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“Whirr” is King: International Capital and the Paradox of Consciousness in *Typhoon*

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Much critical reception of *Typhoon*—which pits a ship’s captain incapable of figurative speech against a “great wind” that “disintegrate[s]” the linguistic economy of his vessel into “shreds and fragments of forlorn shouting”—has focused on its remarkable, and perhaps prototypically modernist, insight into the twentieth century’s theoretical interest in the contingency of the linguistic sign (Conrad 31). As Sooyoung Chon notes, the story can be read as “a parable about narrative art” wherein Captain MacWhirr’s effort to “maintain [. . .] civilized order on a ship in crisis” reflects how the “imaginative language [of] good narrative” struggles to maintain “contact with the humane and the real” that lie at the elusive heart of what a narrative endeavors to convey (34–5). Similarly, for Joseph Kolupke, *Typhoon* is about “a ship of state, a political microcosm” whose pragmatic leader arrests “the natural drift to nihilism and anarchy” in a “universe [in which] there is no transcendental signifier” (81–3).

Such interpretations are well deserved, for the text clearly demonstrates Conrad’s effort to draw an extended parallel between the great storm encountered by the unimaginative and “literal” Captain MacWhirr and a turbulent, knowledge-threatening slippage between utterance and understanding (*Typhoon* 19). After all, at the height of the storm at sea, the fierce swirling winds fragment the dialogue (at times stealing speech at the moment of utterance), leave the crew “whirled a great distance” from their central voice of authority, and cause the first mate to consider “the very thought of action utterly vain” until he hears

“the resisting voice” of the “literal MacWhirr” as if it were “sent out from some remote spot of peace beyond . . . the gale” (33–6). As Ted Billy rightly observes, *Typhoon* thus “dramatize[s] the limitations of all human systems based on verbal constructs” (100). But I would argue that the tale’s foresight into the twenty-first century’s theoretical concerns lies in its more complex struggle to comprehend how material, and specifically global-economic, forces are intimately bound together with those of language and consciousness. Indeed, what Conrad’s own inconclusive wrangling with semiotic ambiguity in *Typhoon* ultimately discloses is a deep-rooted link between crises of meaning or knowledge, loosely understood as modern, and the volatile interdependence of interests that drive the incipient global phase of imperial capitalism.

Although it has not been analyzed in due detail, the ship upon which the plot of *Typhoon* unfolds, a newly built steamer named the *Nan Shan*, stands out among the sailing vessels in Conrad’s *oeuvre* as a forceful symbol of industry and capitalist modernity.¹ The partial but frequent glimpses Conrad gives us of the vessel unfailingly depict it as a composite of “excellen[t] instrument[s],” a marvel of the division of labor that “embod[ies] all the latest advances in shipbuilding” (*Typhoon* 5, 7). During the storm, the brief close-ups of the ship’s machinery are accelerated into a visual effect that anticipates the use of montage in Sergei Eisenstein’s *Potemkin*, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, and Wyndham Lewis’s *Vorticism*:

Glams, like pale long flames, trembled upon the polish of metal; from the flooring below the enormous crank-heads emerged in their turns with a flash of brass and steel—going over; while the connecting rods, big-jointed, like skeleton limbs, seemed to thrust them down and pull them up again with an irresistible precision [while] discs of metal rubbed smoothly against each other, slow and gentle, in a commingling of shadows and gleams. (55)

Arguably, the “irresistible precision” of the machine even anticipates a futurist paradox, as industry here churns against *and* with nature, in turns suppressing and harnessing what Conrad, in his “Author’s Note” to the novella, terms the “elemental fury” of the typhoon (viii).

Intervening with these tensions of modernity, however, is the equally relevant fact that the *Nan Shan* is a product, a material symbol, of empire and its burgeoning economies. In fact, what Edward Said notes of *Heart of Darkness*, that it “emphasiz[es] the fact that during the

1890s the business of empire, once an adventurous and often individualistic enterprise, had become the empire of business,” is even more true of *Typhoon* (23). For it is not just “all Europe,” but a broad range of Eastern and Western interests that have, quite literally, “contributed to the making of” the *Nan Shan* (Heart 45). The construction of the ship is funded by a British company based in uncolonized, trade-opened Siam, a location that allows the ship owners to sail under the Union Jack or, when they “judged it expedient,” the Siamese ensign (*Typhoon* 8). The ship was built by laborers in Dumbarton, Scotland, in the region near Glasgow where, as Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, “the erosion and collapse of [Scottish] native institutions, [. . .] educational system and religion” was the price for becoming an industrial engine of empire (308–9). The ship is, in turn, hired from Siam-based Sigg and Son by the Chinese Bun-Hin Company, who use the ship to transport coolie laborers. These workers, returning from their “few years of work in various tropical colonies,” represent the ease with which imperialist economic interests substituted coolie trafficking for the recently illegalized slave trade (*Typhoon* 6). The ship’s captain, meanwhile, is a transient native of Belfast who has effectively abandoned his family business; and his crew is a compelling, untraceable mixture of middle and lower classes from the British Isles. Thus, the vessel is indeed a “political microcosm,” as Kolupke argues, but it is considerably more complex than a “ship of state” (81). Considering both the mode of producing the composite machine that is the *Nan Shan* and the *Nan Shan*’s function within economic production, we should recognize that the ship embodies a much more slippery entity: the deterritorializing drive for commodity and surplus. Here I would agree with Stephen Ross, who, although surprisingly without any mention of *Typhoon*, argues in his recent study *Conrad and Empire* that “the Conrad of the major phase almost obsessively presents us with a [. . .] depiction of imperialism as global-capitalist (rather than nation-statist) [. . .] and international casts of characters whose hybridity often renders any accurate genealogy impossible” (14).

It is thus difficult to accept Chon’s contention that the “moral kernel of the story”—the message that “story-telling is the only way of transcending [. . .] the realm of actual events and action”—renders the “colonial dominations represented” in the tale “not all that significant” (25–6, 32). For, given the incipient globalization that Conrad’s narrative makes a very literal effort to contain, the opposite may be true, namely, that the content of *Typhoon* helps to *determine* the reflexivity of its

inquiry into meaning. Such is certainly the case with one of *Typhoon's* most compelling aesthetic maneuvers, its use of the whirling storm as a symbol of epistemological ambiguity *and* as the vehicle in metaphoric descriptions of the "tempestuous tumult" of Chinese laborers fighting over the coins that are strewn about their cargo hold during the storm (62).² Although critical attention has been paid to the "subtle, naturalistic fashion in which the figurative language of the storm description becomes the literal denotation of the struggling coolies," interpretations tend to engage this manifold trope only on its more abstract valences (Kolupke 73). As Kolupke puts it,

the identification [. . .] of the coolies with the storm [. . . is] a kind of commentary on the nature of figurative language itself. [. . .] It seems to say that it is in the nature of literary language to expand in this fashion, symbol and symbolized, vehicle and tenor, mirroring one another, even exchanging places as we scrutinize them ever more carefully. [. . .] For human beings, language and reality are inseparably joined, may in fact be the same thing. (81–2)

Kolupke further posits that what *Typhoon* dramatizes, via MacWhirr's pragmatic responses to such semiotic entanglements, is the human effort to "counteract," by way of insistence upon purposeful utterance, "the natural drift to nihilism and anarchy" that "confront[s] humanity in times of crisis" (81). However, such a reading abstracts, and thus naturalizes, the specific function of the ship and the manner in which that function is restored by the operation of language as an objective medium of exchange. The narrator explains that "Old Mr. Sigg liked a man of few words;" hence, the ship's owner is comfortable with MacWhirr at the helm (*Typhoon* 8). But because a chief function of the Sigg and Son ships is the trafficking of coolie labor, then the challenge of a literal mind stabilizing epistemological disjuncture aboard these ships is, by the same logic, analogous to the challenge of legitimizing or narratologically comprehending a slave trade—of operating within a system that requires not just labor, but some kind of *trade* in that labor, to support its expansion of a surplus-based economy.

Paradoxically, one way to resolve this challenge is to depict the reality of an en masse commodification of humans with more consumable figures of speech: to represent them as teeming masses of primitive humanity, as racial others of a unified consciousness, or as the very embodiment of one's own sense of incomprehension. We might argue,

then, that what is really offered in the text’s equation of the storm with epistemological uncertainty *and* with the “confused uproar” of coolie laborers, whose “gusts of screams [. . .] mingle with the blows of the sea” as they fight over their storm-strewn coins, is evidence of Conrad’s own struggle to ascertain a metaphysical understanding of the human consequences of imperial and capitalist ideology (*Typhoon* 62). Indeed, among Conrad’s conscious concerns in *Typhoon* is to wrestle not just with the slippage between language and meaning, but with the unconscious “forces” that drive human beings and the systems of value and exchange, including language, which they create. It seems to want, like captain MacWhirr, “to penetrate the hidden intention [of the storm] and guess the aim and force of the thrust” (33). But just as MacWhirr is himself a component of this force—a sharer in the inscrutable intention of an expansive capitalist endeavor that presumably motivates the individual and the collective at once—so too is *any* mode of consciousness or expression aboard the *Nan Shan* already complicit with the mobile gale of ambiguity that it presumes to contest.

Indeed, the “force” welling up to “disintegrate” the false objectivity of meaning and systematic functionality aboard the *Nan Shan*—the “senseless, destructive fury” of the storm that “loot[s]” the ship—is, or is inseparable from, the attempt to sustain, through networked interests and well-divided labor, a permutation of slave trading (*Typhoon* 36). As the boatswain descends to the cargo hold at the height of the storm, the volatile rhetorical core of this attempt—the representation of coolies as both literal victims and figurative symbols of the natural forces that drive the global market—is confronted:

down there he could hear the gale raging. Its howls and shrieks seemed to take on [. . .] something of the human character, of human rage and pain—being not vast but infinitely poignant. [. . .] He pulled back the bolt: the heavy iron plate turned on its hinges; and it was as though he had opened the door to the sounds of the tempest. A gust of hoarse yelling met him: [. . .] a tumult of strangled, throaty shrieks that produced an effect of desperate confusion. (45–6)

Perhaps part of the intent here, as in *Heart of Darkness*, is to employ the racial other in the critique of the imperial project—as a primitive test-case for the human propensity to develop or accept the various signs (such as money, words, or manners) that mediate desire and fulfillment and therefore develop (naturally?) into expansive market economies.

Like the cannibalistic Congo natives in Marlow's recollection, *Typhoon's* "Chinamen" are sometimes perceived as showing what Marlow calls "restraint," and at others basic desire, which in turn reflects the philosophical inquiry into the forces of nature that the story puts in conflict (*Heart* 37). But if so, then what is also evident is that in *Typhoon*, as in *Heart of Darkness*, the system of imperialism that Conrad exposes also proves to "ha[ve] the power of a system representing as well as speaking for everything within its dominion," as is especially evident in the appropriation not simply of the consciousness, but the incomprehensibility, of the other (Said 24). In the case of *Typhoon*, the result is that the human figures who represent exploitation by the system also represent the "incomprehensible" or "confus[ing]" forces of nature that somehow drive it, and this paradox is in turn internalized or interpreted to stand for a modern crisis of meaning (*Typhoon* 64, 46).

Much like the theme of the novel, its ambiguous centerpiece Captain MacWhirr, whom Conrad envisioned as "a leading motive [to] harmonize all these violent noises, and [. . .] put all that elemental fury in its place," is also an inseparable component of the contingent forces of global imperialism that he presumes to navigate (*Typhoon* xxviii). Prior to the storm, Conrad's narrator makes a crucial allusion that connects the unconscious "motives" of MacWhirr to the theistic force that, in Adam Smith's formulation, propels the division of labor: for MacWhirr to have "run away to sea [. . .] at the age of fifteen," says the narrator, "was enough to give you [. . .] the idea of an immense, potent, invisible hand thrust into the ant-heap of the earth [and] setting the unconscious faces of the multitude towards inconceivable goals" (4). As the storm hits, both above and below deck, Smith's conundrum of nature and consciousness morphs into its Marxist opposite, concerning altruistic species-being: fearing that a "Mischievous hand" would be at work if the ship went down while the coolies fought over money, MacWhirr contemplates "the nature of man," and the "heart, which [. . .] even before life itself [. . .] aspires to peace" (42). Herein he makes his decision to "face" both the human storm below deck, by equally dividing the money, and the typhoon itself (71).

Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine the degree of unmediated consciousness that motivates the captain against ambiguity and greed, or to evaluate objectively his actions as protests against modernity and imperialism, for MacWhirr, whose name means 'son' or 'offspring of a spinning motion,' is indeed only derivative of the very crisis he navigates. Whether or not MacWhirr's act of distributing wealth

among the warring coolies is understood as species-being altruism (“hope to have done the fair thing”) or as a perfectly task-oriented adherence to his role in a division of labor (“for the sake of all concerned”), the act nonetheless serves to sustain the burgeoning economic system of which the ship, crew, and human cargo are a part (*Typhoon* 76, 79). After all, this is a system that, exactly like MacWhirr, “is unable to grasp what is due to the difference of latitudes” (3).

From the standpoint of Marx’s writings on capitalism and imperialism, it is worth noting that what the “unimaginative” MacWhirr most closely corresponds to is the “division of mental and material labor” in *The German Ideology*. Marx asserts that the perpetuation of ideology requires the distinct but complementary roles of the “thinkers [or] active, conceptive ideologists” and the more task-oriented bourgeoisie who “have less time to make up illusions and ideas about themselves,” and whose “passive and receptive” relationship to a reigning ideology helps to sustain it (173). The former, we might say, are in the business of figurative language, while the latter expound the virtues of the literal, but as long as the material field of reference for word usage remains the same, then the difference in modalities of expression matters little. At best, then, MacWhirr’s heroic indifference to any signification beyond the material is a mere simulacrum of the ultimate indifference of global-capitalist imperialism to any of the cultural, moral, or philosophical principles that, especially in Conrad’s era, presumably functioned as the centers of nation-state ideologies. Conrad in fact seems to anticipate, or verify, much more recent developments in the critique of the global permutation of capitalist ideology, such as the definition of Empire as a “postmodern [. . .] global economy” offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow. (xii-xiii)

Typhoon’s Captain MacWhirr cannot be an opponent of this apparatus, because he is an uncanny personification of it. Two important defenses

for this belief lie in his complicity in the primitive symbolism attached to the coolies, as explained above, and his resistance to the metaphysical symbolism of the Siamese flag, as discussed below.

According to Eberhard Griem, MacWhirr's comical lack of concern for what the Siamese flag represents politically (for he is only concerned that the flag matches the picture in his Signal Code book) "express[es] the view that what really counts in the responsible command of the ship are the people in command, rather than the abstract authority indicated by the flag" (27). James Hansford, on a similar but more theoretical note, points to MacWhirr's insistence on the formal correctness of the Siamese ensign as evidence of the captain's laudable "emphasis on the reality of experience, not upon the signifying system under which it provisionally functions" (149). I propose, however, that the "arbitrary nature of the signifying system" is the "authority" in command of the ship, and that the arbitrary nature of representation does not obscure, but rather *determines*, the "reality of experience" aboard the *Nan Shan* (Hansford 149). MacWhirr's stance against figurative expression matters little, that is to say, because the ensign, like its British counterpart, is *already* an arbitrary signifier, functioning as mere disguise within the hegemony of capital interests. MacWhirr's presumed triumph of presence against a gale of indeterminacy—of "mere holding on to existence within the excessive tumult"—may be no more than a confirmation of the unfathomable resilience of market forces, which adjust to moral paradoxes and linguistic turbulence as easily as the Siggs can raise or lower the more "expedient" national flag (*Typhoon* 42, 8). To be sure, the contending forces that would appear, on one level, to be pitted against one another throughout *Typhoon* can also be seen, upon more thorough analysis, to derive from the same pervasive, expansive, and motive-disregarding force of the increasingly global economies of Empire. Whether or not closure or certainty are achieved by the multiple letters that the crew members write, attempting to explain or comprehend MacWhirr's actions at sea, the system embodied by the voyage rolls on, equally inscrutable. Hence the subtlety of Mrs. MacWhirr's response to the triumphantly unimaginative letter her husband had written from the eye of the storm:

"He's well," continued Mrs. MacWhirr languidly. "At least I think so. He never says." She had a little laugh. The [daughter's] face expressed a wandering indifference, and Mrs. MacWhirr surveyed her with fond

pride. "Go and get your hat," she said after a while. "I am going out to do some shopping. There is a sale at Linom's." (*Typhoon* 76)

NOTES

1. As Susan Jones has argued, Maurice Grieffenhagen's illustrations for the serial publication of "Typhoon" in *Pall Mall Magazine* are decidedly modernist in their "representation of discontinuity or dislocation" (201). See Jones's "Conrad on the Borderlands of Modernism: Maurice Geiffenhagen, Dorothy Richardson, and the Case of *Typhoon*," 195–211.

2. In the "Author's Note," Conrad underscores this equation by describing the storm as an "elemental fury" and the coolies as the "human element below [the] deck" (*Typhoon* vii).

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