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The Search for Authenticity: Aspects of Conrad's Existential Vision

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The ensuing article has been thus titled on account of the recurrent and striking correspondence between Joseph Conrad's letters, prefaces and artistic works, and the loosely tied philosophies of foremost Existentialist thinkers. The brevity of this work mandates that its objective is merely to emphasise some outstanding similarities between general existential tenets and recurring themes in Conrad's writings, most prominently, the search for authenticity. The methodology undertaken in this study will be thematic and will focus primarily on *The Secret Agent*, *Heart of Darkness*, 'Falk' and 'Amy Foster' as commensurate existential texts, although other texts such as *Nostromo*, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad* and *A Personal Record* will be occasionally referred to. These texts will be select ideas from the philosophies of leading Existentialist thinkers, especially Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, with some reference to Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka and Albert Camus. While not philosophical in scope, some discussion of the aforementioned thinkers must be undertaken in this paper to illuminate the outstanding similarities to be subsequently considered.

Otto Bohlmann has observed, 'existence cannot be trimly fashioned into a system, particularly not an abstract one', and as such the need to affix a workable definition of "Existentialism" can clearly present tremendous difficulties (*Conrad's Existentialism*: xiv). Such problems inherent in generalising about principles of an individual-based philosophy have often impeded the study of existential thought in the Humanities. However, by relying on *features* of existential thought rather than attempting to discuss even one "existential" philosopher's invariably subjective understanding of the nature and meaning of

being, it is possible circumvent this dispute, while at the same time examining Conrad's own subjectivist artistic outlook.

Indeed, in order to best understand the attitude and writing of Joseph Conrad – expatriate, seaman, adventurer, and artist – it is significant to appreciate the fierce individualism, anguish directed toward modern society and an emphasis on a personal fidelity as central motifs in his works. These unswerving tenets are a fingerprint upon virtually all Conrad's productions, and are largely based on his personal experiences of alienation and personal truth, as well as with fixed systems such as imperialism, capitalism and conventional morality which impinge upon the 'fidelity to one's sensations' (Conrad's Fiction: 44). Conrad's interest in "authentic" experiences, and even temperament, clearly bear a striking resemblance to the underpinnings of existential thought, as this extended quotation from an 1898 letter to Cunningham Graham demonstrates:

Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be best of all, and systems could be built, and rules could be made – if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well – but as soon as you know of you slavery the pain, the anger, the strife – the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunken[n]ess of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming – in negation, in contempt – each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always a vain and floating appearance (The Collected Letters, vol. 2: 30).

Such a set of principles as outlined by Conrad above – and repeatedly reaffirmed in more than two decades of letters (not to mention his public *oeuvre*) – share

great similarities with existentialist thought, which for the purposes of this composition, hold that individuals

must acknowledge his fundamental aloneness and solitude in a universe indifferent to his fate; he must recognise that there is no transcendent power which can solve his problem for him. He must do this because he cannot escape his responsibility for himself and the fact that only by using his own powers can he give meaning to his life (Existentialism and Modern Literature: 14).

This view is remarkably similar to Conrad's consistent non-fictional assertions that 'the unwearied self- forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on earth. A task which fate has perhaps engaged nothing of us except our conscience' ('A Personal Record' in The Mirror: 92). This emphasis illuminates a remarkably well coordinated outlook with existential thought on the primacy of individual consciousness and the importance of fidelity to self as a central factor preceding "authentic" existence, that is, a morality which is personally rather than socially dictated: 'there is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world...that is always but a vain and floating appearance' (Eternal: 161). This correspondence has led Adam Gillon to argue 'since Conrad, no less than Dostoyevsky or Sartre, manifests the quality of uncompromising individualism, we may inquire whether his view of the human condition is similar to that of the modern existential thinker' (Eternal: 162). Nevertheless, in Gillon's admirable studies and other critical texts on Conrad like Bohlmann's, this similarity has not been comprehensively focussed upon.

Yet at the same time there is a general appreciation that Conrad 'shares the existential view that any interpretation of the world simply reflects and individual's experience of it at a particular moment' and moreover, that this fundamental parallel in existential thought and Conrad's views is repeatedly manifested in his fiction (Conrad's Existentialism: 8). While the present inquiry

also affirms ‘thorough affinities with the German existentialists and with Kierkegaard,’ it is clear that Conrad arrived independently at this viewpoint and was only definitely familiar with Nietzsche’s writings on existential thought (Conrad’s Existentialism: xiv). As will be shown, this philosophical agreement lends itself to an existential reading of Conrad’s texts as well as (to a lesser extent) other Modernists 1, and allows for a scrutiny of his characters, plotting structure, narrative, and use of binaries. In order to most effectively link Conrad’s writing to existential thought, the aforementioned constructs will be refracted through the search for authenticity and the inextricable torments inherent in this quest, both of which are of critical importance to Conrad’s fiction.

For Joseph Conrad, the concept of authenticity 2 is intimately connected to *Dasein*’s 3 struggle to understand itself within the context of an indifferent (and often pessimistically perceived) environment. As such, *Dasein*’s quest for self-understanding is constantly immersed in and at conflict with the world at large and with other beings. Conrad, the Polish expatriate who frequently wrote letters regarding his feelings of solitude and alienation both before and after his seafaring experiences in the Congo, clearly identifies with the sense of ‘alienness of the world [which] is perhaps the main tenet of existentialism’ (Eternal: 163). This crisis of “otherness” and the threat it poses to authenticity can be most clearly seen in ‘Amy Foster’, where Yanko survives an absurd shipwreck to find himself in an alien environment hostile to his diversity (this is also similar to Giorgio Viola and Capataz’s feelings over being foreigners in Costaguana). The environment Yanko finds himself in seeks to contain his ‘freedom of movement’ by harnessing and attempting to assimilate Yanko’s “otherness” (‘Amy Foster’ in The Nigger of the Narcissus: 111). He is immediately acquired for the Swaffers, whose feudal and conventional approach to opulence, religion and society, as exemplified by Mrs. Swaffer’s implacable ‘steel cross’, stands in diametrical opposition to Yanko’s habit of reciting the Lord’s Prayer to himself, that is, personal spirituality (ibid.: 128). The illusion Yanko succumbs to, that he can assimilate while still living an authentic life, is shattered by Amy’s resistance to

the customs and habits he attempts to instil in his son, which naturally stand in contrast to Amy's inauthentic and socially constructed morality, from which she can never fully escape.

This authenticity often places the individual outside (and sometimes in conflict with) socially constructed mores in Conrad's writing and can be a destructive influence on the society at large. This point is brought home in Conrad's The Secret Agent. The professor's nihilistic eagerness to destroy all institutions⁴ is an excellent example of this untempered, Nietzschean revaluation of all inherited values: '[Other Dasein's character] leans on the social order. Mine stands free from everything artificial. They are bound in all sorts of conventions' (The Secret Agent: 68). This reading of the text demonstrates that by trying to destroy the fabric of what "is"; Conrad clearly shows that unchecked authenticity can be as dangerous as inauthenticity.

Such a dangerous authenticity (as opposed to Winnie Verloc's rather "unimaginative" inauthenticity, which only holds that things 'don't take looking into') is exemplified by the existential madness overcoming the infamous Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, leading him to reject normal social interactions for unrestrained domination over others. Conrad is clear on the results of this sort of solipsism: 'Believe me or not, his intelligence was perfectly clear – concentrated, it is true, upon himself with horrible intensity' (Heart: 113). Indeed, this lust for imperial and interpersonal dominance, which 'all Europe contributed to making' eventually devolves from a potentially positive "cultivation" into power-mad inauthenticity (ibid.: 83). For Kurtz (like the Goulds and the burden of possessing/being possessed by the San Tome silver mines), the misplaced authenticity of his actions, coupled with the unrestrained environment of the Congo proves too great a temptation for constructive engagement. The *laissez-faire* capitalism – which becomes equated with power in Kurtz's mind – fostered by an imperialistic Europe leads Kurtz to become defined by materialism: ⁵ 'the appetite for more ivory had got the better of the-what shall I say? – less material aspirations' (ibid.: 96). This materialistic inauthenticity, in turn, creates a need to

“have”, and is responsible for Kurtz’s invariable fall from existential grace and subsequent godlike position amongst “his” natives.

Essentially, the European lifestyle of inauthentic possession represented by the “fallen” Kurtz and those ‘hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other’ in Brussels exemplifies the socially conditioned attitude of “having” (*ibid.*: 120). Conrad heralds this danger through Marlow, who is disgusted with the ‘inconceivable mystery of a soul [Kurtz] that knew no restraint, no faith, and no fear, yet struggling blindly with itself’ (*ibid.*: 112).

In contrast to this inauthenticity lies Conrad’s own fervent belief in fidelity, a concept closely relating him to Marcel and Kierkegaard and is distinctly evident in Conrad’s fiction. For Conrad, fidelity to oneself is the basis for authenticity, as another extended quotation from a letter makes clear:

Selfishness preserves everything – absolutely everything – everything we hate and everything we love. And everything holds together. That is why I respect the extreme anarchists. – ‘I hope for general extermination’. Very well. It’s justifiable and, moreover, it is plain. One compromises with words. There’s no end to it. It’s like a forest where no one knows the way. One is lost even as one is calling out ‘I am saved!’ For myself, I look at the future from the depths of a very dark past, and I find I am allowed nothing but fidelity to an absolutely lost cause, to an idea without a future. And so, I often do not think about it. Everything vanishes. Only truth remains – a sinister and fleeting ghost whose image is impossible to fix. I regret nothing, I hope for I realise that neither regret nor hope means anything to my own being. Towards myself, I practice a fierce and rational selfishness. Therein I pause. Then thinking returns. Life starts again, regrets, memories, and a hopelessness darker than night You who devote your talents and your enthusiasm to the cause of humanity, you will understand no doubt why I must – I need to – keep my thinking inviolate as a final act of fidelity to a lost cause. It’s all I can do. I’ve thrown my life to all the

winds of heaven, but I have kept my way of thinking. It's a little thing – it's everything – it's nothing – it's life itself. This letter is incoherent, like my life, but the highest logic is there nevertheless – the logic that leads to madness. But everyday worries make us forget the cruel truth. It's fortunate (The Collected Letters, vol. 2: 160-1).

Moreover, for Conrad, Marcel and Kierkegaard, this responsibility to oneself provides 'a particularly instructive example of an attitude possessing a certain "ontological weight"' (Existential Thought: 203). This 'regard for one's dignity' is often in contrast to established social mores, leading to the paradox Kierkegaard discusses at length in Fear and Trembling ('A Personal Record in The Mirror: xvi). By citing Abraham's moral struggle, Kierkegaard shows that his willingness to kill Isaac lies outside of all established morality and fidelity, yet is still *not immoral*. Kierkegaard terms this paradox as the teleological suspension of the ethical.⁶ More than perhaps any other existential position, Conrad's characters experience this paradox in their authentic quest for personal fidelity and meaning. As pointed out in 'The Plot in the Secret Agent', Conrad accomplishes this by establishing Hegelian binaries⁷ contrasting "corrective" authenticity found in the ethical *telos* (the opposite of the professor's "destructive" authenticity, as previously discussed) with socially conditioned inauthenticity.

This opposition is most palpable in The Secret Agent, where virtually every character has a reciprocal philosophical (or better, ideological) counterpart. The best example of this may be the comparison between the Assistant Commissioner's nightly whisky foursome with "established" community figures and the meeting of the four "dis-established" anarchists in Chapter 3. This contrast clearly extends to Mr. Verloc's character, whose 'philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort' guides him into an absurd, socially produced existence (The Secret Agent: 12). Secret Agent Verloc is continually defined by those around him: Vladimir's insistence on an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible;⁸ Verloc's position as Embassy spy, police informant and husband whilst still politically an anarchist, and his inability to flee after

confrontation by the Assistant Commissioner because of his “settled”, apathetic life. While Verloc epitomises inauthenticity, his opposing character, Stevie, is a simple moral creature ‘at the mercy of his righteous passion’ (*ibid.*: 172). For Stevie, this authenticity becomes Kierkegaard’s teleological suspension of the ethical when his fidelity to his emotions comes in conflict with social mores, such as the cabbie’s whipping of his horse. Stevie refuses to stay on the horse because of the ‘necessity’ that is his personal fidelity (*ibid.*: 157). Moreover, when Stevie finally climbs back on the carriage at the insistence of his family, this compromise with inauthenticity fills him with despair. 9 The concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical within the context of binary oppositions is also evident in the authentic outlook of Michaelis’ patroness, who takes an interest in anarchism in opposition to conventional morality because she is ‘interested in things rising above the dead of mankind’ (*ibid.*: 105). This engagement with her perception of the world stands in stark contrast to the obligatory maternalism of Winnie Verloc, who, as previously noted, fervently believes that things ‘did not stand looking into very much’ (*ibid.*: 241). It is only after she discovers the inauthenticity of her previous existence in the wake of Stevie’s death that Winnie discovers ‘her freedom’ (*ibid.*: 251). Now under ‘control of her will’, Winnie immediately uses this new-found authenticity to kill Mr. Verloc in a perfectly Kierkegaardian example of the teleological suspension of the ethical (*ibid.*: 260). Yet this choice drives Mrs. Verloc into despair, for by the destruction of everything formerly important to her the world becomes ‘a vast blank’ (*ibid.*: 270). However, instead of giving new meaning to her life, Winnie is overcome by despair and commits suicide when Ossipon (toward whom she desperately attempts to defer her newly discovered authenticity) rejects her. 10

Other examples of this teleological suspension of the ethical can be plainly seen in ‘Falk’ and Heart of Darkness, where Marlow and Falk rebel against inauthentic “universal” norms in defining themselves as “particular” beings. As an authentic being, Falk represents ‘the epitome of human self-preservation ... Falk has a most profound horror of death’ (‘Falk’ in The Nigger of the Narcissus:

143). This 'struggle for every precious minute of his life' leads him to cannibalism, which offends conventional morality; but as Falk is at pains to explain to the Captain, this is what separated him from his dead comrades who 'despair possessed ... till the apathy of utter hopelessness re-asserted its sway' (*ibid.*: 231-2). In this environment, closely analogous to Conrad's view of a hostile yet absurd world, Falk survives but finds himself alienated and outside the world as 'a notoriously unsociable man' (an example being his inability to eat with others), despite being part of it. 11 Similarly, Marlow chooses to reject the institutionalised morality of imperialism by using the teleological suspension of the ethical in Heart of Darkness. The rampant solipsism of Kurtz 12 and the other colonists there leads Marlow to reject the "sedentary" status quo around him, for 'the moral shock [he] received, as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul, had been thrust upon [him] unexpectedly' (Heart: 109). This authenticity leads him to reject Kurtz, and especially the manager 13 as a result of their methods and lack of fidelity toward humanity: even when Kurtz is dying, all the manager can think of is fossilised ivory and the ruination of the district because of Kurtz's 'unsound method' (*ibid.*: 105). Through despair, Kurtz also comes to an authentic reasoning in his final moments 'of complete knowledge' (*ibid.*: 118). The realisation of his transgressions amongst the easily-led natives and championing of materialism anticipates Kurtz's lament over the 'horror' of his inauthentic life. It is perhaps this final understanding for Kurtz that secures Marlow's respect and promise to honour his memory. This fidelity toward keeping promises 14 underscores Marlow's authenticity, and his lie to Kurtz's Intended at the end of Heart of Darkness best demonstrates Marlow's teleological suspension of the ethical: by lying about his last words while staying faithful to his promise to respect Kurtz's memory, Marlow has chosen a personal fidelity 15 outside the realm of the ethical yet with a high degree self-consciousness. 16

To be sure, Joseph Conrad's writing reflects an extraordinary association with existentialist thought, particularly with respect to individualism and the quest for

an authentic experience from within a vexing or difficult milieu. While the parameters of this study have been chiefly concerned with Conrad's artistic treatment of authenticity, this has excluded a full discussion of other notable existential motifs in Conrad's novels. Most conspicuous of these from a structural point of view is Conrad's use of narrative perspectivism. Omniscient narratives, such as in The Secret Agent, allow readers to identify with various characters who reflect in Sartre's phrase, 'the universe of human subjectivity' (Existentialist Thought: 165).

Similarly, Conrad's first person narratives often reflect a filtered or incomplete telling of a tale, which, as shown by 'Amy Foster' 17 and Heart of Darkness, give readers a flawed or biased approach to the story. Furthermore, the lack of closure; breakdown of language (evidenced most clearly as a motivating issue in 'Amy Foster') and uncertainty of meaning (for characters such as Marlow in Heart of Darkness), all reveal Conrad's affinity for an "open" text which allows readers to decide how to interpret what is presented to them. Also, from a thematic perspective, unease over the state of modern society and dread over the future is strongly featured in Heidegger and Marcel's thought. Conrad's view of London in The Secret Agent and Brussels in Heart of Darkness, in addition to the harsh judgements of contemporary life in his letters, demonstrates a distaste for an increasingly dehumanised and conformist society. This is especially true of the view Conrad takes toward institutions in his works: systematised religion, xenophobic communities (such as the one presented in 'Amy Foster'), socially acceptable evils such as imperialism and *laissez faire* capitalism (the hunt for European ascendancy and ivory in Heart of Darkness), and the growing absurdity of law and order, as represented by the 'game' played between anarchists and police constables in The Secret Agent (The Secret Agent: 65). 18 Lastly, the influence of Dasein's environment on consciousness, as repeatedly shown by the darkness of the Congo on Marlow's state of being, as well as the influence of Dasein's perception projected onto its environment (as epitomised by Mr. Verloc's anguish over his meeting with Vladimir, 19 are also central tenets of

existential thought. 20

Primary investigation into this subject has proven overwhelmingly fruitful, especially with respect to Conrad's letters and prefaces, which help clarify aspects of his existential position. As such, this paper strongly suggests further scholarship into this area, especially pertaining to comparisons with Kierkegaard, Kafka and Nietzsche, contemporaries with whose work Conrad was likely familiar with, if only marginally. These topics have never been scrutinised academically, and are in need of proper treatment. However, the scope of *this* work is merely to draw attention to aspects of Conrad's existentialism *in his fiction* rather than in his more general ideological outlook, and a rigorous study of this startling juxtaposition must be unfortunately deferred.

Indeed, much more could be established on each of these topics; each of which beg inquiry in their own right. Nonetheless, it is clear that numerous correlations can be made between Conrad's convictions (as pronounced in his letters and prefaces) and specific attitudes toward fidelity through the attitudes, environment and actions of his characters, and the approach to *being* as examined by existentialist thought. Although Dunbar may be correct in asserting 'it is perfectly possible to be acquainted with an appreciable amount of Modern artistic production without becoming consciously aware of its existential elements', he does not take into account the irrefutable evidence offered by Modernist writers such as Conrad, Dostoyevsky and Kafka: it appears quite difficult indeed to read their works and *not* become aware of intrinsic existential elements (Existentialism and Modern Literature: 18).

Endnotes

1. While 'modern art is largely a reflection of [existentialist thought] and the unharmonious, corrupt, dismal and sheltering effect of much of our painting, music and literature can be traced to it.... [yet] it is when we turn to literature that we find inescapable proof that the existentialists are not alone in regarding man as living a desperate and perilous existence in the modern world' (Existentialism and

Modern Literature: 15). Truly, existentialist thought is a ‘powerful exponent of Modernism’ (Conrad’s Existentialism: 2).

2. This term gained popularity in Heidegger’s Being and Time and is closely related to Marcel’s concept of “functional man” in Being and Having and Sartre’s conception of “good faith” in Being and Nothingness. This term reflects the quest for personal truth over conventional, “inauthentic” meaning which Heidegger terms *das Man* (literally translated “the they”). That the conformity of *das Man* seeks to disrupt the individual’s quest for subjective meaning reveals it as ‘a dangerous potentiality through the very fact of seeming to offer a way of escape from the difficult task of being a real self’ (Existentialist Thought: 51).

3. The *Dasein* (literally translated “being-there”), like Marcel’s concept of ‘incarnate’ and Kierkegaard’s ‘particular individual’ reflects the individual’s consciousness *in* a given situation, which is always shaped by the *Dasein*’s emotional state and environment. This effectively means *Dasein* is forever condemned to the responsibility of choice for future possibilities in and around him while paradoxically existing *at that particular moment*. Hence Heidegger’s ontological (the philosophical study of being) analysis of *Dasein* is ‘our own analysis of ourselves in our existence [and] can also be described as “existential”’ (Heidegger: 10).

4 Conrad’s rejection of this anarchistic pattern may well owe much more to Nietzsche (who said that ‘he who will create in good and evil, truly he must be a destroyer first and smash all values’) than previously thought (Nietzsche: 10). While Conrad frequently wrote that he admired extremists, he rejected Nietzsche’s ‘mad individualism’ on the basis that all institutions should not necessarily be eradicated as contrived morality (The Collected Letters, vol. 5: 188). Instead, Conrad believes that ‘all ambitions are lawful except those which climb upward on the miseries or credulities of mankind’ (‘A Personal Record’ in The Mirror: xviii). Hence, Conrad sides with Sartre and Kierkegaard in a consecration of personal, “good” values instead of with Nietzsche or the

professor's assertion that all values must be destroyed in the vain hope to remake something better.

5. Marcel's extensive study of this phenomenon in Being and Having reveals the threat of actually being "devoured" by one's possessions: 'Egoistic desire is destructive of personal being, because desire merely wishes to "have" its object' (Existentialist Thought: 202).

6. To define this term (literally the personal acceptance of a goal in contradiction to the customarily "ethical"), it must be understood that the particular being is always more ascendant, more imminent, than the universal (or *das Man*). However, the individual must work through the universal in order to fully grasp the particular: 'For faith in this paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal-yet in such a way, be it observed, that the movement repeats itself, and that consequently the individual, after having been in the universal, now as the particular isolates himself as higher than the universal' (Fear and Trembling: 46). In this sense, Kierkegaard regards faith not only as religious conviction, but also faith in oneself as only viable the arbiter of morality.

7. The use of the Hegelian dialectic of creating a counterpoint by virtue of 'determinate negation' (literally to offer a metaphysical antithesis) is an especially evident aspect of Conrad's fiction (Conradiana: 186).

8. Vladimir's intention is quite reminiscent of the absurdity in Kafka's The Trial, where the meaninglessness of K.'s trial and death sentence is an analogy to the institutionalisation of punitive action. Nietzsche also discusses the ingrained notion that the 'creditor-Church or State- must be allowed to demonstrate its power by inflicting pain and humiliation on the culprit' (Nietzsche: 12). Hence, Vladimir's instruction, like the absurdity of the French gunship firing into a continent or natives digging an 'artificial hole...for giving the criminals something to do' in Heart of Darkness, is yet another existential inquiry, this time into the nature of punishing those who are unaware of transgressing a law but are punished anyway (Heart: 25-6).

9. Although treatment of existential despair must again be deferred, it is another central tenet of existentialist thought and a key emotional stage for many of Conrad's characters. Despair 'provides the royal road to authenticity. Anxiety, Heidegger argues, is a kind of ontological queasiness that creeps up on you whenever you come close to understanding the inherent instability of your existence. It is like fear, only worse: a bottomless apprehensiveness that you can never comprehend' (Heart: 27).

10. Marcel discusses the ramifications of despair and suicide thoroughly: 'Only by dealing with questions of this kind-of death, suicide, and betrayal-can the thinker hope to experience the 'dizziness' which is 'a positive condition of all metaphysical thought worthy of the name'' (Existentialist Thought: 193). Yet Winnie clearly favours death to the abyss of 'dizziness' and choice that Marcel defines, and her suicide is the clear result.

11. This is again closely related to Kierkegaard's explication on the duality of the particular and universal man in Sickness Unto Death and Fear and Trembling.

12. 'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my-' everything belonged to him' (Heart: 82).

13. Not nearly enough has been established regarding the behind-the-scenes power relations between Kurtz and the manager, whose materialistic inauthenticity is veiled when 'the seal was on' (Heart: 35, 36, 118). This desire for control in the Company motivates much of the sabotage which motivates action in the novella: the sinking of the steamer, burning of Kurtz's foodstuffs, the repair delays and lack of rivets, and particularly the final breakdown which 'was the first thing that shook Kurtz's confidence' in surviving the Congo (ibid.: 116).

14. As discussed by Marcel, this 'fidelity...has a genuinely creative function to which I cannot remain indifferent, because it is myself that I am pledging and not a limited set of physical conditions' (Existentialist Thought: 204).

15. 'Ultimately fidelity draws its strength from its' ontological implications, for it consists of keeping ourselves 'permeable' to the presence of Being. It has, therefore, a transcendent as well as subjective meaning...' (Existentialist Thought: 206).

16. Conrad reinforces this belief in a portion of a letter reprinted by Gillon: 'there is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world...that is always but a vain and floating appearance' (Eternal: 161).

17. 'I have been telling you more or less in my own words what I learned fragmentarily in the course of two or three years...' ('Amy Foster' in The Nigger of the Narcissus: 117).

18. 'The policeman...hesitates to arrest [the anarchist], because he deems it against the rules of the sport in which they are both engaged' (The Secret Agent: 325).

19. He 'leaned his forehead against the window-pane - a fragile film of glass stretched between him and the enormity of cold, black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man. Mr. Verloc felt the latent unfriendliness of all out of doors with a force approaching bodily anguish' (The Secret Agent: 56).

20. 'Every understanding is projected from a mood we have been thrown into out of an understanding that it projects into the world: we exist essentially as a "thrown projection"' (Heart: 25).

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First Response

This article is original, challenging, rich and suggestive, but over-ambitious and has the appearance of trying to condense into a few pages a substantial proportion of a PhD thesis. To take on Heidegger, Sartre and Marcel - not to mention Kierkegaard and Nietzsche - within the frame of a brief article is exceptionally demanding. Nor can one strictly claim that these thinkers are all Existentialists in the same sense. The guiding theoretical premises of the discussion require close scrutiny and full debate prior to their integration into a sustained and philosophically self-conscious investigation. I have little doubt that the writer is capable of this kind of enquiry, because the footnotes bear evidence of extensive and reflective reading. Overall, then, this research presents the outline of a more balanced and searching study to follow and is both apt and demanding.

