The Tragic Vision
Krieger, Murray

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Krieger, Murray.
The Tragic Vision: The Confrontation of Extremity.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68500

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2412980
CHAPTER SIX

Joseph Conrad: Action, Inaction, and Extremity

1. The Varieties of Extremity

HEART OF DARKNESS

I saw on that ivory face the expression of somber pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

"The horror! The horror!"

. . . And it is not my own extremity I remember best—a vision of grayness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. . . . I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! (169-170, 171-172)

The Varieties of Extremity

Thanks to Mr. Kurtz, Conrad's magnificently proportioned Marlow never need pay the full price himself for so costly a victory and a vision. And this is the debt to Kurtz that he acknowledges and that he meets, however modestly, in that cautious ethical realm which Marlow clasps for his safety. For, having lived through Kurtz's extremity, Marlow can retain his own more yielding—and more compromising—resistance to extremity, more fearful than ever of its consequences but now fully aware of the vistas it opens onto for him who dares embrace it. And Marlow can move beyond his own "vision of grayness." Kurtz has, at great expense, made the tragic vision available to his less venturesome but still sensitive fellows: in his relation to Marlow, he is an allegory of the role that the visionary and the literature in which he figures are to play for those of us who are interested but not ourselves committed totally. And where the tragic visionary is concerned, of course totality is all.

Heart of Darkness is effective as an ideal archetype of the literature of the tragic vision, giving us an exemplary version of the relations between representatives of the ethical and of the tragic realms. The categories it so clearly schematizes frame most of Conrad's work and reach beyond to many others. For this reason I use it here, before moving on to the novels that are my central concern, even though Kurtz in his open and wildly vicious defiance is closer in spirit to those visionaries with which I began in my early chapters.

As I have here posed the ethical-tragic relation, it would seem that it is in the ethical resistance to the tragic that moral strength resides. But it is just the paradoxical nature of this strength that constitutes the central problem of Heart of Darkness. The key to the novel turns on Conrad's complex attitude toward the twin classical qualities that Marlow terms "innate strength" and "restraint." Two points seem immediately clear: as surely as Marlow does have them, Kurtz does not; and these qualities are severely tried—and especially needed—in Africa, that is, in the primitive reaches of pre-civilization or in the Dionysian darkness of pre-consciousness. We must examine
the sources of Marlow's inner strength and of Kurtz's lack of it. The problem is perhaps most neatly posed in the passage in which Marlow, sailing down the river, is attracted and tempted by the frenzied dancing and howling of the natives on the banks. Will he join them? (This, after all, is to be the essence of Kurtz's sin.) Marlow admits that he feels a stirring deep within him, feels a call to his primitive humanity in the spectacle. He cannot ignore the call, but rather rejects it in full realization of its significance and its attraction. And he explicitly gives his listeners the reasons for his rejection:

Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced. Of course, a fool, what with sheer fright and fine sentiments, is always safe. Who's that grunting? You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no—I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes—I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags, and get the tin-pot along by hook or by crook. There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (110)

Previously, in much the same spirit, Marlow has told us,

When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily. But I felt it all the same; I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half-a-crown a tumble—(106)
Again, it is with much the same view that Marlow later seizes upon a very commonplace seaman's manual.

The matter looked dreary reading enough, with illustrative diagrams and repulsive tables of figures, and the copy was sixty years old. I handled this amazing antiquity with the greatest possible tenderness, lest it should dissolve in my hands. Within, Towson or Towser was inquiring earnestly into the breaking strain of ships’ chains and tackle, and other such matters. Not a very enthralling book; but at the first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with another than a professional light. The simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle and the pilgrims in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably real. (112-113)

The source of Marlow’s restraint, then, is finally just a healthy practicality, a preoccupation with the most worldly of things because these are explainable, are tangible causes for tangible effects. This notion of diehard practicality persists through the story since it is what is lacking in Africa and what Africa most challenges. The many incidents which befall Marlow on his trip to the scene of action are all fearful indications of the same omen: the cause-and-effect pragmatics of civilization has been replaced by a nightmarish futility. The shelling of the coast by the man-of-war, the landing of soldiers, the “objectless blasting,” the bustling activity, all seem pointless and ineffectual. It is like “some sordid farce acted in front of a sinister blackcloth” (69), with “a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery” (70). The surf and the Negroes rowing boats are comforts. They have a meaning: “For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straightforward facts” (70). Significantly, when the natives later attack Marlow’s boat, they are dispersed by nothing so fitting as gunfire but rather by something as seemingly unrelated as the sound of
the steam whistle. The world of European efficiency cannot absorb the jungle’s unreality into itself. Modern equipment gives us especially eloquent testimony. The farthest accomplishments of the reasonable and utilitarian world, this equipment, sent literally to realize Africa, lies all around, rusted, decayed, broken, as we are continually reminded. Finally one kind, rivets, emerges as an important symbol.

For one thing, rivets save Marlow. He seems almost overcome by the Kafka-esque nightmare of Africa. Desperately challenged, Marlow tries to subordinate everything to his desire to repair the steamboat, and for a significant reason. “In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life” (86). The prime requisites for the repair job, however, are rivets. And the well-balanced Marlow becomes quite passionate in relating his need for them.

What I really wanted was rivets, by heaven! Rivets. To get on with the work—to stop the hole. Rivets I wanted. There were cases of them down at the coast—cases—piled up—burst—split! You kicked a loose rivet at every second step in that station yard on the hillside. Rivets had rolled into the grove of death. You could fill your pockets with rivets for the trouble of stooping down—and there wasn’t one rivet to be found where it was wanted. We had plates that would do, but nothing to fasten them with. (95)

Week after week passes and he cannot get delivery of this small quantity of these petty things. Their full symbolic importance becomes inescapable when Marlow adds, “what I wanted was a certain quantity of rivets—and rivets were what really Mr. Kurtz wanted, if he had only known it” (96). Thus what counts is not merely their pettiness, not merely their identification as a species of European machinery, but also their precise function: they hold “things” together which otherwise, in the words of Yeats, “fall apart.” Symbolically as well as literally, then, Marlow, like any European who would keep his sanity, must fight for his rivets. The merest expectation that
rivets may arrive leads Marlow and his foreman to behave “like lunatics.” Marlow recklessly tries a jig, they caper loudly on the iron deck. Perhaps this is the counterpart to the wild native dance that we have seen Marlow so sturdily resist. For Marlow’s is a dance dedicated out of a kind of desperation to those unyielding sources of European resistance to savage intemperance. Elsewhere Marlow lists several of these superficial binders which maintain the balance of civilization, as he insists on the inability of his audience to understand the moral enigma that is Kurtz:

You can’t understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind 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 untrammeled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude without a policeman—by the way of silence—utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion? These little things make all the great difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. Of course you may be too much of a fool to go wrong—too dull even to know you are being assaulted by the powers of darkness. (132–133)

We should see by now that Marlow’s conception of strength takes a strangely paradoxical nature: it consists in the relentless retention of artificial props. To hold onto one’s crutches brings the restraint that makes him strong; to try courageously to walk without them results in the lack of restraint that we are so often told weakens Kurtz. The problem is hardly a simple one. There is, for example, the problem of “the fool” whom Marlow has just defined for us. If the mere retention of the props of modern society constitutes strength, then the paragons of strength in the tale are such nonentities as the company manager or that “miracle,” the chief accountant (he of the “high starched collar, white cuffs . . . snowy trousers
... varnished boots ... green-lined parasol ... penholder behind his ear" (77) who was annoyed at the sick because their groans impaired the efficiency of his computations). Clearly these are the fools Marlow spoke of who are too insensitive to be aware that there is any problem, any temptation in their situation. And of course these men cannot be expected to understand Kurtz at all. Thus they reject him completely but uncritically, and reject him in the practical rather than in the moral realm, since for them he can be evil only insofar as he represents a threat to their interests, their “aesthetic” pursuits. As beings who do not partake of the ethical, they can hardly be said to possess moral strength; for this strength can hardly exist where there is ignorance of moral alternatives. Marlow, on the contrary, is completely aware of the alternatives, their respective claims and consequences. His rejection of Kurtz, made in the moral realm, is yet critical of itself, so that it reveals both admiration and sympathy together with its repulsion. Marlow chooses the crutches, knowing them to be crutches, and thus knowing also that his choice must shut him off from areas of vision which are Kurtz’s. He has chosen morally, but the moral criterion remains worldly and pragmatic: it just wouldn’t do to act otherwise and would constitute a breach of civilized faith. By so choosing, he has insured himself against the tragic—but insured himself against the glory of its vision as well as the horror of its devastation.

Kurtz’s vision and the value that even Marlow places on it reveal the final complexity of this question of strength. Of course the full meaning of Kurtz can be apprehended only in the context of the idealized imperialism he represents. Speaking, at the outset of the tale, of the Roman conquest of England and of the brutality of imperialism generally, Marlow tells us: “What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretense but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . . .” (57–58) The use here of the language of primitive religion is significant: it is Kurtz who,
bowing down before progressive Western man's rationalization for imperialism, sacrificing himself to it, allows himself—in a perverted service of it—to become the god himself and thus to be bowed down before and sacrificed to. After all, it is Kurtz—"emissary of pity, and science, and progress" (90) and member of "the gang of virtue" (90)—who is responsible for the symbolic painting that shows the bearer of light into darkness as herself blinded and as herself rendered sinister in the light of her torch. It is he who, writing the report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, acknowledges the role of the whites in Africa as "supernatural beings . . . with the might as of a deity" (134). Of course, writing as "an exotic Immensity ruled by an august Benevolence," Kurtz pleaded in behalf of altruism for this power to be used for civilizing, the sole salvation. Yet it is this plea that without warning is interrupted by the fearful imperiousness of the command, "Exterminate all the brutes!" just as his self-conscious mission is transformed into the unlimited "ivory-grubbing" and the insistence on adoration of self and with it the sacrifices of idolatry.

When Marlow was speaking of the inborn strength that led him to resist the dancing natives and traced its source to the devotion to practical necessity, he insisted—man of the world that he is—that "Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake" (110). And so it was with Kurtz. But his story would allow Marlow to go further: the slavish devotion to principle is finally an identification with it, allowing one to make oneself into the god, the embodiment of what he has worshiped. The rest, of course, is demonism and destruction, the overassertion of self finally without even the pseudo humility of the idealistic claim to have lost oneself in service. So Kurtz, relentless as he is in his pursuit of absolute integrity of motives, becomes a pure representative of the force of imperialism that in its arrogance victimizes itself: he becomes what he is at last as a symbol of that impure mask of disinterested virtue which disguises the
ugliness of man playing god before man. However lofty the
initial undertaking, in the extreme it must lead to the bowing
down and the sacrificing by those supposedly being served.

Marlow is too wise and sensitive an ethical man to trust
utterly to principle, or to trust utterly to anything. This innate
distrust in anything more pretentious than those modest, routine
details that bind life to itself is the source of Marlow’s resistance
to extremity just as Kurtz’s abandoned embrace of principle
forces his rejection of anything less than extremity. But Marlow
does recognize the visionary powers of extremity that accom-
pany its socially destructive powers. And the tribute he pays to
Kurtz—the quotation with which I opened this chapter—is im-
pressive testimony indeed. I believe it is worth quoting more
fully here.

I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest
you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable grayness, with
nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators,
without clamor, without glory, without the great desire of
victory, without the great fear of defeat, in a sickly atmosphere
of tepid skepticism, without much belief in your own right,
and still less in that of your adversary. If such is the form
of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some
of us think it to be. I was within a hair’s-breadth of the last
opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humilia-
tion that probably I would have nothing to say. This is the
reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He
had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the
dge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare,
that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough
to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate
all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—
he had judged. “The horror!” He was a remarkable man. After
all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candor,
it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper,
it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange com-
mingling of desire and hate. And it is not my own extremity
I remember best—a vision of grayness without form filled
with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. . . . I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! (171–172)

In this passage Marlow establishes Kurtz as both morally vicious and morally victorious. Marlow may have the strength and the righteousness, Kurtz the weakness and the satanic appetite; but the insight and ultimate victory (that accompany the crime and the self-induced fall), necessarily denied Marlow because of his very strength, are Kurtz’s—and Marlow knows it. The paradoxical nature of Marlow’s strength and Kurtz’s weakness is thus acknowledged by our ethical strong man himself. The self-candor of this acknowledgment leads Marlow to pay his debt to Kurtz by speaking the lie whose corruptness he hates to the woman whose purity he cherishes. This is Marlow’s concession to his experience or, more precisely, to his vicarious involvement with Kurtz’s experience. For, as always, Marlow is able to compromise, to save what he can. This is his tie to life and his rejection of extremity.

As at once the sensitive and the normal man who has both been shown by Kurtz and been horrified by him, Marlow is our ideal lens and narrator even as he becomes the protagonist of a kind of Bildungsroman. And he willingly pays for his education. Normal enough to see the need to reject Kurtz but sensitive enough to qualify his rejection and to see the even greater need to be captivated by Kurtz, Marlow can sensitize us to the phenomenon of Kurtz as he appreciates it, because we can trust him ethically as “one of us.” Given Kurtz himself directly, we would simply be repelled by him. Marlow can prevent us from pooh-poohing Kurtz so blandly, without seeing any problem in him that touches us; he can prevent us from being “the fool,” the fellow he scorns whose tie to the world is so secure as to render him morally tone-deaf. Thus, less than Marlow in the
full breadth of our allegiances and sympathies (and which of us possibly could match him in this?), we perceive vicariously through him as he does through Kurtz. Our own need enables us to understand his—and to accept his willingness to pay for having it satisfied, to acquit himself of his debt to Kurtz by something surely less than identification with him but uneasily approaching it in the totality of its moral involvement. But Marlow has cracked our moral austerity enough for us to countenance all this, even if—through the example of Kurtz—he has made us distrustful of that other, that self-appointed immoral austerity as well. With him we can fear extremity while knowing that some of us who are more daring must embrace it—for our sakes. And for what they reveal we are in their debt.

Marlow’s attachment to the workaday world is strong enough for him to cry for rivets and to depend upon them for his salvation. But he also sees them as limitations upon action—limitations that are justified by the example of a Kurtz and that yet cry out for this example lest they stifle the errant soul of man that they in propriety contain. And so Marlow’s attachment to the world is also tenuous enough for him to see these necessary limitations as themselves sadly limited. He cannot be confused with those fools who take their blinders for reality and who limit man’s vision to what practicality permits. Innocent or dangerous—the high-starched collar of the accountant or the intrigues of the manager—these are “too dull even to know [they] are being assaulted by the powers of darkness” (133). Nor is there any moral awareness in them. On the contrary, Marlow is all awareness, perhaps too much awareness to allow any final commitment—except to the compromising unidealistic world that scorns commitment. The limitations on even this commitment explain why he is open to the extremity of Kurtz, while his refusal to abandon the commitment (to noncommitment) explains why he remains in need of Kurtz.

Since Marlow is incomplete even while he is comprehensive, he cannot furnish the answer to Kurtz. Marlow has no answers: he cannot even quite dare to ask Kurtz’s questions. He
The Varieties of Extremity 165

shows us that we cannot afford the vision of Kurtz if we are to manage, as social beings, to struggle along in our daily drudgeries. But neither can we do without it unless we are to become enslaved to these drudgeries and thus take them as our reality. In seeing the weakness within his own strength, the moral mediocrity that must cling to him so long as he clings to that last rivet, Marlow—sensitively liberal as he is—defines the requisites of the tragic vision, what makes it at once indispensable and intolerable. But if the structure of ethical insights were to be complete, there would have to be some level beyond that of worldly morality from which Kurtz could be judged absolutely: a level which would include Kurtz’s vision—and with it would soar beyond a parochial pragmatism—but which would have passed beyond this vision to a final other-worldly affirmation. To stop short of the profoundly religious vision is to rest in demonism; yet to proceed to it is not to deny the existential authenticity of the tragic. It should be clear, however, that a retreat to the dogged insufficiency of Marlow will not do even if Conrad shows us nothing else that will. For if we view Marlow as actor rather than merely as narrator—the observant representative of our own best selves—his position seems hardly adequate to the awesome data of experience organized by the tragic vision or, ultimately, to the affirmation of the earned religious vision to which the tragic may very well be the gateway. I reserve until my final chapter the question of whether we can any longer ask literature (if we ever could) to yield so ultimate a vision as the religious. But if I may once again sound a familiar note, I suggest that this is to ask for tragedy when, as a modern, Conrad at his most authentic cannot reach beyond the tragic vision.

LORD JIM

Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—nicht wahr? . . . No! I tell you! The way is to the
destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. (184)²

But the call to willful triumph in the last of these words of Stein is soon muted. The victorious “shadow,” speaking with confidence from the unreality of the “shapeless dusk”—existing outside “this concrete and perplexed world” (184)—returns to the light and can pursue his fervor no longer: “... his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face. ... The light had destroyed the assurance which had inspired him in the distant shadows” (185). Ironically, taking the symbolic form of light, the reality proves itself as the destructive element by destroying the shadowy dream that claimed to have found the way to overcome it. And Stein senses his ultimate defeat, despite the heroic resilience seen in his biography. It is his romantic self-assertion, his ability to “follow the dream” in the face of failure, that he bequeathes to Jim, but his self-delusion—perhaps recognized in this scene—will be Jim’s also, and Jim will also come to a recognition of it, a far more costly one.

Yet the sea in Stein’s metaphor appears to represent the dream rather than reality, so that the dream rather than reality would appear to be the destructive element. However, to the romantic—as Stein conceives him and as Jim realizes him even more completely than Stein did—the dream is the reality, the existence into which he has been capriciously hurled. As, for the modern existentialist, man suddenly wakes up to find himself catapulted into existence and proves his humanity by the strength of his response to the meaninglessness of the challenge,

² From *Lord Jim*, by Joseph Conrad, ed. Robert Heilman (Rinehart Editions; Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1957). All page references are to this edition which I use because Professor Heilman has labored over the textual problem and has compared the standard collected American edition with the three other principal texts: the first American edition, the first English, and the collected English (see Textual Note, pp. 365 ff.).
The Varieties of Extremity

so Conrad—through Stein—sees as the critical moment of man’s existence his awakening to the sealike, dreamlike quality of the life into which he has fallen and which now claims him. And we must remember the dreamlike, indeed the nightmarish, atmosphere which pervaded “the night of the first ages” (109), the irrational unconscious symbolized by Conrad as the Heart of Darkness. There, we were told, it is the nightmare which is the terrifying reality that, as we have seen, must be purposefully ignored in the interest of sanity: “When you have to attend to things of that sort, to the mere incidents of the surface, the reality—the reality, I tell you—fades. The inner truth is hidden—luckily, luckily” (106). And Marlow has earlier acknowledged the Kafka-esque quality of this inner truth and of the invulnerable solitude with which one is overcome by it as a reality-principle as well as a dream:

It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. . . .

. . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence,—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone. . . . (94)

As a visionary Lord Jim may hardly seem to be enough like Kurtz to justify my using Heart of Darkness to shed light on the longer novel. For Jim may seem to have found his salvation—within the total resolution that allows tragedy—by sacrificing himself to what society may demand of the hero, while Kurtz has sacrificed society to his own satanic appetites. But the stories have more in common than the presence of Marlow, though it is surely true that my treatment of Heart of Darkness should help illuminate his role in Lord Jim. It is rather that his
very presence and the similarity of his role suggest something in common between the two men he tries to save and fears to judge.

Quite clearly *Lord Jim* revolves about what Stein calls the "romantic" attitude, which tells us that our protagonist is one of that uncompromising tribe that seeks and finds extreme situations. At the beginning Jim is filled with schoolboy notions of honor and sees himself as uniquely chosen for the courageous and the sacrificial deed: "always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book" (4). But the trials of exacting necessity find him wanting. He has two seemingly insignificant failures before that major catastrophe on the *Patna*. Each time the world, suddenly transformed, presents him with its terrifying aspect. It is this that paralyzes him into inaction. In his first failure at training school the gale blows

> with the strength of a hurricane in fitful bursts that boomed like salvoes of great guns firing over the ocean. . . . Jim had threatening glimpses of the tumbling tide . . . There was a fierce purpose in the gale, a furious earnestness in the screech of the wind, in the brutal tumult of earth and sky, that seemed directed at him . . . (4)

Before he fails again, Conrad tells us:

> There are many shades in the danger of adventures and gales, and it is only now and then that there appears on the face of facts a sinister violence of intention—that indefinable something which forces it upon the mind and the heart of a man, that this complication of accidents or these elemental furies are coming at him with a purpose of malice, with a strength beyond control, with an unbridled cruelty that means to tear out of him his hope and his fear, the pain of his fatigue and his longing for rest: which means to smash, to destroy, to an-

---

3 For a discussion of an earlier, a related but weaker—if more optimistic—attempt by Conrad to deal with this sort of protagonist, see my "Conrad's *Youth*: A Naive Opening to Art and Life," *College English*, XX (1959), 275–280.
nihilate all he has seen, known, loved, enjoyed, or hated...
(7-8)

Despite the openness of nature's challenge—its frank revelation that it will not cooperate with his dream of glory—the lad complains that he has been caught "unawares." That night on the Patna, however, he is not given so open a view of universal malevolence. Instead, nature shows only a pleasant and tranquil face and so beguiles him into a false security. That fateful night Jim "was penetrated by the great certitude of unbounded safety and peace that could be read on the silent aspect of nature like the certitude of fostering love upon the placid tenderness of a mother's face" (13-14). Marlow later comments, "And all the time it was only a clouded sky, a sea that did not break, the air that did not stir. Only a night; only a silence" (99). As Jim returns to his high heroic dreams, he feels "something like gratitude for this high peace of sea and sky" (16) unaware that he is to be repaid at once and not in kind. The nightmare reality that Stein later sees as the "destructive element" has engulfed Jim, and only out of a kind of stubbornness does he resist his complete destruction.

After the inquiry he persists, not quite "shirking his ghost" or "facing him out," although something of each. The opportunity Stein finds for him in Patusan (a name which is obviously meant to echo the Patna) Jim answers brilliantly. He never allows himself to be caught unawares here, so that heroic act follows heroic act in a faithful service that surely seems more than atonement enough for his faithlessness to those other non-Europeans who staked all on the white man's loyalty. He seems indeed to have immersed himself in the destructive element without succumbing to it: precisely Stein's formula for the "romantic" who would yet manage life. Instead of the alienation forced upon him by his earlier failure, he not only has integrated himself into the Patusan world but has reconstructed that world about him.

Why is it, then, that Marlow still has his doubts, that he
fears that the “opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to [Jim’s] side,” may still be veiled? What is there about Jim’s situation in Patusan that is still so profoundly unsatisfying? Now that he has reversed his earlier incapabilities and has surely realized everything that a hero of schoolboy romance could ask, what nagging thing mars it all?

To begin with, about the entire affair of the Patna lurks an intangible mystery, a circle of moral ambiguities, in light of which no answer like the simple about-face in Patusan can satisfy Marlow—or us. Referring to the elusiveness of the Patna episode, Jim says:

It was not a lie—but it wasn’t truth all the same. It was something. . . . There was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and wrong of this affair. . . . Suppose I had stuck to the ship? . . . In thirty seconds, as it seemed certain then, I would have been overboard; and do you think I would not have laid hold of the first thing that came in my way? . . . I would have meant to be [saved] . . . And that’s more than I meant when I . . . jumped . . . (112)

This impalpability helps draw Marlow into the situation. As he witnessed the questioning of Jim at the inquiry, he saw Jim’s helplessness as he tried to unmask the true reality of what happened that night. Nor can the mere facts help. Those least of all: “They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!” (23)

The facts those men were so eager to know had been visible, tangible, open to the senses, occupying their place in space and time, requiring for their existence a fourteen-hundred-ton steamer and twenty-seven minutes by the watch; they made a whole that had features, shades of expression, a complicated aspect that could be remembered by the eye, and something else besides, something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable body. . . . his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind . . . (24–25)
Perhaps Marlow recalls his own words out of another of his tales. For Jim, thrust into a dream that constitutes his reality, echoes the full sense of what we have already heard Marlow, in Stein-like tones, tell his listeners in *Heart of Darkness*:

... it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence,—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone. . . . (94)

Conrad distrusts facts since they deceive us: the utter intimacy of personal experience is incommunicable, and this insulation belies the smug and pretentious claims of facts to tell us about the human history of each of us. The effect Conrad achieves may remind us of that other weaver of sea stories who cultivated the mystic, unsharable sanctity of personal experience—the Herman Melville of *Benito Cereno*. Here we—with Captain Delano—are presented with an obvious, and often obviously misleading, mystery. Suddenly it seems to have cleared, the facts have been straightened out. And then, just to be certain there are no misunderstandings, Melville gives us endless excerpts from Don Benito's deposition in the court records. The facts are laid out again and again, in inexhaustible and repetitious detail. But ironically, the real mystery has not been solved; it has only deepened. For the more Delano knows, the farther he is from capturing the heart of that darkness which fills Don Benito's soul and sends him to his death. Indeed is this not much of what Melville is about when, in *Moby Dick*, he burdens his narrative with the often puzzlesome cetological intrusions? Does not the multiplication of exposition's facts, drawn from many descriptive studies, still leave us infinitely removed from the whale's fullest significance? Hence Ishmael's weariness with his data even as he dare not give up these only contacts with the reality of the whale that obsesses his pages. And we are perhaps reminded finally of Shakespeare's impatience, in his Sonnet 116, with the finitude of fact as he seeks to define love as the star

Whose worth is unknown, although his highth be taken.
Indeed, the complex manipulation of Conrad’s point of view and time sequence is not a mere virtuoso display. Rather, it is yet another attempt to indicate how unreachable Jim’s problem is. The course of events is gone over again and again, in all varieties of chronological order and from all varieties of points of view. Seemingly crucial bits of information are added here and there as revelation always seems beyond the next turning. But the heart of the matter still remains just beyond grasp. Thus the enumeration of Jim’s heroic actions is something less than immediately convincing.

The haunting theme of common guilt also serves to cloud Jim’s success in Patusan. It is a theme that has been with us from the beginning. It helps explain, for example, why Marlow becomes so obsessed by Jim’s case that he manages to get to all the sources of information and of different attitudes that he needs to tell his story. For Jim is “one of us,” as Marlow often says, so that Marlow is profoundly troubled that as “one of us” Jim should be involved in the ugly business of the Patna.

Why I longed to go grubbing into the deplorable details of an occurrence which, after all, concerned me no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a certain standard of conduct, I can’t explain. You may call it an unhealthy curiosity if you like; but I have a distinct notion I wished to find something. Perhaps, unconsciously, I hoped I would find that something, some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse. I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible—for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man’s creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death—the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct. It is the hardest thing to stumble against; it is the thing that breeds yelling panics and good little quiet villanies; it’s the true shadow of calamity. Did I believe in a miracle? and why did I desire it so ardently? Was it for my
own sake that I wished to find some shadow of an excuse for
that young fellow whom I had never seen before, but whose
appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the
thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness—made
it a thing of mystery and terror—like a hint of a destructive
fate ready for us all whose youth—in its day—had resembled
his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying.
I was, and no mistake, looking for a miracle. The only thing
that at this distance of time strikes me as miraculous is the
extent of my imbecility. I positively hoped to obtain from that
battered and shady invalid some exorcism against the ghost of
doubt. (42-43)

Somewhat later Chester, Conrad's version in this novel of the
insensitive "aesthetic" fool, says of Jim:

Takes it to heart? . . . Then he's no good . . . You must
see things exactly as they are—if you don't, you may just as
well give in at once. You will never do anything in this world.
Look at me. I made it a practice never to take anything to
heart. (139)

And he offers to bury Jim on a guano-filled island. Marlow's
reaction, as he rejects the proposal, is significant:

To bury him would have been such an easy kindness! It would
have been so much in accordance with the wisdom of life,
which consists in putting out of sight all the reminders of our
folly, of our weaknesses, of our mortality; all that makes
against our efficiency—the memory of our failures, the hints
of our undying fears, the bodies of our dead friends. (149-150)

With Brierly, ironically one of the judges at the inquiry,
this awareness of common guilt is fatal. Temperamentally much
like Jim, in his romanticism at least, Brierly has been an un-
equaled and continual success. Jim's trial so unnerves him, so
persuades him to identify himself with the culprit, that he tries
desperately to send Jim away before its conclusion—a reminder
of Marlow’s remarks about burying him to keep him out of our way and out of our awareness. About Brierly’s subsequent suicide Marlow has few questions. During the inquiry, he tells us, Brierly “was probably holding silent inquiry into his own case. The verdict must have been of unmitigated guilt, and he took the secret of the evidence with him in that leap into the sea” (49–50).

In view of these universal fears, we can hardly expect Marlow to be utterly convinced—as convinced as Jim wants him to be—by what he sees on his last visit to Lord Jim’s domain. In answer to Jewel’s fears, Marlow is forced to admit to her, whose admiration for Jim will not allow her to believe it, that Jim will never leave her for the outside world that drove him there “because he is not good enough.” But his moral sensitivity leads him to add, “Nobody, nobody is good enough” (276). Jim reveals his own dissatisfaction in a similar lament:

Is it not strange . . . that all these people, all these people who would do anything for me, can never be made to understand? . . . What more can I want? If you ask them who is brave—who is true—who is just—who is it they would trust with their lives?—they would say, Tuan Jim. And yet they can never know the real, real truth . . . (264)

And then he confronts Marlow with the key question, on which he never does get Marlow’s reassurance: “But all the same, you wouldn’t like to have me aboard your own ship—hey? . . . Only . . . you just try to tell this to any of them here. They would think you a fool, a liar, or worse” (265). Nobody is good enough, Jim no more so than the rest, and his growing awareness of this truth gives him a maturity which demands more than the schoolboy heroism he can now turn on at will.

When at the end Marlow visits Stein and there sees Tamb’ Itam and Jewel, the disappointed, even disgusted report of Jim’s last actions (“He would not fight”) is meant to delude us into believing that the Patna episode has occurred again, that Jim’s
hard-won heroism has crumbled. He seems superficially to have come full circle to a paralysis that destroys a sacred trust. Yet he promised Marlow, that last time, to be "faithful" (290); and although Jewel bitterly charges him with being "false," Stein's assurance is unquestionable as he tells Jewel, "No! no! Not false! True! true! true!" (304). Of course, "true" here can only mean faithful in the appropriately chivalric context of knighthood. Marlow himself, finally the unromantic ethical man with a worldly commitment—a commitment to "a fixed standard of conduct" (43)—but not one exclusive enough to mar the all-embracing sympathy he requires as narrator, is almost persuaded despite some lingering doubts that he dare not give up. After describing the "proud and unflinching glance" (362) with which Jim accepts his death, Marlow suggests this to have been Jim's moment of vision in which the veil was raised and the face of the Eastern bride, his opportunity, finally revealed. And why not? We remember that after the Patna episode Jim insisted on rejecting the temptation of death:

Sick of life—to tell you the truth; but what would have been the good to shirk it—in—in—that way? That was not the way. I believe—I believe it would have—it would have ended—nothing. . . . No! the proper thing was to face it out—alone for myself—wait for another chance—find out . . . (114)

When he allows himself to decide in favor of death in Patusan, we realize that this last act is no failure and that he has found out. He now can accept the punishment he earlier wanted and sought but had to resist, because the act which now brings it about is one of profound courage, however similar it may seem to that earlier act of cowardice.

There are two interlocking justifications for this final action. One of them relates to Jim's new-found and fully exploited capacity for action. Having reversed his initial inability to act so that he has fulfilled all that bravery could demand, he must now commit the supremely brave act of choosing not to act. The redemption Jim so long sought and finally thought he
found in Patusan was based only upon the deed, and the deed
was proved by the respect it engendered from the society it
served. But we have seen that the satisfactions it provided Jim
were but superficial. He has discovered as only relative that
which he must have as absolute, since he has lost so much in its
name. This painful relativism Jim had to be aware of as he
witnessed himself worshiped in Patusan and despised as un­
worthy of trust in the world beyond. It would seem, then, that
the deed, the applause, and social service cannot be final moral
criteria for him. He must reject the simple schoolboy code and
the conforming obligations under which it placed the would-be
hero in order to meet a wider obligation. And whatever the
final cost, this final action is a victory over relativism in that he
has consciously chosen the inaction that lets down his people
and even forces them to execute him in a death he rushes to
accept.

But of course this is no willful anti-social perversity. There
is reason enough why he should have let them down precisely
this way—which leads us to the second justification for this
action, based on yet another modulation of that ubiquitous
theme of common guilt. The criminal Brown, who in talking
Jim out of destroying him talks him into his own destruction,
seems instinctively to touch Jim’s sore spot. Turning upon Jim’s
moral pretensions as defender of Patusan, Brown challenges him
in just the right way:

And what do you deserve . . . you that I find skulking here
with your mouth full of responsibility, of innocent lives, of
your infernal duty? . . . I came here for food. . . . And what
did you come for? . . . I won’t ask you what scared you into
this infernal hole . . . (333–334)

Brown seems to make their fellowship more intimate with every
word he speaks:

When he asked Jim, with a sort of brusque despairing frank­
ness, whether he himself—straight now—didn’t understand that
when “it came to saving one’s life in the dark, one didn’t care who else went—three, thirty, three hundred people”—it was as if a demon had been whispering advice in his ear. “I made him wince,” boasted Brown to me. “He very soon left off coming the righteous over me. He just stood there with nothing to say, and looking as black as thunder—not at me—on the ground.” He asked Jim whether he had nothing fishy in his life to remember that he was so damnedly hard upon a man trying to get out of a deadly hole by the first means that came to hand—and so on, and so on. And there ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts. (337)

And who is this Brown with whom Jim identifies himself? He is not only an indiscriminate murderer, but one who has chosen his profession out of utter misanthropy, out of purely diabolical spite. Yet Brown for Jim is also “one of us”: “These were the emissaries with whom the world he had renounced was pursuing him in his retreat. White men from ‘out there’ where he did not think himself good enough to live” (335-336).

Jim as romantic must still insist on extremity: he cannot close the circle and so limit those who are one of us, not even to exclude one such as Brown. He cannot stop with surface similarities as can Marlow or even the ill-fated Brierly, or the daring captain in the more optimistic The Secret Sharer. As extremist Jim must now embrace the dream as his element in a final, full awareness of its destructive quality. And Stein’s recognition, with which we began, is now Jim’s too. So Brown comes to be the case for common guilt a fortiori, as a gratuitous murderer the very worst possible of his kind. But, ironically, Jim must disdain moral hierarchy and see likeness rather than difference. As Brierly saw himself in Jim—and not utterly without reason—Jim goes the full length and beyond all reason and sees himself in Brown. Mere ethical judgment becomes impossible when the judge sees himself in the accused, finds the
same dirt on his hands. When Jewel asks Jim if these men are very evil, Jim answers significantly, “Men act badly sometimes without being much worse than others” (344).

Only paralysis, the refusal to act, can follow from this seemingly Christian insight. And yet he is being faithful in the way he promised Marlow on his last visit; not in any merely racial way though it may seem—as it must have to Doramin—that he has chosen the worst of his kind over the best of Doramin’s. But such a view stems only from the reasonable ethical judgment which equates men (as Kyo would put it) with what they do; and Jim has moved willfully beyond. In a more profound sense he is being faithful to the world outside, the world which has judged him and before which he must still prove himself in a way beyond the possibilities for action afforded by his Patusan domain. It is a world of more subtle moral awarenesses than the self-enclosed, ruthless, and finally vengeful demand for self-preservation of Doramin’s people, a demand that the still embattled Jim was earlier too young and too ethically eager to question. The faithfulness for which—out of an act of ethical and social treachery—he turns his back on all is, then, a faithfulness, what Marlow at the end calls an “eternal constancy,” to “a shadowy ideal of conduct” (362) surely Western and very likely Christian.

We must note finally that this ideal of conduct, while formed in the very shadows from which we heard Stein’s formula for victory with which we began, finds itself—like Stein’s formula—tested in the light. Here at the end, “within the coast that under the western sun looks like the very stronghold of the night” (362), we find that we have not really left the Heat of Darkness after all. But we saw Stein reduced to twitching uncertainty as he moved from the shadows to “the ring of faint light” and into “the bright circle of the lamp” (184–185). Emerging from the dark “into the light of torches” (361), Jim carries his “shadowy ideal of conduct” with him still, and just as firmly. In surrendering “himself faithfully to the claim of his
own world of shades” (363), Jim—more than the successful Stein ever could—has earned his right to the “proud and unflinching glance” “sent right and left at all those faces” (362) whom he has so fearlessly and irrevocably betrayed.

But as a solution to the moral dilemma Jim’s tentative alternative proves to be a delusion: as Doramin’s rage reveals, the Christian refusal to act is also, alas, a form of action and doomed with the others. Thus closes another door on the existential trap, confirming the claims of Axel Heyst, the protagonist of Victory, that all action—Jim’s as well as Kurtz’s—is the devil’s work but adding what Heyst’s career, in flying from action, attests: that inaction is as deadly as the rest and with fewer satisfactions. It opens no door out of the dilemma but only one that leads in again to the tragic.

2. Victory: Pseudo Tragedy and the Failure of Vision

I suppose I have done a certain amount of harm, since I allowed myself to be tempted into action. It seemed innocent enough, but all action is bound to be harmful. It is devilish. That is why this world is evil upon the whole. (54)

“There must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all.”

He reflected, too, with the sense of making a discovery, that this primeval ancestor is not easily suppressed. The oldest voice in the world is just the one that never ceases to speak. If anybody could have silenced its imperative echoes, it should have been Heyst’s father, with his contemptuous, inflexible negation of all effort; but apparently he could not. There was in the son a lot of that first ancestor who, as soon as he could uplift his muddy frame from the celestial mould, started inspecting and naming the animals of that paradise which he was so soon to lose.

Action—the first thought, or perhaps the first impulse, on earth! The barbed hook, baited with the illusion of progress, to bring out of the lightless void the shoals of unnumbered generations!
"And I, the son of my father, have been caught too, like the silliest fish of them all," Heyst said to himself. (173-174)  

The baron's dismal view has been justified by what we have seen elsewhere in Conrad. Its validity should be persuasive, as it was for Heyst, faithful son and disciple of a father who seemed to have learned his Conradian lesson well. But Conrad has also made it clear that the inevitability of moral failure does not alter the comfortlessness of avoiding engagement. Nor, we have seen, is inaction ultimately an avoidance of engagement so much as just another sort of engagement. Rather, for Conrad risk is all—risk even in total awareness that there is little to gain and that integrity, for which the risk is taken, consumes itself. And the fullness of risk involves the fullness of commitment, and with these, extremity. Always, however, the need for commitment is balanced by the vision of its futility: as the first reveals the inadequacy of Heyst's position, so the second justifies it.

*Victory* is all too clearly designed to prove Heyst wrong. Indeed, this design is what will give us trouble since what Conrad has shown us elsewhere demonstrates, not that Heyst is wrong but that he is intolerable, not that his refusal to bend to life is in theory invalid, but that it is in fact untenable for the morally sensitized man. The sequence of events and its significance are obvious enough. Apprentice to his father's philosophy at the start, Heyst is dedicated to resist all human involvement. As he tells us, "... he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered into his soul" (199-200). The furthest concession his father would make to the temptations of "flesh and blood" is a disinterested pity:

You still believe in something, then? ... You believe in flesh and blood, perhaps? A full and equable contempt would soon

---

do away with that, too. But since you have not attained to it, I advise you to cultivate that form of contempt which is called pity. (174)

Even the father himself, acknowledged by Heyst to have been "very ruthless," was yet "not without pity" (196). Thus the "form of contempt which is called pity" becomes the point of vulnerability for him whose person is temperamentally incapable of accepting the dictates of his cynical reason. And so it is with Heyst. Pity betrays him to Morrison, and pity keeps him tied to Morrison until the latter's death releases him once more, but only with the consequence of slander which—with his own feelings of guilt—ties him to the memory for good.

In past years, in moments of doubt that will come to a man determined to remain free from absurdities of existence, I often asked myself, with a momentary dread, in what way would life try to get hold of me? And this was the way! (202)

It is, ironically, the very indifference of Heyst, "the most detached of creatures in this earthly captivity," that enables him to assume for Morrison the role of "an agent of Providence" (199). He appears as providentially for Lena in what seems a similar and a similarly disinterested act:

It was the same sort of impulse which years ago had made him . . . accost Morrison, practically a stranger to him then, a man in trouble, expressively harassed, dejected, lonely. (71-72)

But clearly his pity cannot be so purely related to contempt in this case, since it can hardly remain so continuously detached: "... this was another sort of plunge altogether, and likely to lead to a very different kind of partnership" (77). His commitment to it continually threatens to become total but remains limited by his temperamental reticence. The invasion of his domain by the allegorical figures of evil finds him "disarmed"
as always, despite his new sense of responsibility. Lena, however, is free to act and cherishes the opportunity to prove their union to be a worthy object of total dedication. Her sacrificial victory conquers Heyst's reticence as well as their enemies. And before adding his sacrifice to hers, he recites the inevitable lamentation: "Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life!" (410) So Heyst acknowledges the error of his ways. He stands corrected by Lena in a mutual consecration of their union which, were Heyst otherwise, might have defied the fates as he had hoped.

We have our narrator's word for it that Heyst too is a "romantic": "Not that we were two romantics, tingeing the world to the hue of our temperament, but that both of us had been acute enough to discover a long time ago that Heyst was" (51). And Davidson adds, remarking on Heyst's precipitate flight with Lena in words that mark Davidson as a later version of Marlow, "I shouldn't have had the pluck. ... I see a thing all round, as it were; but Heyst doesn't, or else he would have been scared" (51). And it is his strangely romantic propensity that enables Heyst not to be scared.

Truth to say, Heyst was not one of those men who pause much. Those dreamy spectators of the world's agitation are terrible once the desire to act gets hold of them. They lower their heads and charge a wall with an amazing serenity which nothing but an indisciplined imagination can give. (77)

As a romantic—though of a kind quite different from Lord Jim—Heyst shares Jim's need to manage his relation to reality. His father's desperate teachings have transformed the world into mere delusion and put themselves in its place. At the philosopher's death, the son feels the burden of his nihilistic legacy descend upon him, claim his fidelity, and deprive him of

the world: “The rooms, filling with shadows, seemed haunted by a melancholy, uneasy presence which could not express itself” (176). The very objects left Heyst by his father assert themselves upon the son to keep his normal reality in shadow:

It seemed as if in his conception of a world not worth touching, and perhaps not substantial enough to grasp, these objects familiar to his childhood and his youth and associated with the memory of an old man, were the only realities, something having an absolute existence. (176)

We should not be surprised, then, when Heyst explains to Lena his insufficiency of presence and of action before Mr. Jones and Ricardo by saying, “I believe you are very plucky. . . . I . . . am so rebellious to outward impressions that I can’t say that much about myself. I don’t react with sufficient distinctness” (316). And a bit later in this conversation: “I have lived too long within myself, watching the mere shadows and shades of life” (318). It is fitting that Mr. Jones, against whom he is so powerless, should be almost literally a ghost, a shade, and thus to Heyst representative of inimical humanity at large:

I’ve said to the Earth that bore me: “I am I and you are a shadow.” And, by Jove, it is so! But it appears that such words cannot be uttered with impunity. Here I am on a Shadow inhabited by Shades. How helpless a man is against the Shades! How is one to intimidate, persuade, resist, assert oneself against them? I have lost all belief in realities. . . . (350)

But the sacrifice Lena takes upon herself shakes the strange security of his cynicism; it acts as the shock to propel Heyst to a new sense of dream and life. Heyst stands as witness to the tableau of victory: the sensual and violent Ricardo, now disarmed, worshipfully seated at the feet of Lena, who has his knife (and masculinity?) buried harmlessly in the folds of her dress between her knees. The seemingly defenseless girl, Heyst’s helpless dependency whom he has protected so woefully, has now in unmanning Ricardo unmanned Heyst as well:
Doubt entered into him—a doubt of a new kind, formless, hideous. It seemed to spread itself all over him, enter his limbs, and lodge in his entrails. He stopped suddenly, with a thought that he who experienced such a feeling had no business to live—or perhaps was no longer living.

Everything—the bungalow, the forest, the open ground—trembled incessantly; the earth, the sky itself, shivered all the time, and the only thing immovable in the shuddering universe was the interior of the lighted room and the woman in black sitting in the light of the eight candle-flames. They flung around her an intolerable brilliance which hurt his eyes, seemed to sear his very brain with the radiation of infernal heat. . . .

A great shame descended upon Heyst—the shame of guilt, absurd and maddening. (391-392)

And what were shadows now become his reality as the symbols of his father’s negations fade:

Heyst stumbled into the room and looked around. All the objects in there—the books, the gleam of old silver familiar to him from boyhood, the very portrait on the wall—seemed shadowy, unsubstantial, the dumb accomplices of an amazing dream-plot ending in an illusory effect of awakening and the impossibility of ever closing his eyes again. (403)

It was at the beginning of the Lena episode, however, that his grasp on his inherited sense of reality—or unreality—weakened. Our narrator has told us of the early Heyst:

The young man learned to reflect, which is a destructive process, a reckoning of the cost. It is not the clear-sighted who lead the world. Great achievements are accomplished in a blessed, warm mental fog, which the pitiless cold blasts of the father’s analysis had blown away from the son. (91-92)

And we have already been told that he was suffused in this fog as he contemplated the desperate rescue upon which, through this symbol, Conrad is clearly bestowing his blessing:
Formerly, in solitude and in silence, he had been used to think clearly and sometimes even profoundly, seeing life outside the flattering optical delusion of everlasting hope, of conventional self-deceptions, of an ever-expected happiness. But now he was troubled; a light veil seemed to hang before his mental vision; the awakening of a tenderness, indistinct and confused as yet, towards an unknown woman. (82)

Of course Heyst’s father was correct in estimating the enmity of the world, the prospects of failure in it, of being overcome by it. Its unreasoning, disorderly, anti-human qualities are discovered in the immeasurable haze of the reality to which Heyst has opened himself once he has opened himself to Lena. The pageant upon which the primal, Eden-like, and yet daring conjunction of the lovers converges is an apocalyptic one played on high rocks overlooking the sea under the tropical noontime sun:

They moved, silent in the great stillness, breathing the calmness, the infinite isolation, the repose of a slumber without dreams. They emerged at the upper limit of vegetation, among some rocks; and in a depression of the sharp slope, like a small platform, they turned about and looked from on high over the sea, lonely, its colour effaced by sunshine, its horizon a heat mist, a mere unsubstantial shimmer in the pale and blinding infinity overhung by the darker blaze of the sky. (190)

We are once again among the abstract, life-denying snows of Lawrence and Mann. Lena senses the enmity of the scene and shrinks before it: “That empty space was to her the abomination of desolation... I look at all that water and all that light... It seems as if everything that there is had gone under’” (190–191). Here the apocalyptic element is made explicit as Heyst sees in her vision “the story of the deluge... The vision of a world destroyed.” (191)

The deluge, we shortly discover, is the destructive moment that awaits in all lives, the explosive shock to the well-established, secure comfort of one stage of existence and the revelation of a
Joseph Conrad: Action, Inaction, and Extremity

Cosmic caprice that will hover menacingly over all man's noblest delusions which would construct a life of ordered integrity. Thus when Lena describes the sudden and traumatic ending of a hopeful and pleasantly routine interlude in her childhood, Heyst merely choruses, "The deluge." This conversation is omen as well as commentary: it finds an echo in the final and fatal scenes in which, as summoner of the deluge, "the thunder growled distantly with angry modulations of its tremendous voice, while the world outside shuddered incessantly around the dead stillness of the room where the framed profile of Heyst's father looked severely into space" (401). Once again the imposition of an infinite, untamed, hazy reality upon the rigorous clarity of the mere shadows and shades of pure negativism. And the choice: the destruction of a life affirmed or the total denial of life. But in the earlier moment of apocalyptic vision, the newly committed Heyst must acknowledge that, even in the wake of the deluge, the happy people in the world destroyed are "they specially who ought to have been congratulated" (191). Thus he indicates this early the formula for tragedy that he confirms at the end, when, under the tutelage of Lena, he awakens finally to a new reality that demands his destruction. The formula is plain, and it is finally affirmative: total dedication to a delicate microcosm in awareness of the constant menace of the macrocosm which finally sends the deluge that leaves a "world destroyed" in which, however, the totally dedicated are specially to be "congratulated."

The more hopeful Lena, shaken by her view of the sea and the fearful vision it brings, is hardly restored by the ensuing conversation. She is newly disturbed by a final glimpse:

The flaming abyss of emptiness, the liquid, undulating glare, the tragic brutality of the light, made her long for the friendly night, with its stars stilled by an austere spell; for the velvety dark sky and the mysterious great shadow of the sea, conveying peace to the day-weary heart. (216)

But if an intimation of the consequences of her new attachment to life and hope seems momentarily to frighten her into Heyst's
shadows, the challenge of the invaders leads her to embrace the brilliant and terrifying realities that end, like the fire, by consuming her—and her Heyst. At the moment of her triumph over Ricardo, as she reaches for the knife Ricardo offers her, "there was a flash of fire in her mysterious eyes—a red gleam in the white mist which wrapped the promptings and longings of her soul." (399)

The communion of the lovers above that fearful expanse of sea has yet another telling reverberation. Heyst cries "Sail ho!" as he notices a boat in the distance. He dismisses it, unaware that it is the boat that the sea is collaborating with Schomberg to send to accomplish their destruction. Its appearance at this moment is proof of the justness of Lena’s symbolic reading of the scene. It establishes the identification of the scene with the shadowless, sun-filled, fire-filled reality that asserts itself—even if destructively—upon the Heyst who is renegade to all his father shadowed forth. And it confirms far more than Heyst knows the comparison he is about to draw to the deluge: it converts the comparison into prophecy, making far more precise the apocalyptic “vision of a world destroyed.” Stein’s metaphor of the sea as “the destructive element” is here extended almost to the literal level, which is to say it achieves the density of symbol. For with the boat—borne on the “flood” beneath them—moving under their very eyes, it is the destruction of their own world that they see.

Nor is even this all there is to this intricate network. From the deluge the talk runs on to Heyst’s “neighbour,” the “good-natured, lazy fellow of a volcano” (193), as Heyst calls him. From the beginning it has been characterized as “indolent” and has been personified as a companion to Heyst who is somehow similar to him—“also a smoker” (4). Of course in part this is fair warning to look out for the equally inactive Heyst in whom smoldering fires also continually threaten the heat and violence of explosion. But more significantly, the seeming indolence of the volcano is as deceptive to Heyst as the deep peace of the sea was that night on the Patna for Jim. For the boat, being carried by the deluge whose agent it becomes, is to be guided to its
oblivious victims by this very volcano. When Ricardo expresses his fears that he and his partners may miss their objective, Schomberg gives them an inescapable target: “What do you think of a pillar of smoke by day and a loom of fire at night? There’s a volcano in full blast near that island—enough to guide almost a blind man. What more do you want? An active volcano to steer by!” (168–169) Schomberg is proved correct, we later learn. The voyagers were almost overcome, almost totally lost “when they caught sight of the smoke of the volcano. It nerved them to make an effort for their lives. Soon afterwards they made out the island” (240). This is the object Heyst turns to after the deluge—an object, he seems to think, less pregnant with ominous significance. But, having already seen the role it has been assigned, we rather recognize it as co-conspirator. It is fit neighbor, not for Heyst his father’s son, but for the Heyst who plunges—even if into the abyss.

And who are these “envoys of the outer world” (329)? That they are allegorical figures is plain enough—if anything, too plain. Even Heyst concedes their function. Mr. Jones, the ghost, is pure evil, the intellectual evil that is disembodied. His misogyny, necessary to the concluding action, is consistent with a dehumanization so complete as to be free of the most basic of our drives. The suggestion of Satan (“I am he who is” [317]) is continually clear, if tentative, as Conrad’s dramatic good sense forces him to play coy in mute acknowledgment of his overcommitment to allegory. Ricardo, the jungle cat, is sensual evil. His vulnerability to women reveals the physical absorption of the beast of prey, while his dislike of whisky only confirms it by suggesting that, like the beast, he needs no artificial stimulant. Ricardo himself significantly relates his feelings about drinking to Mr. Jones’s misogyny when, speaking of women as creatures to be either desired or avoided and of the more extreme attitude of Mr. Jones, he says, “I’m hanged if I don’t think they are to him what liquor is to me” (161). Pedro (“The brute force is at the back” [329]) is indeed kept in the background. As merely subhuman in his bestiality, he hardly supplements the
others. He seems to have been included only because Conrad, requiring more than a single villain for his plot, preferred to have the mystic number of three rather than the two he needed.

Mr. Jones cannot help reminding us of that other scoundrel with the commonplace name, Brown in Lord Jim, in that he too judges his victim by reducing him to his own immoralism. Of course he is armed with the slander of Schomberg that persuades us about the fateful consequences of Heyst’s involvement with Morrison. Thus Mr. Jones answers Heyst’s impatience with their failure to act against him:

Not everybody can divest himself of the prejudices of a gentleman as easily as you have done, Mr. Heyst. . . . We are—er—adequate bandits; and we are after the fruit of your labours as a—er—successful swindler. It’s the way of the world—gorge and disgorge! (383–384)

And as Lord Jim’s precious Jewel was mistaken by the outside world for a priceless gem, an emerald, so the infatuated Ricardo—deserting his “gentleman”—identifies Lena with Heyst’s supposed loot: “But there is plunder stowed somewhere that’s worth having? . . . And who cares? . . . It’s you who are my treasure. It’s I who found you out where a gentleman had buried you to rot for his accursed pleasure” (396). And yet, again in a way reminiscent of Brown, the invaders are in part self-appointed agents of the deluge. Jones tells Heyst:

In one way I am—yes, I am the world itself, come to pay you a visit. In another sense I am an outcast—almost an outlaw. If you prefer a less materialistic view, I am a sort of fate—the retribution that waits its time. (379)

If such are his enemies—the perverse “rebel . . . coming and going up and down the earth” (317–318) and the cat to whom “life was not a matter of passive renunciation, but of a particularly active warfare” (260)—there is also his supposed ally, the servant Wang who represents, not malevolence, but the total indifference of amoral practicality: “Heyst envied the
Chinaman’s obedience to his instincts, the powerful simplicity of purpose which made his existence appear almost automatic in the mysterious precision of its facts” (181). He is a man always armed in the sense that Heyst has been “a disarmed man all [his] life” (404). When he is sufficiently impressed by the threat of Jones and Ricardo, Wang deserts immediately, methodically, of course taking with him Heyst’s gun—as if it could have done his master any good anyway.

His Chinaman’s mind, very clear but not far-reaching, was made up according to the plain reason of things, such as it appeared to him in the light of his simple feeling for self-preservation, untrammelled by any notions of romantic honour or tender conscience. (307)

Clearly Wang is Chinese for a significant reason. The inheritor of a closely integrated culture, he easily merges with Alfuro society on the island so that, never isolated, he is assured of a refuge when danger strikes. And when he so simply refuses Heyst and Lena sanctuary, we are to recognize in the act the destructive indifference of the organized community that efficiently pursues the general welfare. It is in the same matter-of-fact way that he puts Heyst’s gun to use, casually killing Pedro when the chance arises. Of course Wang’s “mysterious precision,” his casual efficiency, remain peculiarly Eastern in being mysterious and casual. They seem to proceed, not from a rationalist’s dedication to a manageable finite world, but from a resignation to the cosmic indifference of an unindividuated infinity. He may remind us of Mann’s—or at least Settembrini’s—notion of what it is to be “Eastern”; and in his inhumane, if automatic, decisions, he confirms the diagnosis: he becomes another reflector of the disinterested, glimmering infinity of the sea out of which, by way of thunder, issues the destructive god.

But totally purposeful against the threat is Lena, who was so helpless against Schomberg and who complained, “real bad people that you can see are bad, they get over me somehow.
... I am afraid of wickedness" (207). But now the role she envisions for herself in her conjunction with Heyst makes her "a human being who counted" (292); it frees her to act where Heyst, whose paralysis persists, cannot. She even glories in Heyst's incapacities because of what they leave only her to do—for him and for the sanctification of their union. Thus the sublime quality of her victory which, even in death, breaks the shell of Heyst's lingering resistance to total dedication. Yet it is finally only a symbolic—indeed a token—victory. For she has split the villains and set Jones against Ricardo by her mere presence, so that she has won before her final disarming of Ricardo. The disarming itself only has the ironic function of assuring that her victory be a tragic one by putting her in the way of Jones's bullet, and that it be—in terms of usefulness—an ineffectual one since the knife can be put to no use, least of all by her, as she acknowledges. All this futility perhaps strengthens the devastating effect her victory has on Heyst.

Heyst himself is at the start already beyond the reach of the ethical, or rather is in full retreat from it, from the light of common and communal reality. The novel traces his return to the human communion, first through his semi-commitment to Lena and then suddenly, thanks to her sacrifice, through a belated affirmation that demands his own unqualified gesture of total commitment to the warmth that destroys. Whereas Jim could break through only by yielding up his union with Jewel and with it his service of the ethical, Heyst must break back through to the ethical he earlier abandoned, thus negating his negation.

Of course Heyst's original rejection was more an empty retreat than a defiant surpassing. Anything but demoniacal, he was Kierkegaard's despairing man who cautiously willed not to be himself rather than the more common despairing man who, like most of our protagonists, recklessly willed to be himself.6

---

So, confronted by Jones and Ricardo, “He considered himself a dead man already” (354). For “His very will seemed dead of weariness” (390). It is this state in Heyst that allows the opposed alliances to become confused, so that the active and heated member of each pair, Ricardo and Lena, apparently in league through Lena’s shrewd duplicity, are opposed by their lifeless partners as Heyst allows himself to be led by his apparent kinsman, the ghostly Mr. Jones. He comes fully to life only to add his death to Lena’s in a tribute to life that a self-inflicted death can alone articulate. He takes fire, but only to realize the metaphor; for fire consumes what it gives warmth to.

If Heyst had been less preoccupied with his will-lessness, he would have noticed how inconclusive the threat is with which the world is challenging him. For all the menace that issues from them, Jones and Ricardo turn out after all to be inefficient and generally unimpressive antagonists. Only Heyst could be overcome by them since he overcomes himself—with shockingly little help, except from a stray bullet that miraculously finds an unintended target. Heyst is presented with several chances to turn the tables on the invaders, especially after Mr. Jones learns of Lena’s presence and becomes anxious for his gentleman friend Heyst to join with him in his pathological aversion to the “Mud souls, obscene and cunning!” (392) Conrad pointedly shows us how much simpler it would be for Heyst to disarm Mr. Jones than for Lena to disarm Ricardo as she does. Now it is true that this difference in their capacity to act is crucial to Conrad’s theme. It follows, then, that the threat sent them by the world could, by a healthier attitude, have been effectually dismissed; that the clouds could, by a sunnier disposition toward life and hope, have been dispelled before they brought the deluge. But if there is nothing more substantial, indeed more inevitable, than this about the ruinous consequences of involvement, then Conrad’s brilliant symbolism has clearly overstated his case; and all we have learned from his other work we must unlearn, since it now evaporates under the pressure of a blithe optimism. For we have earlier learned from Conrad what
Heyst's father learned: that commitment and the action to which it leads are fatal. But now we learn that they are fatal only to Heyst who, because he has earlier turned his back on them, is unable—after running off with Lena—to accept them totally enough or consistently enough. Had he done so, had he been able to join fully with Lena, there would have been no defeat, no deluge.

It is one thing to counter Heyst's father and to celebrate commitment and risk despite all we know that he knows. But it is another to insist that all we have been shown by Conrad and all that the symbolism in *Victory* shows us—that the vision of Heyst's father and of the paralyzed Heyst—can be dissolved into airy phantoms, seen as a crank's delusions, if we merely summon a faith in human communion. This is to deny the driven-ness of the visionary in his extreme situation. It is a retreat from the tragic to the sentimentally ethical that asks for blind faith in life and love and for the comforting cinematic outburst, "Together we can lick the world, baby." For so they could have, Heyst and Lena, had Heyst seen his errors and found the courage to be resolute before it was, perchance, too late.

Perhaps it is that the later Conrad, more mature and anxious for reconciliation, was no longer content with the tragic vision which, we have seen through Marlow, always made him most uncomfortable—as well it should have. So he tried to move beyond to full tragedy. But he had no place to go—nothing both post-ethical and post-tragic to affirm—and had instead to come back, to retreat to the pleasant prospects of ethical existence whose delusions his characters had long before seen through. These prospects can be reasserted now only by denying those earlier denials. And yet even in this novel we can see how persuasive these tragic denials are, so that the later recantation seems a betrayal of Conrad's dramatic powers.

Not only does Conrad try to reach the upper limits of tragedy through the unqualified affirmation given us through Heyst and his sacrifice, but he even tries to build his catharsis right into the *dénouement*. For Heyst dies by fire, a rite in which
he converts the house he and Lena shared into a funeral pyre for the lovers. Davidson justifies the act for Heyst and, we are to assume, in the Heystian spirit: “fire purifies everything” (410). It is, then, a ritual purgation and a cue to the thematic catharsis toward which Conrad is straining. But the content of the ritual, the gods whom it celebrates, belie the gesture. Conrad’s limitations are too severe to permit a break-through, and the data of his world will support nothing that he gives us in its stead. As author Conrad has himself run a risk: unwilling to abide with the tragic vision and able only to withdraw before it since he cannot go beyond, he has still dared to try high tragedy. Instead of achieving more he has achieved less, his pseudo tragedy destroying the authenticity of the vision it tried to surpass. But Conrad’s risk was a worthy and admirable one, even if futile and perhaps foredoomed. If it makes him an imperfect or even, at moments, a foolish novelist, it makes him a daring one, and thus a fit companion for the reckless if erring heroes he so profoundly chronicled.