery horrifies him. Under his civilized skin he has found a capacity for violence he never suspected was there until the circumstances were right, and the violence spilled out.

The veteran knows that the same capacity lies within his smug and genteel countrymen who now regard him with subtle contempt or, worse yet, condescending pity. His knowledge is, often, his only defense. He can clearly understand Marlowe's feelings when he finally gets back to Belgium—and her civilized capitol. "I found myself in the sepulchral city," he says, "resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretence, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew."²⁴

As a nation too we took a painful trip inside ourselves through the Vietnam war. When we finally saw into our heart of darkness, we discovered the bankruptcy of our long-cherished American civil religion. We found that God was not necessarily on our side—and that American military action could be nothing more than a plain, brutal war in spite of our desire to see it as a righteous crusade with some transcendent purpose to justify the violence. We learned that the Kingdom of God was yet to come—and that we were not it in spite of our Puritan beginnings as a "city set upon a hill."

Most of all, we learned that our long-held sense of innocence was a sham, that just as "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (in Marlowe's words), we contributed to the making of a Lieutenant Calley.²⁴

Ten years have passed since a settlement was reached in the long Vietnam conflict. What remains after all the terror, sorrow, and death? What is there to show for it—except the black granite wall that only lists the base price of the conflict? (The real price was higher—for the suffering touched many more than 59,939 people.) Perhaps the answer can only be found in a paraphrase of Marlowe's words: "Droll thing the war was—that mysterious arrangement of logic for the futile purpose. The most we can hope for is some knowledge of ourselves—that came too late—a crop of unextinguishable regrets."

Endnotes

¹Joseph Conrad, *Heart Of Darkness* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), p. 7.

²Conrad, p. 71.

³Maurice N. Hennessy, *Congo* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1961), pp. 13-27.

⁴Conrad, p. 7.

⁵Conrad, p. 31.

⁶Conrad, p. 51.

⁷Sheldon Harris, *Intervention: The Vietnam Buildup* (Xerox Education Publication, Middletown, Conn., 1974), p. 45.

⁸Harris, p. 38.

⁹Conrad, p. 51.

¹⁰Conrad, p. 33.

¹¹Conrad, p. 27.

¹²Conrad, p. 79.

¹³Conrad, p. 12.

¹⁴Harris, p. 37.

¹⁵T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), p. 56.

¹⁶Conrad, p. 22.

¹⁷Conrad, p. 59.

¹⁸Conrad, p. 37.

¹⁹Conrad, p. 50.

²⁰Philip Caputo, *A Rumor Of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), pp. xvii-xviii.

²¹Caputo, pp. xviii-xix.

²²Caputo, p. xx.

²³Conrad, p. 72.

²⁴Conrad, p. 50.