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### Joseph Conrad and the Early British Critics of Colonialism in the Congo

In this short paper I discuss some aspects of the early British anti-colonial literature at the end of the nineteenth century. In particular, I will concentrate on the writings of three distinguished authors who had expressed the most condemning words against the inhuman exploitation of Africans by Europeans in the Belgian Congo at that time. These three writers are: the Irish-born British diplomat, Roger Casement, the renowned French-born British journalist, E.D. Morel, and the great Polish-born English novelist, Joseph Conrad.<sup>1</sup>

In the atmosphere of prevailing racism and biological determinism, colonial expansion and imperial philosophy of the late Victorian era, works and pamphlets of Joseph Conrad, Roger Casement and E.D. Morel were quite exceptional in their condemnation of colonialism and their humane attitude towards the African victims of European imperialism. Imperial expansion was then held to be in the interest of employment, markets, civilization, security and future greatness of Britain. The Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebration in 1897 was turned into a great imperial pageant. Empire sentiment and euphoria reached their zenith in the years 1898-99, when Conrad was writing his anti-colonial and anti-imperial *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>2</sup> In that African novella he described imperialism as

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<sup>1</sup> For more detailed information see my book, *Joseph Conrad and Africa*, Nairobi 1982, 54-71. For discussion of the English image of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, see D. Hammond and A. Jablow, *The Myth of Africa*, New York 1977 and G.D. Killam, *Africa in English Fiction, 1874-1939*, Ibadan 1968.

<sup>2</sup> See generally, C.C. Eldridge *The Age of Salisbury, Victorian Imperialism*, London 1978; C. Bold, *The Victorian Attitude to Race*, London 1971; G.N. Uzoigwe, *Britain and the Conquest of Africa*, Ann Arbor 1974 and also H. Tingsten, *Victoria and Victorians*,

„robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale“, and his ideas were shared by Casement and Morel. Their works largely contributed to the eventual downfall of the Leopoldian colonial system in the Congo.

R. Casement, E.D. Morel and King Leopold's Congo

The Congo Free State was the creation of King Leopold II (1835-1910) of Belgium. Before he became the ruler of this state, he had already expressed his opinion about different colonial issues. He regarded the inhabitants of the colonies as means of production rather than as human beings. He hoped that civilization might follow the footsteps of forced labour. He was indifferent to the principles of free trade and humane treatment of African people. Before he acquired the Congo, the philanthropic *Association Internationale Africaine* had been formed which soon was transformed into a commercial undertaking known as the *Comité d'Etudes du Haut-Congo*, the same organization which dispatched Henry Morton Stanley to study the economic possibilities of the Congo. The next step was the formation in 1885 of the political organization called *Association Internationale du Congo*. It was recognized by the European powers assembled at Berlin in 1885 which enabled the shadowy Congo State of Leopold II to assume a substantial form.<sup>3</sup>

London 1972. Of special value is A.B. Keith, *The Belgian Congo and the Berlin*, Oxford 1919 which gives a detailed study of that problem.

<sup>3</sup> For general background see: R.M. Slade, *King Leopold's Congo*, London 1968; J. Stengers, *Belgique et Congo*, Brussels 1963; F. Masson, *Histoire de l'Etat indépendant du Congo*, Namur 1913; F. Cauter, *Etude sur la situation de l'Etat indépendant du Congo*, Brussels 1906. See also R. Italaander, *König Leopolds Kongo: Dokumente und pamphlete von Mark Twain, Edmund D. Morel, Roger Casement*, Munich 1964. For Britain's attitude towards the Congo question examine S.J.S. Cooley, *Britain and the Congo Question, 185-1913*, London 1962. International aspects of the Congo question are well presented by J. Willequet, *Le Congo belge et la Weltpolitik, 1894 -1914*, Brussels 1962.

In accordance with the Belgian Constitution, Leopold II sought permission from his parliament to accept the crown of the Congo. Reluctantly, the permission was granted, but on the distinct understanding that the union between Belgium and the new state should be entirely personal. The King of Belgians thus also became sovereign of the Congo State. He received absolute ownership over half its area and a more veiled proprietorship of a further area around Lake Leopold. Within this territory the natural resources of the country were reserved to the absolute exploitation of the State, and outside it they were granted in the form of territorial concessions to various monopoly companies for their exclusive exploitation.<sup>4</sup>

The main problem of Leopold II was to secure revenue to meet the needs of the new colonial state. Leopold was an impatient man and did not believe in long-term investments. He sought quick returns for his money and one of the results of his impatience and his contempt for the Africans were the atrocities committed by the colonial administration in the Free State.<sup>5</sup> Their disclosure to the public opinion of the world became the main merit of two unusual men: Roger Casement and E.D. Morel.

Roger Casement (1864-1916) is a tragic figure and although much has been written about him, the extremely important role which he played in the movement for the reform of administration of the Congo has not been fully appreciated.<sup>6</sup> There are two obvious reasons for that. The tragedy

<sup>4</sup> B. Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism 1895-1914*, London 1968, 260. The question of atrocities committed by the colonial administration in the Congo is extensively discussed by R. Ansley, „The Congo Rubber Atrocities - A case study“, *African Historical Studies* (1971), IV, 1, passim. See also R. Ansley, *King Leopold's Legacy*, London 1966. Financial problems of colonial administration in the Congo are examined by J.P. Peemans, „Capital accumulation in the Congo under colonialism“, In: P. Duignan and L.H. Gann eds., *Colonialism in Africa. IV: The Economics of Colonialism*, Cambridge 1971, 162-212.

<sup>5</sup> L.H. Gann and P. Duignan, *The Rulers of Belgian Africa, 1884-1914*, Princeton 1979, 116-30. Still valuable is A. Roeykens, *Leopold II et l'Afrique*, Brussels 1958.

<sup>6</sup> B. Inglis, *Roger Casement*, London 1973 is still very useful. It contains a good bibliography.

surrounding Casement's execution for treason in 1916 (he became one of the principal Irish martyrs in the revolt against British rule in Ireland) had distracted attention from an objective study of his role as a humanitarian. Secondly, because of his official position as a member of the British consular service, his activities as a private individual had to be behind the scenes (he was a British consul in Mozambique, Angola, Congo Free State and Brazil).

A study of documents now available reveals the crucial role of Roger Casement in the *Congo Reform Association*. The idea of organizing it originated from Casement and not from Morel as had been commonly accepted before. The documents confirm that Casement worked actively in this society and that he contributed regularly to its coffers. If then the *Congo Reform Association* is accorded a place in modern imperial history as an organ which helped to rouse the conscience of the world against the ruthless exploitation of the African people, the praise should go in great measure to Casement.<sup>7</sup>

Casement was Conrad's best friend in the Congo in 1890. Like Conrad he belonged to a persecuted nation (Casement was of Irish and Conrad of Polish origin) and he also lost his parents when he was a child. He joined the volunteers who worked for H.M. Stanley whose idea of opening up in the heart of Africa the last remaining unmaped region of central Africa attracted King Leopold II. It seems that Stanley did not realize for some time the real colonial and imperial goal of Leopold II and the ruthless methods which he had applied in building his Congo Free State.

About 1890, travellers and missionaries visiting the Congo were beginning to notice with increasing uneasiness what they described as inhuman methods of the colonial administration there. One of the earliest to start an open attack was the Black historian, George Washington Williams, who came to the Congo in 1890 and started to publish startling denunciations of the colonial system. In the same year Roger Casement met Conrad in the Congo and they, too, like Williams, were shocked by

what they saw there. Let us quote the report of John B. Murphy, an American missionary working in the Congo, who sent from there in the same year the following text which throws much light upon the situation of Africans in the Congo:

Each town and district is forced to bring in a certain quantity [of rubber] to the headquarters of the Commissaire every Sunday. It is collected by force; the soldiers drive the people into the bush. If they will not go, they are shot down, and their hands cut off and taken as trophies to the Commissaire. . . these hands, the hands of men, women and children are placed in rows before the Commissaire who counts them to see that the soldiers have not wasted cartridges.<sup>8</sup>

A few years later, Casement's friend the journalist E.D. Morel wrote that the carnival of massacre, of which the Congo territories have been the scene for the last twelve years, must appeal all those who have studied the facts. From 1890 onwards the records of the Congo State have been literally blood-soaked. . . [there were] atrocities committed upon young children by the State's soldiers. . . and the 'prime-movers' . . . in this diabolic and unholly so-called civilising power are actuated, we are told, by sincere love for their fellowmen and black brothers.

Roger Casement, together with Edmund D. Morel and with the help of the *Congo Reform Association*, which they established, discovered easily the exploitative character of the Free State and Leopold's ruthless methods. It was Casement's report on the Congo, worked up in 1903 for the British government, that gave the most complete analysis of the situation in that colony which became the hell for the Africans. On 5 August 1903 Casement reported from the interior of the Congo:

In the lake district things are pretty bad. . . whole villages and districts I knew well and visited as flourishing communities in 1887 are today without a human being; others are

<sup>8</sup> Inglis, *Roger Casement*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> E.D. Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, London 1904, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Cooley, *Britain and the Congo Question, 1885-1913*, 65 and also Porter, *Critics of Empire*, 266.

reduced to a handful of sick and harassed creatures who say of the government: Are the white men never going home; is this to last for ever?<sup>10</sup>

One month later, Casement wrote to Lord Lansdowne using still more accusing and condemning words:

Of all the shameful and infamous expedients whereby man has preyed upon man . . . this vile thing [the rubber trade - HZ] dares to call itself commerce. . . were I to touch on the subject of the treatment of the natives under the rubber regime, my indignation would carry me beyond the limits of official courtesy.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of September 1903 Casement came across a few examples of mutilation which made the most terrible impression on him. A group of Africans came to see him at the Congo Balolo mission of the Baptist Missionary Society. They brought with them a boy of about sixteen whose right hand was cut off at the wrist by a 'sentry' of one of the rubber companies who in this way wanted to compel workers to collect more rubber.

Morel found at the same time many examples of mutilation and in his *King Leopold's Rule in Africa* he left a horrible picture of colonial cruelty. He wrote that the systematic hand-cutting and worst forms of mutilation for over a decade have been practised all over the Congo territories. Mutilation of dead and living

must be assigned to the direct instigation of State officials and agents of the Trusts appointed to terrorise the rubber districts. The soldiers let loose through the country . . . have been required to bring back tangible proof that proper punishment was inflicted, and the hands of slain, or partly slain, people were the readiest and most acceptable form of proof.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> W. R. Louis, 'Roger Casement and the Congo', *Journal of African History* (1964), V, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Zins, *Joseph Conrad and African*, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, 119.

Within two weeks, Roger Casement produced for the British Foreign Office a sixty-one-page record of his journey up the Congo river complete with documentary evidence - the shocking proof of atrocities committed by the Congo Free State and the White traders in that country. He gained international fame for revealing to the world atrocious cruelty in the exploitation of African labour by European colonists.

A few more words should be said about the man who for several years of his journalist career had been disclosing the misery of the Africans in the Congo. It was Casement's friend and collaborator Edmund D. Morel (1873 - 1924), one of England's most powerful pamphleteers and effective reformers of that time.<sup>13</sup> The son of a French civil servant and an Englishwoman, he was educated in England where he became a very prolific writer and journalist. He dedicated several years of studies and publishing to reveal the atrocities in the Congo state and his books are still a very important source of information about it. As already mentioned, he founded, together with Roger Casement, the *Congo Reform Association* and became the soul of that movement which stirred the humanitarian conscience of the English people at the very beginning of the twentieth century.

From Casement received Morel his first knowledge of the nightmare of the Congo State. From Roger Casement he learned about daily

agony of the entire people. . . in all the repulsive terrifying details. I verily believe - wrote Morel - I saw those hunted women clutching their children and flying panic stricken to the bush; the blood flowing from those quivering bodies as the hippopotamus hide whip struck and struck again; the savage soldiery rushing hither and thither amid burning villages; the ghastly tally of several hands; later on. . . we turned again to that tortured African world, to the 'heart of darkness', as Joseph Conrad described it in his memorable story.<sup>14</sup>

Already in 1890, Morel had become interested in the atrocities committed by the colonial administration in the Congo and started to

<sup>13</sup> E. D. Morel, *History of the Congo Involvement*, ed. W. R. Louis and J. Stengers, Oxford 1968, passim.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

collect evidence to bring those crimes to the light. In 1896 he wrote in his *History of the Congo Reform Movement* that he started to work

with the determination to do my best to expose and destroy what I then knew to be a legalised infamy. I knew that there lay concealed beneath the mask of a spurious philanthropy, and framed in all the misleading paraphernalia of civilised government, a perfected system of oppression, accompanied by unimaginable barbarities and responsible for a vast destruction of human life... The avalanche of abuse...<sup>15</sup>

In the preface to his important book *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, Morel confessed that in 1899 he became convinced

that the system of government carried on by authorities of the Congo State was a bad and wicked system, inflicting terrible wrongs upon the native races, and that the conception of tropical African development upon which it rested was one that ought to be struggled against without pause or abatement of energy in the interest of humanity, of European honour, and European statesmanship in the Dark Continent.<sup>16</sup>

Morel was not only an excellent organizer and agitator but also a very hard-working researcher. In his books, printed in the first years of our century, Morel compiled an enormous amount of different data and documentation supporting the current opinion about the mismanagement and atrocities committed in the Congo by the colonial administration. He not only saw the wrongs inflicted by Europeans upon African people, but he also understood correctly the nature of European expansion and exploitation. He had condemned the colonial system of forced labour and production. He thought that the two essentials of this system were: denial to the natives of any rights in their land and in the products of commercial value their land produced. To which he added physical force to compel the Africans to gather those products for the Europeans. Morel wrote that the colonial exploitation was an old story of evil, greed and lust perpetrated upon a weaker people. But never before has

the hypocrisy with which such deeds have been cloaked, attained to heights so sublime. Never before has hypocrisy been so successful. For nearly twenty years has the Sovereign of the Congo State posed before the world as the embodiment of philanthropic motive, high intent, humanitarian zeal, lofty and stimulating righteousness. No more marvellous piece of acting has been witnessed on the world's stage than this.<sup>17</sup>

The British Government was rather cautious over the publication of Casement's Congo Report and the Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, pointed out that it would make 'a great noise in England'. The discussion that followed in England concentrated on the method of publishing the report which embittered Casement a lot. He insisted on publishing the names of oppressors and oppressed but the British Government opposed this idea vigorously asserting that it could expose the victims and witnesses of persecutions to the risk of reprisals. At last the Report was published on 12 February 1904 with letters and symbols substituted for names and places.<sup>18</sup>

Casement's Report and the creation of the *Congo Reform Association* by Casement and Morel were the feasts that contributed greatly to the eventual downfall of the Leopoldian system and the annexation of the Congo by Belgium. They mobilized public opinion in Britain against that colonial system which Joseph Conrad also very strongly condemned in his *Heart of Darkness*.

#### Conrad's Heart of Darkness as Anti-Colonial Literature

The importance of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) as a political writer was noticed pretty late and was new in his traditional image of a sea-dreamer.<sup>19</sup> As the author of *Heart of Darkness*, *Victory*, *Nostramo* or *The Rescue*, Conrad was a 'colonial' writer and colonial themes play an

<sup>17</sup> Morel, *History of the Congo Reform Involvement*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> For detailed discussion consult W. R. Louis, 'Roger Casement and the Congo', 99 ff.

<sup>19</sup> This problem is thoroughly covered by such authors as E.K. Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*, Chicago 1963; A. Fleischman, *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad*, Baltimore 1967), and M.M. Mahood, *The Colonial Encounter*, London 1977. See also Zins, *Joseph Conrad and Africa*, 115 ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, IX-X.

enormous role in his writings. If he had a maturing effect on English literature, it was in part because he called attention to the sheer horror in certain political realities that were overlooked by English citizens and politicians. The case of his oppressed Poland was one, the colonial exploitation of the Africans was the other one. Conrad's condemnation of imperialism and colonialism as well as sympathy with persecuted and suffering people had one of their sources in his Polish background, in his personal sufferings and the persecution of his people living under foreign occupation. His personal experience and memories created in him great sensitivity for human degradation and moral responsibility. Conrad's strong moral and political sensitivity made Henry James write the following words about the author of *Heart of Darkness*: „No one has known - for intellectual use - the things you know. . . you have, as the artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached.”<sup>20</sup>

Of all the fiction about Africa written at the turn of the nineteenth century in Britain, only the work of Joseph Conrad stands as great literature. Contrary to Rudyard Kipling and his followers, Conrad was keenly aware of the moral ambiguities of empire. He described imperialism as „robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale” and thus took the opposite view to Kipling's enthusiastic admiration of British expansion. Contrary to Kipling's jingoism, Conrad saw very clearly the real nature of imperialism. It is for the sake of loot that Kurtz goes to Africa in the *Heart of Darkness* becoming the symbol of fundamental conflicts and decadence of colonialism and international imperialism.

*Heart of Darkness* is based very closely on Conrad's experience in the Congo in 1890 where he went to command a river steamer and where he met Roger Casement. It seems that during his short stay in the Congo (only six months) Conrad did not have much opportunity to witness personally much Belgian brutality and oppression.<sup>21</sup> But is a peculiar

ability of the mind of a great writer to understand and depict, even on the basis of scanty evidence, the whole dimension and nature of things. His direct experience of the Ivory-trading area above Kinshasa was limited to a rapid voyage to Stanley Falls and back, on which there was probably little time for shore experience. But Conrad kept eyes and ears well open, both in Africa and England and it seems that a great deal must have come to him by hearsay. One of his main sources was Casement and also traders, missionaries and some English friends both in Britain and in Africa who spoke about the brutality of the colonial system in the Congo. In spite of this one cannot deny that one of the main weaknesses of Conrad's presentation of African realities can be related to his little knowledge of them. *Heart of Darkness*, on the other hand, is of course a literary masterpiece, based closely on Conrad's experience and not a historical or political study. The fact that Conrad had some conventional attitudes towards Africa which were the result of his little knowledge of Africa was much overemphasized by Chinua Achebe.<sup>22</sup> Conrad's journey to the 'heart of darkness' did not probably bring him face to face with many realities of the Congo State which he knew from Casement, literature and other sources but not so much from his own experience.<sup>23</sup> But of course Conrad, contrary to Casement and Morel, was not a politician or journalist and was looking for moral and artistic truth about the human being rather than a precise documentation of the reality which he found in the Congo.

Conrad's criticism of conditions in the Congo was strengthened by the rumours he heard in England about the mismanagement of affairs in King Leopold's Congo. The protests and agitation against it started in 1898, when Conrad had already settled in England after his long voyages

<sup>20</sup> *Selected Letters of Henry James*, ed. by I. Edel, New York 1955, 157.

<sup>21</sup> Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge 1973) gives a very detailed analysis of Conrad's stay in the Congo. Among more recent studies see R. Adams, *Heart of*

*Darkness*, Harmondsworth 1991). See also R. C. Murfin ed., *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, New York 1989.

<sup>22</sup> See C. Achebe, „An image of Africa”, *Research in African Literature* (1978), IX, 1-18.

<sup>23</sup> Zins, Joseph Conrad and Africa, ch.4, where this question is discussed more fully.

and was sketching his *Heart of Darkness*. They began with an accident made famous as the 'Stokes Affair'.

In 1895 Charles Stokes, an Irish ex-missionary who had turned trader, was executed by order of a Belgian captain Lothaire, whom the Africans called 'murderer for ivory'. The official reason from the execution was the pretext that he was supplying guns to a powerful Afro-Arab slaver. British public opinion did not accept this explanation and there was an outcry which pressured the Congo State into paying an indemnity to the British government and bringing captain Lothaire to trail.<sup>24</sup>

The Stokes Affair made a deep impression on Conrad who, like many British citizens, saw in Stokes the victim of Belgian colonial rule. Some echo of this affair can be found in *The Inheritors*, a novel written by Ford Madox Ford together with Conrad in 1899.<sup>25</sup> The villain in that book was to be allegorically Joseph Chamberlain, one of the ideologists of British imperialism. The sub-villain was to be Leopold II, King of the Belgians, the founder of the Congo State. *The Inheritors* was written towards the beginning of the Boer War, for which Chamberlain, who pursued an aggressive policy as colonial Secretary, was in part directly responsible. Conrad was opposed to Chamberlain's prosecution of the war and scoffed at Kipling's jingoistic pride in that war. He mocked Kipling's assertion that the war was undertaken for the cause of democracy, and correctly believed that it was 'an appalling fatuity'.<sup>26</sup> Conrad must have also known the writings of Charles Dilke, the former Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who in 1896 wrote bitterly about the conditions in the Congo, ivory-stealing, the village-burning, the flogging and the shooting which were going in the heart of Africa. And he recalled the words of General Gordon: 'I am sick of these people [White colonialists]; it is they and not the blacks, who need civilisation'. Since Dilke's article

appeared in the July issue of *Cosmopolis*, a magazine sponsored by Conrad's publisher, it is possible that Conrad could have received that issue.

Not only missionaries and politicians, but also the English traders who worked in the Congo State at that time might have supplied Conrad with some knowledge of tropical Africa. In September 1896, several English papers published a Reuter interview with one of them, Alfred Parminier; and in 1897 there appeared in *The Century Magazine* a diary of E. J. Glave under the title 'Cruelty in the Congo State'. They both stressed the rapid deterioration in the situation of the Africans which was the result of the fact that the Congo State employed Arabs to raid villages, take slaves and give them back for ivory.

Conrad's condemnation of imperialism and colonialism as well as his sympathy with and understanding of persecuted and suffering people, had also, as already mentioned, one of its sources in his Polish origin and background, in his personal suffering and the persecution of his people living under foreign occupation. His personal unfortunate experiences and memories of his childhood created in him great sensitivity for human degradation and moral responsibility.<sup>27</sup> The Polish cultural heritage must have helped Conrad to achieve his liberal-mindedness and we are justified, I think in finding in Conrad's Polishness some of the roots of his extraordinary humane and keen awareness of realities in other countries dominated from abroad. In his *Personal Record* Conrad wrote:

An impartial view of humanity in all its degree of splendour and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the unprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was the dominant characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the houses which sheltered my hazardous childhood.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> W. R. Louis, 'The Stokes Affair and the origins of the Anti-Congo Campaign, 1885-1896', *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* (1965), XLIII, passim.

<sup>25</sup> F. MacShane, *The Life and Work of Ford Madox Ford*, London 1965, 45.

<sup>26</sup> F. R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: Three Lives*, London 1979, 493; G. Jean-Aubry, ed., *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, New York 1928), I, 288; I. Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1980), 158.

<sup>27</sup> Z. Najder, ed., *Conrad's Polish Background: Letters to and from Polish Friends*, London 1968); M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius*, Cambridge 1941; G. Morf, *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, London 1930); G. Morf, *The Polish Shadows and Ghosts of Joseph Conrad*, New York 1976.

<sup>28</sup> J. Conrad, *A Personal Record*, London 1912, VII.

Conrad's Polishness is the key to and the source of better understanding of many aspects of his art including his African novella. On the other hand, some stereotypes in his description of Africans were the products of traditional opinions about Africa which Conrad came across during his life in England.<sup>29</sup>

The multiform and multiple structure of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in which the action might be seen as taking place on different levels and having different meanings, makes the interpretation of this African novella especially difficult. The confusion comes out of the novella itself which has a complex structure and in some parts may be understood in more than one way (cultural-historical, moral, literal, symbolic, psychological, etc.). It seems, that the cultural-historical and political interpretation is most fruitful and Conrad himself encourages it when he writes in the introduction to his *Youth*: „*Heart of Darkness* is . . . experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case.”

He also writes in a letter to his publisher, William Blackwood,<sup>30</sup> that his African novella is the criticism of the ‘criminality of inefficiency and pure selfishness’ of colonialism which under the guise of ‘civilising work’ brought so often misery and suffering to Africans.

Conrad came to believe that the true nature of European society was revealed in the colonies which were for Europeans a good test of character. It may be proper to quote here the words of Karl Marx who noted that „the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois

civilisation lies unveiled before our eyes. . . in the colonies, where it goes naked.”<sup>31</sup>

Jean-Paul Sartre came to a similar opinion when he wrote that ‘the strip-tease of our humanism’ took place in the tropics, and ‘in the colonies the truth stood naked.’<sup>32</sup> In spite of all the differences, Conrad shared with Marx and Sartre the notion that in the colonies one could easier see the truth about Western society. Conrad not only understood that the true nature of Western society was at that time revealed in the colonies, but from his Congo experience came to believe that it was his duty as a novelist to unmask that society. At first he grumbled about the stupidity of packing ivory in crates, but gradually he came to attack the colonial set-up as a whole.

*Heart of Darkness*, like *Nostromo*, shows the ‘civilising’ mission of the European imperialism as nothing more than barbarism.<sup>33</sup> The novella, perhaps one of the most terrifying indictments of imperialism ever written, reveals that the interests of civilization and colonialism are basically antagonistic.

Roger Casement, Edmund D. Morel and Joseph Conrad had done more than anybody else to disclose colonial atrocities in the Congo and contributed largely to the downfall of Leopoldian colonial system there. In spite of having very different background, they shared at least one thing in common: their condemnation of colonial exploitation.

<sup>29</sup> I think that Chinua Achebe is too harsh to Conrad in his opinion that the author of *Heart of Darkness* saw the relationship between the White and Black man only in terms of remote kinship. Achebe is committing the ‘sin of anachronism’ in demanding from Conrad our contemporary knowledge and experience (*Heart of Darkness* was written at the end of the nineteenth century); see Achebe, “An image of Africa”, 1-15.

<sup>30</sup> Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad*, 120.

<sup>31</sup> K. Marx, „The future results of the British Rule in India”, *On Colonialism*, Moscow 1968, 88.

<sup>32</sup> J.P. Sartre's Preface to F. Fanon, *The Wretched on the Earth*, New York 1963, 7, 21.

<sup>33</sup> On Conrad's political philosophy see: A. Swingewood, *The Novel and Revolution*, London 1975), 130-41. I was trying to analyse this aspect in my *Joseph Conrad and Africa*, chs. 2, 6.