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**A circular and blazing emptiness: The encounter with death in
the novels of Joseph Conrad**

Lindsey, Betty Coats, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1993

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A CIRCULAR AND BLAZING EMPTINESS:
THE ENCOUNTER WITH DEATH IN THE NOVELS OF JOSEPH CONRAD

by

BETTY C. LINDSEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University
of New York.

1993

c 1992

Betty C. Lindsey

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Chapter One

Doors of Darkness: Conrad's Encounters With Death

Have you gone down to the springs
 of the sea
 or walked in the unfathomable deep?
 Have the portals of death been revealed
 to you?
 Have you seen the door-keepers of the
 place of darkness?
 Have you comprehended the vast expanse
 of the world?
 Tell me all this, if you know.
 Job 38.16-18
 NEB

. . . the greatest authors are rarely
 representative of the ideology of their
 period; they tend rather to expose its
 internal contradictions or the very
 partial nature of its capacity for
 dealing with the facts of experience.
 Ian Watt

Conrad's fictional world is haunted by death.
 Among the late Victorian and Edwardian novelists, not
 excluding Hardy, only Conrad focuses so continually on
 mortality. Death pervades the novels to such an extent
 that it must be regarded as a major theme standing
 apart from the political, psychological, mythical,
 philosophical or ethical contexts in which they may be
 read. Its presence is in excess of its appropriateness
 to their particular settings or stories, whether they
 involve sea life, lost honor, imperialism, terrorism
 and revolution, domestic tragedy, or any other subject.
 Conrad presents death not merely as a natural element

in a depiction of life but as an incongruity contradicting every human pretension, revealing the aporia, the focal point of meaninglessness in the carefully crafted text of human values. For Conrad, meaning in order to exist at all must first be written into this text both created and sustained by human action. But the meaning thus created, which is a practical and psychological necessity, must always be accepted sous rature. As Jacques Derrida's translator explains the use of language "under erasure": "Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible" (Spivak xiv). Conrad treats death as the incongruence that cannot be ignored but must be somehow incorporated and overcome within an imposed human design. For him death is the great crux, the barrier and crossing place where inner being, the irresistible force of a creating consciousness, dissolves as it encounters and becomes the immovable object of non-sentient matter. This encounter is central to the visible, phenomenal world which he took it as the novelist's task to make us "see." As Frederick R. Karl suggests, "The tremendous preponderance of death and suicide in Conrad" may indicate that for him the experience of death is somehow inseparable from an understanding of life (Three Lives 388-89). The present study focuses on the many ways Conrad's concern with death expresses itself

in his novels as they explore the question of how human beings can "be" and the implications of this concern for the interpretation of his work.

The presence of death in Conrad's fiction has been touched on in passing by critics who have analyzed other aspects of his work: Royal Roussel and Donald C. Yelton in their studies of Conrad's imagery; Paul Wiley on its mythical quality and Conrad's "insight into the nature of man in his relation to the world and to society" (10); Morton Dauwen Zabel on the encounter of Conrad's protagonists with "the crisis of moral isolation and responsibility" (28); Guerard on the "psycho-moral foundations of the Conrad 'world'" in its relation to the form of his novels (58); Ian Watt in his "literal interpretation" of the fiction (Conrad ix) in relation to its biographical, ideological and literary contexts; Dwight H. Purdy and John Lester on his religious allusions; and Murray Kreiger, Bruce Johnson and Otto Bohlman on his existentialism. These critics, however, have not treated death as a dominant theme nor analyzed the variety of its permutations in the novels. Yelton and Watt discuss a death theme in The Shadow Line, for instance, and Guerard sees the dark galley that appears in the unfinished Suspense as a symbol of Conrad's premonition of his own death. Roussel identifies Conrad's metaphors of darkness with a primal chaos that is the source of both life and

death, and finds a resigned nihilism in the novels. Steve Ressler, similarly, finds that in his heroes, "tragic consciousness means the collapse of the belief in self-authenticating action" (5). An analysis of Conrad's intense concentration on death should contribute to an interpretation of his vision as tragic, which implies that, despite its failure to continue, human life retains the potential for significance, or as nihilistic, which implies that it is irredeemably absurd, or as something in between.

The prominence of death in Conrad's fiction must to some extent reflect the dominant place held by death in his earliest experiences. Only four when his parents were sent into exile in 1862, he almost died under the harsh conditions of the journey and throughout childhood was subject to recurring illness.¹ Although, according to Jacques Choron in Death and Modern Man, a child usually becomes aware of death, as something that happens to everyone, when he is between eight and ten years of age (1), such a revelation may have come to Conrad even before his mother's death when he was seven. After their first difficult year in exile Conrad's parents, Apollo and Ewa, not only received news of the death of Apollo's father but also that of his brother, Robert, in the abortive Polish

¹ The source for the summary of the experiences of Conrad and his family in this paragraph is Zdzislaw Najder, Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle, pp 16-29.

insurrection of 1863 and that of Ewa's twenty-three year old brother Stefan in a duel fomented by his political enemies; the loss of these brothers was made more bitter by the crushing defeat of the cause of Polish nationalism for which the men had struggled and for which Conrad's parents had been exiled. Apollo wrote to friends: "All life within us has come to an end, we are stunned by despair" (Najder Chronicle 18). This already difficult environment worsened with the onset of his mother's grave illness in 1865. "My poor wife . . . has barely the strength to look at me, to speak with a hollow voice," wrote Apollo. "Konradek is of course neglected" (20). After Conrad's mother died it is clear from Apollo's correspondence that the little boy was living in an oppressive atmosphere of grief, compounded by his father's own illness. "My health has been declining badly," Apollo writes, "and my dear little mite takes care of me--only the two of us left on this earth" (22). Until he was eleven, Conrad lived for the most part in isolation with a father in whose mind the protracted death throes of Poland became strangely fused with his memory of the sufferings of his dead wife. This strange conflation of ideas appears in a letter sent by Apollo to relatives more than eight months after Ewa's death:

The little orphan keeps clinging to me and it is impossible not to be constantly worrying about him. . . . {T}he little mite is growing up as

though in a cloister; the grave of our Unforgettable is our memento mori and every letter from the East, West, South or North brings us fastings, cilice, and flogging. We tremble with cold, die of hunger, struggle in abject poverty of our brothers. . . . I am here as though by a bolted door behind which a beloved being is dying and we cannot as much as wipe the mortal sweat off her forehead. . . . (Najder Chronicle 23)

When Conrad was eleven, a little more than a year after he and his father were liberated from exile, Apollo died "in the bitterness of shattered hopes" in the uncongenial Austrian-dominated Polish province of Galicia (28-29). Recalling "the awful stillness of the sickroom," Conrad later wrote about his feelings while his father was dying:

I looked forward to what was coming with an incredulous terror. I turned my eyes from it sometimes with success, and yet all the time I had an awful sensation of the inevitable. I had also moments of revolt which stripped me of some of my simple trust in the government of the universe. (NLL 168)

A child experiences the death of parents as a kind of abandonment, and as "the government of the universe" and the parental role are associated in the mind of a child, it is perhaps not surprising that Conrad's fiction depicts a universe in which no trust whatsoever can be placed. Although, according to the psychoanalyst, Gregory Zilboorg, consciousness maintains automatic defenses against the thought of death (467; qtd in Becker Denial 16-17), these defenses must inevitably be weakened by such childhood experiences, leaving the consciousness vulnerable to an

inescapable threat. The youthful Conrad's situation reflects the "traumatic childhood experiences, loss of a love object and aggression by the outside world" that play an important part in the psychology of suicide, according to Choron (Modern 67). Although Conrad's suicide attempt at the age of twenty was abortive, at least fifteen of his characters, according to Karl (Three Lives 388), succeed where Conrad failed. Karl, Jocelyn Baines, Bernard C. Meyer and others have discussed the role of suicide in his fiction.

Not only were Conrad's memories of his parents indelibly associated with failure and death, but his legacy from them was one of noble aspirations ending in defeat and of Poland as, symbolically, a dead nation, struggling futilely for resurrection. His identification with this dead nation in a letter to a Polish friend in 1885 is clear:

. . . {W]hatever may be the changes in the fortunes of living nations, for the dead there is no hope and no salvation! We have passed t[h]rough the gates where "lasciate ogni speranza" is written in letters of blood and fire, and now the gate is shut on the light of hope and nothing remains for us but the darkness of oblivion.
(Letters 1:12)

More than thirty years later, recalling a visit to Cracow in 1914, Conrad described Poland in similar terms as a country for which "the past was gone, and there was no future, whatever happened. . ." (NLL 178).

Conrad's sojourn in the Belgian Congo where, as in childhood, he experienced a near-fatal illness, could only have reinforced the impact of these early experiences of death. Like Poland, a victim of imperial domination, the Congo that Conrad depicts in Heart of Darkness and An Outpost of Progress is a place where death by violence as well as disease was to be encountered on every hand. His biographers and his correspondence reveal Conrad's constant concern about his health and his conviction that he would die young. When he was just returned from Africa and not quite thirty-four, his tendency to "philosophise . . . on death" was deplored by his uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, who wrote in a letter: "It is not natural at your age . . ." (Najder, Polish Background 150).

Conrad's childhood experiences of loneliness and death and his adolescent self-exile from eastern Europe, the scene of the trauma, obviously play an important role in the shaping of his fiction. Not only are many of his characters individuals adrift in alien environments, most of them have suffered parental loss, their fathers, dead or alive, having a negative influence on their lives. In Lord Jim, one may see even in Jim's benevolent clergyman father a proponent of those "impossible standards" that Conrad criticized in Christianity (Wright 35), and, as such, a judge that Jim dare not face, driving him into the remote outpost

in Malay forest where he meets his death. In Nostromo, Charles Gould's father, who dies a bitter and defeated man like Conrad's, leaves his son the deadly legacy of the silver mine. Nostromo himself, an orphan who flees from a cruel uncle to become a sailor, is killed by Viola, who has looked on him as a foster-son. In The Secret Agent, Winnie Verloc and her defective brother, Stevie, are children of an ineffectual mother and a violent father who had abused them. Stevie's brother-in-law, a 'father-figure' to him, causes his death. In Under Western Eyes, Razumov, an illegitimate child "without a family" is "as lonely in the world as a man swimming in the deep sea" (UWE 10). Razumov's remote nobleman father abandons him to the machinations of the Russian Imperial bureaucracy in the person of another paternalistic figure, Councillor Mikulin, who uses him as a tool against revolutionists. In Chance, the pattern of a destructive father and a dead or absent mother is present for three characters: Flora de Baral, Captain Anthony, and his sister, Mrs. Fyne, and Mrs. Fyne herself is given the role of a bad parent in her negative influence on her younger female friends. In Victory, the teachings of Heyst's dead father are responsible for his crippling detachment and fatal passivity. Lena's mother had abandoned her, and her helpless father is a paralyzed invalid. In The Rover, Peyrol's sharpest childhood memories are of a dying

mother, and the very "notion of a father was absent from his mentality" (R 6). A recent book of Freudian criticism, treating the father/son relationship in Conrad from an oedipal viewpoint, sees Lingard as he appears in Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands ("a man whose supposed benevolence achieves the ruin of two adoptive sons") as Conrad's "prototypical father" (Rising 15). Possible psychoanalytic dynamics behind Conrad's relationship with his father and his uncle (an undoubted "father-figure" to whom the above description seems more applicable) are peripheral to the present study of the death theme in Conrad, but such interpretation is not needed in order to see a relationship between Conrad's childhood experiences and the association of the parental role in his fiction with isolation, suffering, and death. This relationship is also congruent with Conrad's negative images of nature in its metaphorical identification as a 'parent' who brings forth its children only to abandon them to destruction.

What is of more interest about the recurrence in Conrad's fiction of the absent mother and the dead or life-denying father than its association with his personal history, however, is its symbolic congruence with what Ian Watt has called the "twin manifestations" of the "intellectual crisis of the late nineteenth century . . . the death of God and the disappearance of

the omniscient author" (Conrad 181). The juxtaposition of these two cultural phenomena seems more than coincidental. Each manifests an absence of authority and the destabilization of narrative--if one may metaphorically posit human life as an on-going narrative that the one who is living it explains to himself in terms of a particular cultural tradition. It seems significant that, despite his experiments with multiple points of view and his admiration for Henry James's mastery of narration from the limited viewpoint of one mind, Conrad never entirely abandons the use of an omniscient narrator. The relativity of a world with an absent author remains a problem for him, as if, while realizing it is unavailable, he retains a latent desire for some final authority whose word is truth. Mother and father as they function together in a child's life mirror mankind's ancient idea of an all-knowing and all-powerful creator, provider, and judge who presides over the origin and end of human life. For Conrad, the cosmic absence replicates the childhood bereavement; the intimate loss becomes the unfillable emptiness of an 'abyss,' an image that haunts his fiction.

By the late nineteenth century when Conrad began writing novels, not only had German scholars analyzed the Bible as an ordinary and imperfect historical document and Nietzsche announced the death of God, but

Schopenhauer, following Kant, had persuasively argued that the phenomenal world, including space and time, is merely an illusion shaped by the senses of the human perceiver. Although Conrad denied having a philosophy, it is clear that the philosophical thought of Kant, among others, contributed to his ideas about the problematical nature of what to common sense appears to be the 'real' world, especially in reference to the shaping power of perception in organizing sensory phenomena. Related to this insight is the narrative device that Ian Watt calls "delayed decoding," revealing the temporal gap between the registration of impressions by the senses and their interpretation by the conscious mind (Conrad 175-9). Conrad's emphasis on consciousness as creator of an illusory human world unique to each observer also reflects the influence of Schopenhauer, whose thought seems consonant with certain aspects of the dark mood of the fin de siècle. Bruce Johnson quotes Galsworthy as saying that Schopenhauer was read with "satisfaction" by Conrad at the turn of the century (23). Despite his aristocratic distrust of political democracy, Conrad's attitude toward society contrasts to the philosopher's radical alienation, yet Schopenhauer's pessimism, anti-intellectualism, and emphasis on the value of self-denial are reflected in the novels. Johnson points out the similarity between Conrad's 'ego' and

Schopenhauer's 'will' and believes that "Conrad's use of the word 'idea' to represent a man's projected and idealized illusion and Schopenhauer's use of that concept in The World as Will and Idea are too close to be accidental" (43). But although Conrad insisted on the illusory nature of appearances, his preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus," in its emphasis on "the universal senses, especially to sight," Johnson argues, "is the most telling defense of maya ever written" (49). For Conrad, it is essential to the art of the novelist to show "the kingdom of this earth itself, the ground upon which his individualities stand, stumble, or die" (NLL 6-7). And intrinsic to the appearances of the material world is the event of death, a bitter fact that neither contemporary philosophy nor science could assuage.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, both philosophical thought and scientific hypothesis had described a world that is accidental and contingent rather than created and purposeful. The speculations of science in particular were becoming common currency, although most people undoubtedly did not for some time comprehend all of their implications. "The Victorians were learning a whole new vocabulary," writes George Levine, ". . . and, consequently, a whole new reality" (253). Conrad seems to be satirically allowing 'the devil to speak true' through the mouth of Mr. Vladimir

in The Secret Agent, when the diplomat contemptuously calls science the new "sacro-sanct [sic] fetish" of the middle classes (SA 30). The influence of science over all aspects of life is perhaps the dominant characteristic of the modern period, and Conrad shows himself as particularly conscious of what Marshall Berman has defined as the experience of the modern: "to be part of a universe in which as Karl Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'" (15). In such a universe, in the words of Robert Penn Warren, "[m]an is precariously balanced in his humanity between the black inward abyss of himself and the black outward abyss of nature" (Introduction xxxiv).

The image of the "abyss," a word that appears so often in Conrad's fiction, seems to have been associated with the effects of modernism from the beginning. Douglas Bush writes of the late Renaissance period of the great Shakespearean tragedies that saw the early beginnings of modern science and the spread of the Protestant movement as a time when, for thoughtful Europeans, "both the inner and outer world [had] become oppressively vast and dark" (80-81). In 1762, according to Berman, Rousseau, the first person to use the word moderniste in its current sense, "astounded his contemporaries by proclaiming that European society was 'at the edge of abyss'" (17). In 1856, Marx points at "the abyss" beneath "the dry crust

of European society" (577; qtd. in Berman 19).

Although it may seem paradoxical that periods of intellectual enlightenment and social advance should evoke, for many, images of darkness and emptiness, the analogy is apt for those who see themselves suspended between an irrevocable past and an unknown future, caught in what Berman calls an "inner dichotomy, this sense of living in two worlds simultaneously" (17). Even when such abyssal images are not meant negatively, they carry an undertone of menace. The Italian futurists, before the First World War, proclaimed that science would hack "an abyss between those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future" (qtd in Berman 25), words revealing the "hard, absolute optimism" of the "revolutionary spirit" that despite of his portrayal of the optimistic anarchist Michaelis in The Secret Agent as benign always suggested to Conrad "the menace of fanaticism and intolerance" (PR xxi-xxii). In A Personal Record, first published in the first decade of the new century, Conrad comments with characteristic irony on the continuing disintegration of traditional values:

Rules, principles and standards vanish every day. Perhaps they are all dead and vanished by this time. These, if ever, are the brave free days of destroyed landmarks, while the ingenious minds are busy inventing the forms of the new beacons which, it is consoling to think, will be set up presently in the old places. (PR 96)

Science, chief among these "new beacons," offered for many besides the Futurists the hope that, conquering nature for mankind's benefit, it would transform the world for the better. "Modern mankind found itself in the midst of a great absence and emptiness of values and yet, at the same time," Berman writes, "a remarkable abundance of possibilities" (21). But for Conrad its discoveries only made more desperate the situation of conscious beings in a cosmos in which individuals, species, and ultimately life itself were dispensable. Conrad's attitude was closer to the mood of those artists and thinkers for whom the optimism that had accompanied the great intellectual and economic changes of the century had shifted into the pessimistic skepticism of the fin de siècle, a mood expressed by Hardy's poem, "The Darkling Thrush," in which the passing century is visualized as an outstretched corpse. Jerome Buckley describes the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a time when "the main currents of contemporary thought . . . seemed to be washing away the foundations of all real certitude" (196). Buckley quotes the observation of the agnostic Leslie Stephen, "There is a deep sadness in the world," and writes that Stephen, "between man's hope and the law of nature . . . saw a cruel disparity. . ." (191).

Conrad also found no source of comfort in the "law of nature" that had become very much part of contemporary thought by the end of the century: Darwin's principle of Natural Selection or the Survival of the Fittest, which eventuated from "the struggle for existence" or "the struggle for life" (48-50 passim; ch. 3). The influence of Darwinism evident in the fiction of Meredith and Hardy (Stevenson 389) is plain in that of Conrad as well. An ironic biblical allusion in Heart of Darkness in which Marlow describes the brickmaker who had made no bricks refers to the outmoded biblical theory of creation:

It seems he could not make bricks without something, I don't know what--straw maybe. Anyway it could not be found there and as it was not likely to be sent from Europe, it did not appear clear to me what he was waiting for. An act of special creation perhaps. (HD 77)

Although Herbert Spencer and others, positing continual change as species adapt to environment, interpreted biological evolution optimistically, Conrad's allusions to Darwinian theory indicate that he did not, just as he saw no validity in social engineering based on a scientific model nor in ideological dogmas such as Positivism or Marxism that incorporated the idea of inevitable historical progress. A reference to biological competition appears in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" in the description of Donkins as "an ominous survival

testifying to the eternal fitness of lies and impudence" (NN 10). In Almayer's Folly, Conrad vividly evokes a competitive struggle for existence with a typically Conradian emphasis on its deadly outcome, in a passage describing "the intense work of tropical nature":

". . . plants . . . climbing madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence of a desperate struggle towards the life-giving sunshine above--as if struck with sudden horror . . . at the death and decay from which they sprang" (AF 71).

Darwin himself did not take a gloomy view of "the struggle for life," seeing, on the final page of The Origin of Species, "grandeur in this view of life" (131; ch. 15) and going even further at the end of The Descent of Man, suggesting that man "having risen, though not through his own exertions, to the very summit of the organic scale" may have "hope for a still higher destiny in the distant future" (208; ch. 21). Conrad, however, could not take so sanguine a view of mankind's "distant future," since the inexorable physical processes of the universe seemed to remove any hope of "grandeur" in the destiny of human beings on earth. To the contrary, Conrad's preoccupation with the death of individuals was exacerbated by the spectre of the eventual annihilation of the race (and indeed of all life) arising from the conclusions drawn by the physicist Lord Kelvin showing the irreversible decay of

matter and energy. Much of the pessimism Conrad reveals, especially in his correspondence with Cunninghame Graham, seems to arise, at least partly, from his knowledge of current scientific theories of a mechanistic universe slowly winding down as its heat and energy dissipate to the stillness, darkness, and cold of a dead world. Although the human race has emerged out of nature, Conrad sees nature as an unconscious, inexorable process somehow alien and, indeed, inimicable to mankind. In a letter to Cunninghame Graham he writes that "we, living, are out of life--utterly out of it," and continues:

The mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud do not concern us in the least. The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness and silence. Letters 2:16-17.

Behind Conrad's sceptical conservatism seems to lie always the haunting thought that shadows the idea of human "progress"--that it could only end in the "cold, darkness and silence" of death. As he wrote in his essay on Anatole France, "fatality is invincible," and "there is an implacable menace of death in the triumph of the humanitarian idea" (NLL 38). In commenting on Conrad's letter, Frederick Karl recognizes "verbal parallels" between it and an essay by Anatole France and notes that H. G. Wells's novel, The Time Machine,

also pictures "in the farthest epoch . . . an ailing sun and a freezing world." "The conviction that entropy would triumph on a cosmic scale," Karl writes, "was widespread as the century neared its close" (Letters 2:17 n.).

Nevertheless most of Conrad's contemporaries among the English novelists remain concerned with the here and now, the conflicts of love and marriage and the uncertain fit between the individual and society; none of them places the special emphasis on death that he does. Only the next generation of English novelists, in particular Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, would begin to include a concern about death as a thematic element in their work and show by its content and form a recognition that, as Lukács holds, the "novel tells of the adventure of interiority" (89). Although Conrad consciously differentiated his fiction from that of what he called "the national English novelist" (Wright 72) in his attention to aesthetic form acquired from the French masters he admired--"the perfect blending of form and substance" and a "care for the shape and ring of sentences" (Preface NN xiii)--a more important difference lies in its content. Conrad's fictional world is both broader, and, except for that of Thomas Hardy, darker.

The only novelist of his time with whom Conrad may be compared in the pessimism of his outlook is Hardy,

whose main focus is on the injustices of a social order through which, in the eyes of the author, the injustice of the universe expresses itself. But death itself is less thematic in Hardy than in Conrad, as Hardy objects not so much that the universe kills human beings as that it does not 'play fair' with them. Yet, with the possible exception of The Secret Agent, Conrad's novels are not so hopeless in their final effect as Tess of the D'Urbervilles, The Mayor of Casterbridge, or Jude the Obscure. Where Conrad is ironic, Hardy is bitter, seeming, unreasonably, to bear an animus against a God who is not there. Hardy's characters are victims of all circumstances, all luck is bad, the deck is stacked. Conrad's are given a semblance of choice, and winds sometimes blow in the right direction. For Conrad, "Dark Powers" can even be "foiled by the steadfastness of men" (LJ 121), whereas for Hardy they always win. In Lord Jim, even while protesting that the accident that causes his ruin had been "brutally sprung" on him, Jim concedes that "All the same one is responsible," and Marlow agrees (LJ 180). Like Jim, Conrad in his fiction seems to be carrying on "a subtle and momentous quarrel as to the true essence of life" (LJ 95), while Hardy has already decided that it is simply "a brief transit through a sorry world" and "a general drama of pain" (The Mayor of Casterbridge 410, 411; ch. 45). Conrad's characters can show an

irrational resilience that Hardy's lack, and essential to the dynamic of his novels is the subtle tension of action versus inertia that acts as a resistance to fate.

Because he was European and culturally Catholic in an English and culturally Protestant country, Conrad necessarily breaks with the English novel in its traditional concern with what David Daiches identifies as changes "in social or economic position or in marital situation" by English characters within the structure of English society (1). Marlow's statement that "[a]ll Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (HD 117) might be said of Conrad's characters as a group, with the addition of Asia and the Western Hemisphere, as well. The real problems of James Wait, Lord Jim, Kurtz, Decoud, Dr. Monygham, Winnie Verloc, Razumov, and Heyst arise not from conflict with others or with society but with themselves and, ultimately, their place in a universe that does not know they are there. Jim is "overwhelmed by the inexplicable; he [is] overwhelmed by his own personality," which seeks both to flee from and to defy death (LJ 341). Decoud is "not fit to grapple with himself single-handed," and the solitude of nature becomes for him, fatally, "a state of soul" (N 497).

Thus the intense concern with death noted by Choron in the works of such writers as Hemingway,

Faulkner, Malraux, Camus, T. S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas (Western 272) had already taken possession of Conrad's imagination in the late nineteenth century. Since such a concentration on the arbitrary nature of death and its finality deprives human life of any objective rationale, it is not surprising that portents of the literature of the Absurd are also evident in Conrad's fiction. As Leon Seltzer points out in his comparative study of Conrad and Melville, "That the split between man and the world that has mysteriously given him life is irreparable is the fundamental tenet of absurdist thought" (121). Conrad's concentration on the tenuous reality of observed and reported happenings, the "story" that creates the human world structured by memory and desire within the individual consciousness, reveals a modernist sensibility. Yet, particularly applicable to Conrad is Berman's contention that "to be fully modern is to be anti-modern," and, paraphrasing "the great modernist and antimodernist" Kierkegaard, "the deepest modern seriousness must express itself through irony" (14)--the dominating tone in Conrad's fiction. Countering modernity by an insistence on the value of an abstract virtue like "Fidelity," Conrad fulfills Berman's paradoxical definition of what is modern: "to be both revolutionary and conservative: alive to new possibilities for experience and adventure, frightened by the nihilistic depths . . .

longing to create and to hold on to something real even as everything melts" (13-14). Existing in tension with the social values that he refuses to discard, Conrad's irony works against a traditional affirmation of the heroic yet permits the retention of heroes manqué: Jim, Kurtz, Gould, Nostromo, Dr. Monygham, Razumov, and Heyst, characters who contend against the forces of chance, meaninglessness, and death in an indifferent universe.

Conrad's vision of the world is ultimately his own, and it is characteristic that he can never see with a single eye. His fiction reflects the tension between intellectual nihilism and the heroic values which he inherited, according to Najder, from the patriotic traditions of his own family, of the szlachta class from which he came, and from the Polish romantic literature which he read as a child. The theory of fiction he reveals in his preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" reflects corresponding contrasts in the tension between objectivity and subjectivity implicit in his assertion that "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect" the artist "descends within himself. . ." (xi-xii). Underlying truth for Conrad is subjective, even in the apparently objective task of reflecting "the visible universe." He asserts this idea even more

strongly in his 1905 essay "Books," in which he writes that the novelist "must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image . . ." (NLL 6).

Edward Said points out that, for Conrad, "[t]he particular experiences of an extravagantly itinerant life, and his own intellectual energies in general, immediately exhausted whatever was ready-made" (21). Conrad thus fits Ernest Becker's description of the creative artist who is "separated out of the common pool of shared meanings. There is something in his life experience that makes him take in the world as a problem; as a result he has to make personal sense out of it" (Denial 171). In creating "his own new meanings," Becker writes, the artist "must, in turn, be sustained by them," although the "dialogue is too inverted to be secure" (Denial 257). Conrad's novels show evidence of just such a process of inverted dialogue, described by one critic as "a dialogue between what Conrad . . . called 'ideal' value and the world of sensation and imperfection" (Johnson 51). Conrad's experience of art means an engagement with life and its unanswerable questions, in particular those surrounding the indivisible union of life and death: of consciousness emerging out of and swallowed up by the unconscious forces of nature. His finest

work continually confronts human pretensions of significance and purpose with the actuality of death and oblivion and reveals his characters' flawed yet dynamic strategies of response.

slow progress toward death of the title character. Title characters die as well in Almayer's Folly, An Outcast of the Islands, Lord Jim, Nostromo, The Secret Agent, and The Rover; one or more central characters die in Heart of Darkness, Under Western Eyes, Chance, and The Rescue. In Victory, five central characters die.

Death in the Early Novels

In each of Conrad's first two novels, which share a common setting and many of the same characters, there are four deaths, including that of Lingard whom both novels suggest has died in England. More important than the number of characters who die, however, is the general emphasis on death in these novels, especially in their final pages, independent of the particular fates of their protagonists. Near the middle of Almayer's Folly (1895), a boatman is found drowned, and although this man as an individual is irrelevant to the plot, the discovery of his body serves as a turning point when Almayer mistakes it for that of a more important character in the novel, Dain Maroola. The mutilated corpse is described in gruesome detail, and the place of its discovery among floating logs in the river links it with the novel's central image of death--the floating logs and uprooted trees introduced on its second page. At the end of the novel, Taminah,

the slave girl who loves Dain, the lover of Almayer's daughter, Nina, apparently dies of grief, her death achieving additional significance because of the placement of its announcement on the next to last page following the news of the birth of Almayer's grandchild, an event that seems to hasten Almayer's death as well. The birth of this child becomes, in its effect, a death sentence for two people.

A subtle but significant preoccupation with death emerges in the conversation of two minor characters, Babalatchi and Abdullah, in the last three pages of text. Babalatchi announces the birth of Nina's baby and Almayer's violent reaction, from which, he says, he barely "escaped with my life"; Mrs. Almayer is overjoyed, and he says: "She will not die soon"; he wonders if he will "live long enough to see" the war he foretells, adding that when his people fight with the whites "we can only die!" He mentions Taminah, who "grew thin and could not work" and "died two days ago," and goes off "looking very sad." Next, Abdulla visits his old enemy Almayer's house to inquire "Is he dead?" The old Arab gazes at the dead Almayer, foreseeing his own approaching death, realizing that "before him was only the end" (AF 206-08). Thus at the end of the novel the report of the birth of a new life does not balance the death of Almayer; rather its juxtaposition

with so many other reminders of life's transience underscores the final triumph of death.

An Outcast of the Islands (1896) even more obviously places the death of the outcast Willems in a context emphasizing death's inexorable triumph over everyone. At the beginning of part four, Willem's mistress Aissa's old father succumbs to age and perhaps the neglect of his daughter. Near the novel's end, Willems himself dies violently in a melodramatic scene. Then, in its last pages, a new character appears, a visiting "Roumanian" whose impending death is announced almost immediately. This character's only function--except to die--is to serve as audience to Almayer's vivid reprise of the circumstances of Willems's death. The man, a declared "materialist," expresses his lack of interest in a tiring visit to Willems's grave, which Almayer looks on as a kind of tourist attraction, unless "you carry me there." With typical Conradian irony, the man's fate is then revealed: "As a matter of fact he was carried there a few months afterwards, and his was the second white man's grave in Sambir. . . ." (OI 365).

Thus both of Conrad's first two novels place a generalized emphasis on death in their final pages, The Outcast introducing an irrelevant character at the end merely so that he may die. Conrad's major fiction will continue to combine a sharp focus on the death of

individuals such as James Wait, Kurtz, Jim, Decoud, Nostromo, Stevie, the Verlocs, Haldin, Heyst, and Lena, accompanying this concentration with a general emphasis on death that transcends the particular circumstances of any novel.

"The immortal sea . . . like the image of life, with a glittering surface and lightless depths"

Death takes center stage from the moment the mortally-ill James Wait climbs onto the deck of the Narcissus to confront the ship's crew with his reproachful presence and his cough, "metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud," reminding them of a subject upon which, like most people, they previously had preferred not to dwell. Even more obviously than in the two earliest works, the inevitability of death underlies and shadows the circumstances and events of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (1898), Conrad's first important novel and the first of the two he wrote about the fear of death aboard a ship threatened by the external forces of nature, disease, and the dissolution of morale. Like The Shadow-Line (1917), it is set within the context of the power and indifference of the sea, depicts nature as an implacable enemy, and dramatizes the reactions of individuals to the prospect of their own deaths and the deaths of others. Wait represents not so much death as "the fear of death,"

suggests Ian Watt, death being one of "those most universal agents of anticlimax, the facts" that people tend to resist ("Conrad Criticism" 275). This novel makes clear that death and its denial are inextricably linked--that of all dismaying facts, death is the one universally resisted. The efforts of the crewmen to mitigate the discomfort they feel in the presence of this too-conspicuously-dying man place Wait's mortal illness in a wide context. Reminding themselves of past encounters with wholesale death that left them unscathed, they repeat their previously successful psychological evasions of any potential threat to themselves. The stoic Singleton says "'I have seen them die like flies.' . . . as if trying to recollect gruesome things, details of horrors, hecatombs of niggers," drawing upon ancient memories of "slavers, bloody mutinies, pirates" (NN 129-30). The sailmaker who must sew the dead Wait into his canvas shroud, hating the job, tries to comfort the grieving Belfast by using a variation on the Queen's argument to Hamlet that death is too common to be a subject of concern. He asks, "What makes you take on so?" and tells Belfast of an outbreak of disease in India when he had "sewed in twenty men a day" and thought "nothing of it" (NN 157-58). Despite such superficial denials of the "sinister truth" that they are involved with mortality, the crew cannot shake off their uneasiness. After the

violent storm that very nearly kills them all, both the oldest and the youngest crewmen face the fragility of life: Singleton, who "had never given a thought to his mortal self," achieves a "completed wisdom" when the collapse of his aging body makes death real to him, and the carefree cabin boy, Charley, becomes "subdued by the sudden disclosure of the insignificance of his youth" (NN 74).

In revealing the crew's support of Wait's "untruthful attitude in the face of [the] inevitable truth" of his impending death, Conrad ironically records his observation of a common human reaction in such circumstances--the discomfort and involuntary identification felt by those faced with a dying man who has "no grit to face what's coming to us all" (NN 127). In writing about the "latent egoism" of the crew's "tenderness to suffering . . . in the developing anxiety not to see him die" (NN 138), Conrad does not so much denigrate the human feeling of sympathy as he simply points out that it derives as much from the survival mechanism of egoism as from altruism--both of which, he once wrote, are "good" (Letters 2:30). It is true that the crew's support for Wait's denial of death makes them susceptible to Donkin's subversive incitements to riot, breaking the group solidarity essential on a ship where the most immediate enemy is the life-threatening power and indifference of the sea

itself. Yet Conrad recognizes that Wait's fellow seamen, of whom the narrator is one, behave as they do because they are human, moved by the complex emotions about which he comments with irony rather than contempt. In wanting "to keep him alive till home--to the end of the voyage," they are conspiring, symbolically, to keep themselves alive (NN 141). It is important to recognize, above all, that the crew's problem with Wait is not an "irrational identification" as Guerard holds (109); it is, rather, a natural and fundamental one. James Wait is fated to die, and so are they.

Almost twenty years later, in The Shadow-Line (1917), Conrad returned to the subject of a death-haunted ship, struck by fever and dominated not by a dying seaman but by the malign influence of the former captain who had died aboard, his fear of death turning into a fierce hatred of the ship and the men who would survive him. Death is identified in this novel as "our common enemy," and Donald C. Velton identifies its theme as "the shrinking from death (timor mortis) that manifests itself as a shrinking from life" (312), an interpretation that is only partly true. A "shrinking from life" is certainly exemplified by the dead captain's replacement, a young officer who has sensed that the passage from youth to maturity approaches the borderline on whose farther side lies death. His

"feeling of life-emptiness" (SL 49) is reflected as well in the figure of the Chief Steward of the Officers' Home, a place "as still as a tomb," who lurks in a dim office filled with the smell of decay and dust and believes that his job "would be the death of him" (SL 9-10). The three characters who are in real danger of death, however, do not shrink from life. The dying captain reacts to the approach of death by plunging into a sexual affair, playing his violin, and, in his envy of those who would survive him, destroys the medicine meant to keep them alive. Mr. Burns, the first mate, fears death but fights to stay alive, crawling up on deck to defy the evil spirit that, in his fevered condition, he feels has cursed the ship. And Ransome, the cook and acting steward (a foil for the Chief Steward on shore) constantly "listening to a warning call" from his ailing heart fears death so much because "[l]ife was a boon to him--this precarious hard life" (SL 133, 129). With Burns on what seems his deathbed, most of the crew sickening with fever, and the ship trapped by an immobilizing calm, the ship begins to seem like "a floating grave," and the young captain experiences a relapse into to the "creeping paralysis of a hopeless outlook" (SL 92-93). The victory against death achieved when the heroic efforts of the captain, Burns, and Ransome bring the ship into port, "full of fever-stricken men, some of them dying,"

is shown to be temporary (SL 126). The courageous but exhausted Ransome resigns his post, "in mortal fear of starting into sudden anger our common enemy it was his hard fate to carry consciously within his faithful breast" (SL 133).

Conrad wrote The Shadow Line in 1915 when the devastation of trench warfare on the Western Front had begun and his elder son was expected at any time to be sent into France. Although deeply affected by the war, Conrad, according to one biographer, "was neither surprised nor embittered by the news of hundreds of thousands being killed or maimed" (Najder Chronicle 408). If this is so, his acceptance may have arisen not only because he had "foreseen" such slaughter in a general European War, as his biographer suggests, but also because, as his fiction reveals, death was at all times and in all circumstances already so present to his imagination. In this short novel and The Nigger of the "Narcissus," written respectively near the end and near the beginning of Conrad's creative life, the theme of death seems to show itself least obscured by competing elements, as if these two works emerge out of the first and the last flare of that creative power with which a writer can draw on and transmit an authentic and unmediated vision.

"I was concerned as to the way he would go out."

Combining the marine setting of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and The Shadow-Line with that of the Malaysian forest of the first novels, Lord Jim (1900) is the first of Conrad's novels that is striking by the sheer number of its characters who die, although its central concern seems not to be death so much as it is the idea of lost and (perhaps) regained honor, or, on a deeper level, the epistemological mystery of human personality emerging out of an inner life that is ultimately unknowable. In addition to the title character, at least eight other identifiable characters die, four of them important to the story: Brierly, one of Jim's judges at the inquiry; Dain Waris, his friend; Cornelius, his lover's father, and Gentleman Brown, his unexpected nemesis. In addition, Marlow's narrative includes an extraordinary number of other deaths: those of the second engineer on the Patna, one of Jim's would-be assassins during his early days in Patusan, one of Brown's men and the native he kills, as well as the unnumbered men killed in the attack on the Arab fort by which Jim achieves heroic status in the community. Marlow also mentions ten other deaths peripheral to Jim's story: those of Stein's wife and child, Stein's three assailants and his friend Mohammed Bonzo, Jewel's mother, Brown's girl, and the heroic "little Bob Stanton" (Jim's foil, like the French

lieutenant, in relation to the theme of honor), who drowns with the lady's maid he is trying to rescue. Marlow describes the four latter deaths in dramatic and pathetic detail. The novel's death toll increases with the disappearance of Chester and "a crew of twenty-two hands all told" on a voyage that, but for Marlow, would probably have included Jim; after a hurricane, "not a sound came out of the waste" from these doomed adventurers (LJ 176).

In view of all these deaths, a veritable hecatomb of characters, Marlow's preoccupation with the significance of Jim's death acquires an added irony and even a poignancy of which Marlow himself seems quite oblivious. Like his engagement with the deaths of Fresleven, the helmsman, and Kurtz in Heart of Darkness (written concurrently but published later), Marlow's concern with the manner and meaning of Jim's death forms part of Conrad's continuing dialectic on the value of individual human life despite the reality of universal annihilation. Although Marlow has earlier assured his listeners that Jim's disgrace is "an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an ant heap," he is still concerned "as to the way he would go out" (LJ 93, 223). He therefore condones Jim's "exalted egoism," the young man's insistence, against all evidence, on his own significance, ruefully and repeatedly acknowledging

that in this behavior Jim is "one of us" (LJ 416). Such egoism, making possible the "extraordinary success" Jim at last achieves in deliberately facing Doramin's fatal bullet, is a human characteristic that Conrad himself cannot reject, since it is the only armor that shields men and women against the empirical evidence of the irrelevancy of their fate in a world where they are, as Aeschylus calls them, "the creatures of a day."

The "gloomy circle of some Inferno"

Jacques Berthoud describes Heart of Darkness (1902) and The Nigger of the "Narcissus" as narratives of "extraordinary urgency" that have "an exploratory intensity found only in works concerned with the central problems of their author's life" (25). If urgency of tone and intensity of concentration are criteria, these works reveal that for Conrad the idea of death was indeed life's central problem. Although in analyzing Heart of Darkness critics usually subordinate its emphasis on death to such elements as its treatment of colonialism, its introduction of the modernist character of the "hollow" man, Marlow's mythological and psychological journey to an interior underworld, or the significance of his lie to the Intended, death so pervades the novel that its 'incidence' is difficult to reckon. The choice of

setting--the disease-ridden interior of the Congo under the cruelties of colonial rule--insures a high rate of mortality. The Belgian Congo was indeed a place where many people died, and if the novel were singular in Conrad's oeuvre in so emphasizing death, its death rate might even be viewed naturalistically. On the other hand, one critic seems to view the novel's emphasis on death principally as a literary device, with "symbolic corpses and metaphoric decay" reinforcing "Conrad's equation of death and deceit" (Stewart 319). Neither explanation, however, accounts fully for the role of death in this novel; it is more than an empirical fact and more than a metaphor.

Perhaps to a greater extent than in any other of Conrad's novels, the surfeit of death in Heart of Darkness is shown to have a universal, or, as Conrad would say, an "ideal" significance, although that aspect is present in them all. Such an expanded perspective may be seen in Marlow's reaction to "the grove of death" on which he inadvertantly stumbles on his arrival at the first station, a place of "mournful stillness . . . where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved," where "in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair . . . some of the helpers had withdrawn to die." He immediately perceives this colonial death camp with its "black shadows of disease and starvation" as "the gloomy circle of some Inferno,"

enlarging his personal experience into a Dantean vision consonant with his likening the "uninterrupted, uniform, headlong, rushing noise" of the nearby rapids to "the tearing pace of the launched earth . . . suddenly become audible" (HD 66). Such universalizing metaphors reveal Marlow's perception of the irrationality, cruelty, and death in the Belgian Congo as a reflection in microcosm of the conditions of human life itself. As Yelton has suggested, in all of Conrad's finest novels the narrative perspective is essentially cosmic (479). Such a viewpoint underlies and supports their pervasive irony and is one reason for the sometimes portentous tone of their diction. The Narcissus, surrounded by "the abysses of sky and sea" sails on "lonely and swift like a small planet" (NN 29). The Patna in Lord Jim, filled with sleeping passengers, moves as smoothly as "a crowded planet speeding through dark spaces of ether behind the swarm of suns . . ." (LJ 22). The captain in The Shadow Line, "decoyed into this awful, this death-haunted command," likens himself to "mankind" which has "blundered unbidden" or has perhaps also "been decoyed" into the midst "stars, sun, sea, light, darkness, space, great waters; the formidable Work of the Seven Days" (SL 97). Even those novels not laid against a background of "the abysses of sky and sea" evoke a sense of the macrocosm. Enclosed within the warrens of

city streets in the cramped kitchen at the bottom of a small house in the London of The Secret Agent, Stevie will trace with his pencil the endless circles of the cosmos.

Yet death in Heart of Darkness is not a philosophical abstraction; each death is immediate and circumstantial, a particular event intensely experienced, with which Marlow feels himself personally involved. Death confronts him on every hand in the form of dead men, victims of accident, disease, murder, or simply "the country." In the midst of what seems a general shambles, he takes particular note of the deaths of three of these men. The first is Fresleven, his predecessor, whose almost accidental death in a trivial dispute with some Africans provides the job opening that Marlow fills.² Just as the new captain in The Shadow Line feels "a semimystical bond with the dead" as he sits in the place of his predecessor, "just such another man as myself" (SL 62), Marlow feels his connection to Fresleven, having "stepped into his shoes," even though he 'meets' him only when "the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones" (HD 54). Marlow says that after his death "nobody seemed to trouble much about Fresleven's

² This episode is based on fact. Jeffrey Meyers's biography points out that Conrad was twice hired to replace dead men (95). The other occasion is fictionalized in The Shadow-Line.

remains. . . . I couldn't let it rest, though . . ."

(HD 53-54). Marlow's concern to recover his predecessor's body reflects the anxiety he feels about a subject that the other Europeans seem to regard with what seems to him a surprising indifference. He notices their sangfroid on his voyage to Africa; soldiers disembark and some, he is told, "got drowned in the surf; but whether they did or not, nobody seemed particularly to care" (HD 60-61). He implies an equal lack of concern by anyone except himself that sailors on a nearby French warship are "dying of fever at the rate of three a day" (HD 62). On his journey upriver from the coast by steamer, he is shocked by its captain's off-hand remark that a newcomer who recently preceded him had "hanged himself on the road."

"'Hanged himself! Why, in God's name?'" Marlow cries. But the captain shrugs it off. "Who knows?" he says. "The sun too much for him, or the country perhaps" (HD 63).

The premonition of death that Marlow had felt in Brussels and encountered as rumor on his journey is more than justified by observed facts when he arrives in Africa. At the first station, after fleeing from the grove filled with dying Africans, he finds a cot in the office of the chief accountant on which a dying European lies, a portent not only of the death of Kurtz but of his own almost-mortal illness. On his

nightmarish march through the bush to the Central Station, he repeatedly encounters dead men: "Now and then a carrier dead in harness, at rest in the long grass near the path," and once "the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead" (HD 71). Marlow himself seems all too likely to be numbered among the Europeans that the manager says "die so quick that I haven't the time to send them out of the country" (HD 92). The scattered hints of his increasing illness, the chills and fever, or "a little touch of other things--the playful paw-strokes of the wilderness, the preliminary trifling before the more serious onslaught" (HD 105) lead to a time of "impalpable greyness," an "unexciting contest" with death in which he believes only a little more strongly in his own right to live than in the right of death to take him (HD 105, 150).

"I have wrestled with death," he tells his listeners, years later, but it is not simply his own mortality with which Marlow struggles (HD 150). He seems to feel even more acutely that of other men whom he encounters in the carnage of the Congo, especially those with whom he feels a particular connection--not only Fresleven, but also his dying African helmsman, whose blood fills his shoes, and Kurtz--both of them men with whom it might seem he has nothing in common. Although as Marlow tells of dragging the African's body

over the side of the boat, he compares his importance to that of "a grain of sand in a black Sahara" (HD 119), the man's inert weight in death seems to him "heavy, heavy; heavier than any man on earth" and remains a lasting burden on his mind (HD 120). The "subtle bond" with this man that Marlow only recognizes "when it was suddenly broken" seems especially poignant in its transcendence of apparently impassable barriers of race and culture (HD 119). But perhaps an even deeper division is crossed by his alliance with the corrupted and doomed idealism of Kurtz against the sordid cynicism of the manager and the "imbecile rapacity" of the pilgrims, and an even stronger bond with the dying acknowledged when he drags Kurtz away from the campfires of his followers and stands by his deathbed. If Marlow has seemed oversensitive to death before, feeling closer to the dying and the dead than to the survivors around him, his alliance with Kurtz, "whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth," worsens his condition (HD 147). Having made his "choice of nightmares" in favor of Kurtz, a man "as good as buried" even while he lives, Marlow feels as if he also "were buried in a vast grave full of unspeakable secrets" (HD 138). This imagined grave seems no mere metaphor but rather a macabre fantasy of premature burial like a passage from Poe: "an intolerable weight oppressing my breast, the smell

of the damp earth, the unseen presence of victorious corruption, the darkness of an impenetrable night. . . ." (HD 138). Marlow senses that he is "numbered with the dead" in the eyes of the other whites, while they, in turn, seem to him like "mean and greedy phantoms" (HD 147).

His horror at what he witnesses ill-concealed under an ironic tone, Marlow is a man sensitized to the subject of death; he lacks the automatic protective mechanism possessed by the average person that Ernest Becker calls "the ability to be smug about terror" (Denial 59). His is a nightmare vision of the Europeans in Africa leading a grotesque danse macabre in which the hapless Africans are forced to join. Set down in what Conrad sees as a primal wilderness, they have made themselves the allies and agents of the dark forces of death that they encounter there. Although in Heart of Darkness death is certainly a by-product of colonialism, for Conrad it is not just a symbol of colonialism or of moral corruption or of "a lie," but rather each of these things is shown to be a symbol of death. The novel's emphasis on the oppression inherent in an imperial government and the anarchistic self-interest of its agents and hirelings also lays a foundation for the depiction of the self-serving politics of all factions that leads to death in the three novels that follow.

"I dreamt of a world like shambles. . . ."

The subject matter Conrad chooses for his political novels--civil war, oppression, subversion, and revolution--like the excesses of colonialism in Heart of Darkness, is inescapably associated with death. Yet their emphasis on mortality transcends the requirements of their subjects. Nostromo opens with the story of a fatal treasure hunt in which two American sailors and an Indian perish on a waterless peninsula in a search for gold. Yet even the competition for material wealth that is at the heart of the political struggle in the novel appears irrelevant to the deaths of such characters as Don Jose Avellanos, Georgio Viola, and his wife, Teresa, unmercenary people who die of natural causes. And in spite of the novel's background of civil war, only two of eight prominent characters who die are killed in political violence: the hide merchant, Hirsch, and the turncoat Colonel Sotillo, and even they do not die for political reasons. Hirsch, an entirely apolitical person, is tortured and shot by Sotillo, a man without principles of any kind, in an attempt to extract information about the location of silver Sotillo wishes to steal. Hirsch's terrible death is irrelevant to the political struggle and neither advances nor retards the action of the plot. Sotillo is killed by one of his own soldiers because of his greed and ineptitude. General Montero

is killed in a typically Latin crime of honor. So is Nostromo, even though while he visits Giselle without her father's knowledge he is also engaged in stealing silver. Martin Decoud commits suicide in a state of depression originating from the kind of existential angst familiar to readers of modernist fiction.

Nostromo is Conrad's richest novel in the variety of its characters and in the complexity of its background and so can more truly be said to represent a microcosm. It depicts a moribund traditional society caught between the conflicting interests of democracy and imperial capitalism in the modern world, yet death strikes its characters with a disinterested irrelevance that transcends any political agenda its author might have.

An interplay between the event of death as an individual disaster and the idea of it as a universal remedy for society's ills emerges in The Secret Agent (1907) whose theme Hillis Miller identifies as "the universal death which underlies life" (66).

Contrasting to the panoramic Nostromo in its limited time frame, setting, and number of characters, the novel focuses on the death of one small family by murder, accident, and suicide within a context of anarchistic theory that proposes the destruction of society itself in order to make room for a utopian but undefined future. Adolph Verloc, the "agent" of the

title, his wife, and his nephew all die violently in the course of the novel, and the symbolic suicide of Verloc's mother-in-law Conrad makes clear by having her ride to a charity home in "the Cab of Death itself" (SA 131). The concealed emotions and hidden agendas in the Verlocs' domestic world create a deadly explosion of "madness and despair" that parallels the explosion of the anarchistic Professor's bomb that kills Stevie in Greenwich Park (SA 131).

Conrad describes the remnants of Stevie's exploded body that have been shoveled off the ground and stored at the hospital morgue in a manner that exceeds in horror his detailing the gruesome remains of the drowned boatman in Almayer's Folly. The boy's body parts form "a sort of mound--a heap of rags, scorched and blood stained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast"; they are a "heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops," "a heap of nameless fragments," "the by-products of a butcher's shop" (SA 70-71 *passim*). Conrad's emphasis on the shattered organic remnants left after Stevie himself disappears seems less intended to shock the reader than to suggest that--even with so inadequate a human being--his "parts" are so absurdly less than the whole Stevie upon whom his sister places a supreme value.

Under Western Eyes (1911) begins with a scene of carnage: the assassination in St. Petersburg of a Russian official--a kind of political killer himself--responsible for the persecution and execution of the "rising generation" of opponents of the autocratic Russian regime (UWE 7). In the explosion of bombs, his coachman, several by-standers, one of the assassins, and two horses perish as well. Although Haldin, the surviving assassin, regrets the deaths of the bystanders, that he has had "to do this--reckless--like a butcher--in the middle of all those innocent people--scattering death," he says, "This is not murder--it is war, war," (UWE 22). By the time the novel ends, five more people have died. Haldin is captured and hanged, and his mother dies of grief. A coachman, found drunk when Haldin needs him, hangs himself. The death of the sham revolutionist, Madame de S., seemingly of natural causes, is announced on the last page. Serving as background for the events in the novel is Tekla's story of Andrei, a victim of the regime whom she nurses as he lies dying from injuries received in prison, a portent of the similar service she will perform for the crippled Razumov, who, as the novel ends, has not long to live.

The novel equates the "savage autocracy" of the Russian regime and the "divine democracy" advocated by its revolutionary opponents; each devours friends and

enemies alike while grandly offering false solutions which are finally irrelevant to the tragedy of human existence. Both groups of idealogues in Under Western Eyes are shown to be as mindlessly destructive of themselves as they are of others, and as are the rival colonial mercenaries in Heart of Darkness and An Outpost of Progress. Conrad implies that political violence is simply one of the ways the doomed human race cooperates with the deadly force of nature that is its enemy. Symbolic of this cooperation and yet an entirely plausible character in the context of this century's experience of international terrorism is the double agent, Necator, who deafens Razumov for reasons of his own. An executioner for the expatriate revolutionary group and for the imperial Russian state as well, he is a killer for whom all causes are irrelevant, an assassin for all seasons, and, like death in The Shadow-Line, the "common enemy" of all.

Given the history of his family and his native country, Conrad could not escape an interest in politics, but he saw utopian hopes for society as doomed by the realities of a human nature for which the struggle for power and a desire to revenge injury so often ends in murder--or in war. In February 1899, just after the completion of Heart of Darkness and while still writing Lord Jim, Conrad was asked by Cunninghame Graham to attend a peace meeting to promote

fraternity among nations. Conrad declined, expressing his scepticism about the possibility of fraternity even "amongst people living in the same street." He wrote:

What does fraternity mean. Abnegation--self-sacrifice means something. Fraternity means nothing unless the Cain-Abel business. Thats [sic] your true fraternity" (Letters 2:159).

Conrad's immediate association of the fraternal ideal with the biblical legend that the first man on earth to die was murdered by his brother reveals death as an ever-present element in his imagination. This preoccupation with fratricide also appears in the fiction. In Lord Jim, when Gentleman Brown first hears of Jim, he thinks perhaps they, two white men, can work together to exploit the natives. "They would work like brothers till . . . till the time came for a quarrel and a shot that would settle all accounts" (LJ 369). Such an incident actually takes place in An Outpost of Progress. In writing about Conrad's political novels, Irving Howe says that both Conrad's "philosophy" and his "political conservatism," while genuine, are "not finally organic to the work. "At every critical moment in his books, or in rare moments of relaxation, long repressed and discordant materials break through. . . ." (80). What breaks through overwhelmingly in the three novels discussed above is a pessimism concerning human institutions directly associated with Conrad's preoccupation with death. Seeing the ultimate

irrelevance of ideology, Conrad returns again and again to the cause of that irrelevance and cannot forget it. As Jacques Berthoud expresses it: the "political novelist concentrates on those ills that are capable of alleviation, the tragic novelist on those that are not" (21). Conrad sees in all political struggles the tragic self-destruction of fratricide, which seems at the same time absurd as the real war against humanity is being waged relentlessly by its alien enemy--the universe itself. The characters in all of Conrad's novels play out their roles against a background in which human striving for improvement seems ultimately to be made vain by the inevitable universality of death.

The Overshadowing Presence

Although death continues to play a significant role in most of the novels of Conrad's final disappointing decade, it is most central in the three late works that retain much of the imaginative power and psychological complexity evident in that published between 1897 and 1912 and potential if undeveloped in the first two novels. The narrator of The Secret Sharer (1912) forms a strong psychological bond with a fugitive murderer, and the story can be read as a para-Freudian fable of the recognition, acceptance, and sublimation of an anarchic and destructive force within

the psyche. The theme of death in The Shadow Line (1917) has already been discussed. Victory (1915) has the greatest toll of death among its leading characters of any Conrad novel. Out of thirteen characters, eight die. Captain Davidson says at the beginning of the brief final chapter: "Yes . . . there are more dead in this affair--more white people, I mean--than have been killed in many of the battles of the last Achin war" (V 408). The dead he speaks of are Heyst, Lena, Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro, who all die in a climactic denouement as violent as the last act of Hamlet. Earlier, Heyst's friend, Morrison, dies of natural causes in England, and Ricardo recounts the grisly details of the murder of Pedro's brother by Jones, who is depicted as a walking skeleton. As in The Shadow Line, a man already dead at the beginning of the novel plays a prominent part in the its events: Heyst's dead father whose "ghostly voice" with its contempt for life Heyst imagines he still hears (V 219). Like many Conrad characters, including Decoud in Nostromo and Winnie Verloc, in The Secret Agent, Heyst commits suicide.

Although the number of deaths that he scatters in a seemingly patternless profusion throughout his novels may be entirely plausible in a naturalistic sense, Conrad is not a naturalistic writer displaying the more unpleasant aspects of life and human behavior for their

own sake any more than he is a 'realist' claiming to present 'things as they are' by a recitation of events. As a natural phenomenon, death can be as much a 'given' in a created fictional world as is birth, hunger and thirst, sex, and illness; it is something that a novelist may utilize in many ways, depending upon his attitude toward his particular story and its circumstances. But Conrad does not take death for granted nor normalize it as merely one of the common events of life. Death is special in Conrad. He presents it again and again as a presence that overshadows and intrudes.

The "supreme moment"

Conrad places a particular emphasis on the reactions of his dying characters to the approach of death. Their encounter with death becomes a defining event, a "supreme moment" that seems to create an intensification of consciousness. The dying Willems experiences such a moment as, although hardly aware of the impact of Aissa's shot, he understands as never before "in that second, the joy, the triumphant delight of sunshine and of life" (OI 360). In all the major novels the reader is witness to such final scenes and often audience to the last words of the dying. Perhaps the best known of these last words are Kurtz's "The horror! The horror!," words that to the observing

Marlow have "the appalling face of a glimpsed truth" (HD 151). This "truth" may include not only Kurtz's belated recognition of the horrors in which he has participated but also a recognition of those manifest in Africa on every hand to which everyone but Marlow has heretofore seemed oblivious, thus forging a tie between them. At the approach of death, Kurtz's blindness to the glaring contradiction between his rhetoric and his actions dissolves "as though a veil had been rent," and he achieves "a supreme moment of complete knowledge" as he cries out "at some image, some vision" (HD 149). Although Kurtz cannot see the light of a nearby candle, his inner vision, it seems to Marlow, is "wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to embrace all the hearts that beat in darkness." (HD 151) This classic moment of recognition, indeed, of revelation, is perhaps the most all-embracing in any of the novels in Marlow's suggestion that Kurtz's vision transcends the darkness of his own inner void to include the dark heart of mankind and the universe itself. Conrad's emphasis on the isolation of the individual consciousness, however, suggests that Kurtz's vision can embrace only his own universe. Simone de Beauvoir's insight into the significance of her mother's death may be applied to Marlow's about the death of Kurtz: "Her death brings to light her unique quality; she grows as vast as the

world that her absence annihilates for her and whose whole existence was called by her being there. . ."

(94). At the moment of his death, Kurtz's self and his world coincide.

Conrad takes advantage of the dramatic possibilities of the deathbed scene in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" by his lengthy depiction of the death of James Wait extending over more than eight pages of text. Just as Wait's final words, "Light . . . the lamp . . . and . . . go," while the flame already is blazing parallels the inability of the dying Kurtz to see the light of the candle burning in his cabin, so his dying vision of horror seems to some extent a precursor to that of Kurtz.

His eyes were terrified as though he had been looking at unspeakable horrors; and by his face one could see that he was thinking of abominable things. Suddenly with an incredibly strong and heartbreaking voice he sobbed out:

"Overboard! . . . I! . . . My God! (NN 153)

Unlike Kurtz, however, Wait has never suffered from the conflicts of ambition and idealism that culminate in megalomania. His vision is not wide but narrow, focused on his sudden recognition of death's imminence and its consequences for him: his body thrown overboard to be swallowed by the cold sea, his precious self lost, his identity obliterated in its obscure depths. Like a child frightened by the menace of being shut up alone in the dark," he is "unbelieving, desolated"

(NN 153). His cry of horror and despair is, as Cecil Scrimgeour writes, "the individualist's and the romantic's protest against the extinction of consciousness" (351). Wait's fear, denial, and hostility are comparable with the emotions shown by the dying captain in The Shadow Line. His fantasy of a continued existence and his anticipation of the comforts of food and love strikingly illustrate the phenomenon of denial in the psychology of the dying, a denial that is symbolically underscored at his burial by the seeming reluctance of his corpse to slide down the plank into the sea.

Although one critic has suggested that Wait's "eventual death may be construed as psychogenic" (Young 75), Bernard Meyer, a psychoanalyst and presumably an authority on psychogenesis, is content to identify the novel's theme as "the grim spectacle of gradual death unfolded before the uncertain and anxious eyes of the ship's crew"; Meyer relates Wait's manner of death, not implausibly, to Conrad's memory of "the slow dying of his mother and later his father" of tuberculosis (20-21). Meyer's supposition is not really disproved by the fact that many of the details of the description of Wait's dying moments derive directly from a work by Maupassant (Kirschner (201-03), and Conrad's borrowings of specific language from the French text does not vitiate his achievement in English. The emotional

power present in the passages showing Wait's experience of the approach of death is genuinely Conradian, particularly in view of his powerful imaginative evocation of the final moments of other characters in other novels.

The piratical and conscienceless villain, Gentleman Brown, on his deathbed, bears a certain psychological resemblance to the dying Kurtz, who "had kicked himself loose of the earth. . . . had kicked the very earth to pieces." (HD 144). Brown, standing "at the gate of the other world in the guise of a beggar," says Marlow, "had slapped this world's face, he had spat on it. . . . I did not begrudge him this triumph in articulo mortis, this almost posthumous illusion of having trampled all the earth under his feet" (LJ 383-84). But while Kurtz's feelings of pride and power change to terror and despair, Brown's arrogance holds fast even as he lies, choking to death with asthma, on a couch in a "wretched hovel" in Bangkok gloating over the news of Jim's death (LJ 345). Marlow says:

His debilitated body shook with an exultation so vehement, so assured, and so malicious that it seemed to have driven off the death waiting for him in that hut. The corpse of his mad self-love uprose from rags and destitution as from the dark horror of a tomb. It is impossible to say how much he lied to Jim then, how much he lied to me now--and to himself always. (LJ 383)

Marlow adds that the evil he sees in Brown is "akin to madness, derived from intense egoism, inflamed by

resistance, tearing the soul to pieces, and giving factitious vigour to the body" (LJ 344). Although this description might be applied to Kurtz as well, Kurtz's dual soul retains the capacity to see and articulate a "truth" that overshadows his own self-love. Brown remains a liar, especially, as Marlow says, "to himself always." This identification as a liar, a traditional appellation of Satan, as much as his role in Jim's downfall, makes him, in Marlow's words, "a blind accomplice of the Dark Powers" and relates him to that other Satanic imitation, Victory's Mr. Jones (LJ 354). Although Brown is incapable of Kurtz's tragic recognition, he does nevertheless define himself by the story he tells Marlow on the last day of his life, just as Nostromo on his deathbed displays for the last time in its fullest flower his incorrigible vanity, self-service, obsession with reputation, and his greedy subjection to the power of the silver. In the same novel, Teresa Viola by her dying words, "The children, Gian' Battista! Save the children!," succinctly expresses the passions of her life--her possessive obsession with Nostromo and her concern for her daughters (N 340). In words that Michael Levenson applies to Kurtz's death, it may be said of all these characters that "only . . . on the point of death, in the utterance of one's last words, is the truth of the self disclosed" (9).

In the final moments of Lord Jim's life, surrounded by Doramin's people, he sends "right and left at all those faces a proud and unflinching glance" (LJ 416). Rejecting the alternatives of fight or flight, he dies a martyr to his honor--or is he a suicide who cannot face his guilt? Conrad leaves the answer uncertain, but the redemptive meaning of Jim's death for Jim is clear: he realizes in his last moments the heroic identity he has sought for a lifetime, even though, as Marlow suggests about Brierly's suicide, he may have persuaded himself to take a "flattering view" of a suicidal action (LJ 64). When what is called truth is partly convention and falsehood essentially sincere, as Marlow finds these abstractions to be (LJ 93), the subjectivity of Jim's conviction does not destroy its effective validity. In rationalizing his behavior on the Patna, Jim had said to Marlow, "It is all in being ready. I wasn't; not--not then" (LJ 81). When Jim faces Doramin's bullet he is at last ready to face death, and he knows it. For Jim, as for Hamlet, when he, too accepts his appointed fate, "the readiness is all." At the moment of his death Jim achieves a kind of epiphany that crystalizes both the romanticism and the futility of his life.

Conrad devotes four and a half pages of the thirteenth chapter of Victory to the death of Lena, who, like the African helmsman, scarcely knows that she

is dying. Yet, as Marlow is struck by the "intimate profundity of that look" the African gives him "when he received his hurt" (HD 119), Heyst looking at the dying Lena, seems "to read some awful intelligence in her eyes" (V 404) that contrasts to the "something inexplicable"--perhaps only "an abysmal emptiness," that was all he had been able to see there before (V 192). Even if Lena is not fully conscious of it, Heyst can read in her eyes some deep knowledge of the cost of the hazardous and quixotic strategy she had adopted to make him care for her. Marred as the episode is by the sentimentality and banality of some of its descriptive language, it is clear that at the moment of her death, Lena possesses a feeling of heroic magnanimity that, in her triumphal conviction that she has come to Heyst's rescue as he had come to hers, does not count the cost. It can be argued that such an epiphanic experience, the psychological equivalent of the deus ex machina of classical literature, expresses a mental phenomenon so enduring that it is not easily to be dismissed as worthless.

In depicting the death of those characters who have no time to realize fully what is happening to them but at most can only react to death with a reflex of denial or confusion, Conrad's interest remains with the consciousness of the individual, and he gives primacy to whatever inner experience there may be. Although in

The Secret Agent Stevie dies instantaneously, "blown to fragments in a state of innocence and in the conviction of being engaged in a humanitarian enterprise" (SA 200), as the Chief Inspector views Stevie's remains, he ponders "the inexplicable mysteries of conscious existence" and evolves "a horrible notion that ages of atrocious pain and mental torture could be contained between two successive winks of an eye," remembering that long dreams may be dreamed at the moment of waking and an entire life recalled by a drowning man as he sinks for the last time (SA 71). A comparable phenomenon actually takes place as Verloc dies. Although Verloc has not time enough "to move either hand or foot" before the knife is "already planted in his breast," it is enough to see "the moving shadow of an arm with a clenched hand holding a carving knife" that "flicker[s] up and down," to take in "the full meaning of the portent," to "taste the flavour of death rising in his gorge," and to determine on a "plan of defense" even as he dies, muttering "Don't" (SA 197). The sensational violence of the event is secondary to the consciousness of the dying victim and of his assailant as well in a scene that takes up an entire chapter.

The event of death is thus shown to be one that Conrad wants to make his readers not only "see" but feel as well. He attempts in the early novel, An

Outcast of the Islands, to express the shock and denial of one struck down by sudden death. Although Willems has anticipated with dread the likelihood of dying in the Malay wilderness, when death comes, he denies its reality. To use Ian Watts's phraseology, he stubbornly resists "decoding" his perceptions after being struck by Aissa's bullet.

He saw a burst of red flame before his eyes, and was deafened by a report that seemed to him louder than a clap of thunder. Something stopped him short, and he stood aspiring in his nostrils the acrid smell of the blue smoke that drifted from before his eyes like an immense cloud. . . . Missed, by Heaven! . . . Thought so! . . . And he saw her very far off, throwing her arms up, while the revolver, very small, lay on the ground between them. . . . Missed! . . . He would go and pick it up now. Never before did he understand, as in that second, the joy, the triumphant delight of sunshine and of life. His mouth was full of something salt and warm. He tried to cough; spat out. . . . Who shrieks: In the name of God, he dies!--he dies!--Who dies?--Must pick up--Night!--What? . . . Night already. . . . (OI 360)

Guerard, for one, has severely criticized the effectiveness as well as the aesthetic qualities of this particular passage (82). Conrad's early imperfections of technique, however, should not negate his achievement--an ambitious combination of impressionism with something very close to stream-of-consciousness as the reader experiences Willems's death both as observer and participant.

Marlow's African helmsman in Heart of Darkness, pierced by a spear before his eyes, also dies without saying a word, and neither are his thoughts revealed,

yet "the intimate profundity of that look he gave me," Marlow says, was "like a claim of distant kinship in a supreme moment" (HD 119). Marlow senses in the final few seconds of this man's life an inner awareness and an impulse to communicate and to inquire as he turns to look at Marlow "in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner" with his "lustrous and enquiring glance" (HD 111-12). It is as if he seeks the answer to some essential question that he has only now, at this moment, realized it is necessary to ask.

The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me. . . . I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some question in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound. . . . Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding, and menacing expression. The lustre of inquiring glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness. (HD 111-13 *passim*)

It is this moment of dissolution when the sense of a human presence fades between one breath and the next into the vacancy of death that holds for Conrad a continuing fascination.

Conrad's treatment of the state of mind of those of his characters who take their own lives is of particular interest because of his own youthful attempt at killing himself reported by his uncle. Three of these characters seem worthy of special mention because of the quality of austere pathos in the narration of

their final moments in lonely and silent surroundings: Brierly, having held "silent inquiry into his own case" while presiding at Jim's hearing, jumping into the sea at four in the morning, with his gold chronometer left hanging on the rail (LJ 58-61); Winnie Verloc, whose "strong vitality recoiled from the idea of death" (SA 204) mutely struggling with her alternatives on the dark deck of an almost empty Channel steamer: hanging as a murderer or drowning herself in the cold blackness of the waters below; Decoud, in the silence of a deserted island, beholding "the universe as a "succession of incomprehensible images" (N 496), dying of the "solitude [that] appeared like a great void" (N 498).

The suicides of Captain Brierly and Winnie Verloc arise from circumstances particular to them--the memory of a dishonorable action on one hand, the fear of the penalty for murder on the other--situations that each finds impossible to tolerate. Decoud's suicide results neither from any such action nor from the hopelessness of his situation but derives from a skepticism that becomes a complete detachment from the shared hopes and concerns that make up human life--a condition, more and more characteristic of the modern mind, that in the latter half of the twentieth century has come to be called 'alienation.' Decoud's death therefore has a

universal implication and a symbolic quality lacking in that of Winnie or Brierly.

Conrad's explanation that Decoud dies "from solitude and want of faith in himself and others," is not as normative and simplistic as it may appear. His solitude is more "a state of soul" than a matter of geographical location and his exile is that "of utter unbelief" (N 497). Such isolation destroys not only his sense of his own identity but his belief that he has any relationship with those he has left behind. Decoud's radical skepticism becomes a breach of Conrad's primary virtue of Fidelity, as he not only loses interest in the cause he has cynically served for his own ends but also abandons that most basic loyalty of all--loyalty to the self and the preservation of its life.

The ending of Decoud's life--its final few days and its last moments--is a powerful revelation of Conrad's conviction that mankind has no place in nature, "that we, living, are out of life, utterly out of it" (Letters 2:16). In his night journey through the blind darkness of the Placid Gulf, it is as if Decoud has crossed the dark universe itself to find himself altogether out of the human world. An intellectual, he is surrounded by the unconscious processes of nature in which the intellect seems an intrusive and irrelevant aberration. In the island's

profound silence, which, with the synesthesia of the artist or the madman, he envisions "like a tense, thin cord" from which he hangs, the implacable 'otherness' of nature overwhelms and absorbs him (N 498). He ceases to think; his consciousness retreats, and his actions become automatic, even the final firing of the gun. It is his hand that fires the shot, not Decoud, just as it is not Decoud but his eyes that look at the "dark, thin string" of silence.

They looked at it fixedly, while his hand, feeling about his waist, unbuttoned the flap of the leather case, drew the revolver, cocked it, brought it forward pointing at his breast, pulled the trigger, and, with convulsive force, sent the still smoking weapon hurtling through the air."
(N 500-01)

Decoud's center does not hold, and he becomes separated into his mindless parts. Paradoxically, this radical skeptic confronts the same void recognized by Kurtz, a man "who could get himself to believe anything" (HD 154). The silent neutrality of the deserted island finds out Decoud as the Congo's Darwinian "struggle for life" finds out Kurtz. Dying, Kurtz discovers his inner emptiness; discovering his inner emptiness, Decoud dies.

In describing the moment of death as a "supreme moment," Conrad draws on the long tradition of Western and Christian culture that in literature and art have

depicted it as a ritual event of great importance.³ From about the fourteenth or fifteenth century the idea had taken hold in Europe that at the moment of death one's whole life passed before the mind's eye and that the attitude and mental state at that moment would give the dying one's life "its final meaning, its conclusion" either as one reconciled oneself to a universally acknowledged higher power or failed to do so (Aires 38). The event of death retains this importance for Conrad, but the deathbeds of his characters are denied any association with the acceptance of such a higher reality or with the traditional emotions of remorse, reconciliation, consolation, and hope. In Conrad's world, this context for death has not only disappeared but is pointedly excluded. Kurtz, unlike Faust, with whom in his megalomania he might be compared, judges himself by the standards of his own ideals. God as supreme judge is as absent from Conrad's universe as God the creator and savior. In Lord Jim, no absolute arbiter pronounces judgment at the moment of Jim's death, even the author refusing the role. Jim has four judges: Marlow, the "privileged man," Jewel, and his faithful servant, Tamb' Itam, each of whom holds him to a different

³ The material in this paragraph on the attitudes toward death and the deathbed in Western culture derives from Philippe Aries, Western Attitudes Toward Death, especially pages 8-14 and 33-39.

standard and pronounces a different verdict. In Victory, although Lena dies "triumphant," flooded with rapture and "profoundly at peace," her dying triumph is an evanescent reality only to herself; it remains incomprehensible to Captain Davidson, and for Heyst it becomes an accusation.

In his concentration on the event of death and the thoughts of the dying, Conrad thus both affirms and denies tradition. The internal state of mind of the dying remains all important, but not as it acknowledges and reconciles itself to any higher reality but rather as it is able to embrace its own inner actuality, what Marlow calls in another connection "[y]our own reality--for yourself not for others--what no other man can ever know" (HD 85). Conrad affirms the existential idea that the meaning of life and death is self-created, and thus the moment of heightened consciousness preceding death is unique for each individual. Any "truth" recognized at that climactic moment is always "glimpsed" and is as partial and incomplete as human perception and understanding are limited. Willems only realizes too late the joy and delight of simple existence; the death-denying Wait comprehends at last his own extinction; Jim experiences an unarguable validation of the physical courage required of a fictional hero; Kurtz recognizes not only the grotesque union of his intentions and his crimes

but the absence at the core of his being of anything else; Decoud validates his skepticism by ceasing to believe in his own reality and that of a human world; Lena, who defines her existence by her relationship to Heyst, proves to herself her love and her value to him and her worthiness to be his consort by fulfilling the ultimate criteria of laying down her life.

Conrad saw human life, "if you take it to heart" as essentially tragic (Letters 2:17) and has Marlow define it in Heart of Darkness as "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" from which the most one can hope for is "some knowledge of yourself--that comes too late--a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (HD 150). Recalling his own almost fatal illness in Africa, Marlow suggests that the moment of death is somehow a unique segment of time. Although he had been "within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement," he found that, unlike Kurtz, he probably "would have nothing to say" (HD 151). The difference, he explains, is that Kurtz "had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot." He continues:

And perhaps this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. (HD 151)

Marlow's words suggest that consciousness somehow apprehends finality, that in the flow of perceptions that constitutes a human life, structure and meaning can only be discerned at the entirely arbitrary point at which the flow is suddenly blocked, and so a life can only form itself into a shape upon striking the impenetrable barrier of death. They suggest that only death permits the achievement of tragic anagnorisis, an insight adopted by Christianity from a tradition older and less forgiving than the Christian. Conrad would have agreed with the words of another modern skeptic and lapsed Catholic who stood by her mother's deathbed and afterwards wrote: "I understood, to the inmost fibre of my being, that the absolute could be enclosed within the last moments of a dying person" (Beauvoir 62-63).

The Authorial Voice

Death in Conrad's novels does not take place without authorial comment. The subject of death often arises in the text through an authoritative narrative voice or is reflected in the thoughts of a character. An instance of narrative commentary occurs in An Outcast of the Islands when a long passage interrupts the story a little more than halfway through the novel to generalize about "the man of purpose" who "grasps the reward of his perseverance, of his virtue, of his

healthy optimism: an untruthful tombstone over a dark and soon forgotten grave" (OI 197). This 'editorial' passage finds an echo almost twenty years later in Victory when a similar voice points out the recklessness of many aging men, "as if in defiance of the decay and death waiting with open arms in the sinister valley at the bottom of the inevitable hill" (V 94). Heyst expresses a parallel thought as he remembers that his father, serenely considering "the universal nothingness," had "plunged into it headlong, perhaps to render death, the answer that faced one at every inquiry, more supportable" (V 219). In The Secret Agent an omniscient narrator describes death as like night, "the inevitable reward of men's faithful labours in the earth" (SA 215); it is a thing of "finality" (SA 177) a "commonplace" (SA 221) whose "catastrophic character cannot be argued away by sophisticated reasoning or persuasive eloquence" (SA 174). "Death is "a remorseless spoliator" concurs the language teacher in Under Western Eyes, who seems an awkward mask for omniscience in that novel (UWE 112). Death is "that oblivion which is the last word of our common fate" to the Marlow of Heart of Darkness" (HD 155), and the Marlow of Chance (although he seems quite a different person) agrees that death, "the most intimate and final of subjects" (C 209) is "the very

condition of life," which itself is merely a "rapid blinking stumble across a flick of sunshine" (C 282-283).

Although in a letter to Cunninghame Graham Conrad once wrote that if mankind vanished altogether, it would be "[n]o great matter truly" (Letters 2:25), in the novels the value of life and the meaning of death seem the subject of a continuing meditation, dialectical in nature. Winnie Verloc entertains "no vain delusions on the subject of the dead. Nothing brings them back, neither love nor hate. They can do nothing to you. They are as nothing" (SA 200). Razumov modifies this thought when he discovers that "the dead can live only with the exact intensity and quality of life imparted to them by the living" (UWE 304). Charles Gould would grant this premise but at the same time points out the "irreparable change a death makes in the course of our daily thoughts" and the "enormous changes the death of any given individual may produce in the very aspect of the world" (N 65-66).

This dialectical interplay of ideas reflects the conflict of two viewpoints both of which are to some extent valid. On the one hand, the death of an individual is nothing to the anarchistic Professor in The Secret Agent or to the historical processes shown to be unfolding in Nostromo and Under Western Eyes, and, above all, it is nothing to nature. On the other

hand, the novels imply that with each individual death a unique consciousness disappears from the world. Conrad once wrote in an essay of his belief that the only "object" of the universe was to serve as a spectacle and that "unwearied self-forgetful attention to every phase of the living universe reflected in our consciousness may be our appointed task on this earth" (PR 92). Since only human consciousness can be aware of this spectacle, a unique fragment of which each individual perceives, each eye closed forever must represent a tiny but irreplaceable loss from the synthesis of perceptions that make up the human reality.

What Decoud forgets in the solitude of the deserted island on which he dies is that every death represents such a loss, although he has previously acted on its premise when he takes time to write his sister what may be a final letter. Just before he is to begin his fatal voyage with Nostromo, having just left the bedside of the slowly dying Avellanos, he sits downstairs at Viola's inn where he finds that "the ubiquitous death is also waiting" (N 236). As the dying Teresa Viola also feels "the chill, black breath of the approaching end" (N 254), Decoud is acutely conscious that he himself is "under the hovering wing of death in this silent house buried in the black of night, with this dying woman. . . (N 249). Pondering

his dangerous mission, he feels the need to communicate an explanation of his feelings and actions. The omniscient narrator comments:

In the most sceptical heart there lurks at such moments, when the chances of existence are involved, a desire to leave a correct impression of the feelings, like a light by which the action may be seen when personality is gone, gone where no light of investigation can ever reach the truth which every death takes out of the world. (N 230; emphasis added)

As Decoud waits alone in the void of nature on a deserted island in the Placid Gulf, his skeptical heart can no longer remember that every death takes out of the world a truth, and this forgetting destroys him. The bars of silver he places in his pockets to sink his body to the bottom of the Gulf represent not only the "material interests" for which so much has been sacrificed but also, in a larger sense, the material world itself--the world of nature that has appalled him by its silent indifference in the solitude of the Great Isabel. It is this apparent triumph of the material world over human personality that Conrad repeatedly records and laments.

Although it was stated earlier that there is only one death in The Nigger of the "Narcissus," a closer reading reveals that this is not, after all, entirely accurate. In its final paragraph, the incidence of death in the novel becomes almost one hundred per cent: except for the narrator and Donkin (whom Conrad depicts

as a despised and eternally enduring type), all of the members of the crew are described as dead men; they are "a crew of Shades" (NN 173). Seen by some critics as hazily sentimental although rich in characteristically Conradian political and sociological implications, the final three paragraphs function as a poetic coda that builds to an elegaic climax having great resonance in Conrad's later work. As "the sea of life thunder[s] into their ears" on the streets of London, the crew of the Narcissus appear to be "creatures . . . lost, alone, forgetful, and doomed . . . like mad castaways making merry in the storm and upon an insecure ledge of a treacherous rock" (NN 172). "The dark knot of seamen drifted in sunshine"; they "drifted out of sight," says the narrator; "I never saw them again. The sea took some, the steamers took others, the graveyards of the earth will account for the rest." Conrad emphasizes the finality of this parting:

. . . I never saw one of them again. But at times the spring-flood of memory sets with force up the dark River of the Nine Bends. Then on the waters of the forlorn stream drifts a ship--a shadowy ship manned by a crew of Shades. They pass and make a sign, in a shadowy hail. (N 173)

By the poetic imagery of this passage that speaks of the ancients' land of the dead and evokes memory as a driving creative power that brings the dead to life, Conrad gives his story about a group of seamen and their shipmate who dies reluctantly among them on a

particular ship at the end of the nineteenth century a universal dimension. In this image of engendering and rebirth, memory is the father of Conrad's muse. The final lines that tell these men goodbye remembers them "tossing aloft, invisible in the night" giving back "yell for yell to a westerly gale"--exultantly defying the powers of nature that doom them (N 173). One may apply to this novel words that Conrad uses to praise the indeterminacy of the endings of Henry James's novels: "You remain with the sense of the life still going on; and that even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence . . . when the last word has been read" (NLL 19). To evoke in memory this living "presence of the dead" is for Conrad to deny death its final triumph.

Chapter Three

The Surrounding Vision:
Conrad's Imagery of Death

A sudden little river crossed my path
 As unexpected as a serpent comes.

 So petty yet so spiteful! all along,
 Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;
 Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit
 Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:

 Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,
 Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth
 Desperate and done with.
 Bog, clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth.
Robert Browning

The underlying theme of death suggested by its incidence in Conrad's novels, his emphasis on the consciousness of the dying, and his authorial commentary also reveals itself in complex patterns of imagery in which a strong appeal to the visual imagination encounters an insistence that all appearances are illusory. If the "aspect of the world" is an "enigmatical spectacle" whose truth is to be found only within the artist himself (Introd. NN xi-xii), then any description of the world in a creative work must be inescapably subjective. Conrad's own subjectivity, dominated by thoughts of death, reveals itself in his use of symbolic images from nature, of memento mori and personifications of death, his

fascination with the ideas of emptiness and impenetrability, and his evocations of the cosmic and the occult.

Landscapes of Death

Marlow's describes his journey up the African river into the heart of darkness as

. . . like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, and impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. (HD 92-93)

Gathered in this passage are examples of natural imagery that recur throughout Conrad's fiction: water, trees and vegetation, sunlight, and silence--neutral components of the natural world that in the novels consistently form a negative and most often a deadly context to their action. Indeed, Marlow continues this passage by mythologizing his encounter with the wilderness of nature in terms of the biblical fall of man:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. (HD 95).

According to Genesis, the anguish and toil with which the first of men would have to till the cursed ground was secondary to its most important consequence: death.

The prospect of death, unspoken here but permeating the novel, is a context ever-present both in Conrad's imagery of nature and in all of his imaged fictional world.

This context emerges at the beginning of Heart of Darkness, set on a peaceful evening in the Thames estuary, when Marlow suddenly begins speaking of the wilderness of early Britain as having been "one of the dark places of the earth," making plain that one of the things contributing to its darkness had been the presence of death (HD 48). He immediately begins by talking about the death rate in such a place, speaking of the "[s]and-banks, marshes, forests, savages" in terms that might have been used of Vologda, his childhood place of exile--"cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death--death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here" (HD 49). Only then does he begin to muse on "the utter savagery" that at the same time has "the fascination of the abomination" closing around "a decent young citizen in a toga" in anticipation of his impending tale of the moral collapse of the idealistic agent of imperialism, Kurtz, in Africa (HD 50). Important as this subject is in the novel, Conrad's preoccupation with death in this passage and others reveals a separate concern. Like the wilderness of the forests in the two earliest novels and in "An Outpost

of Progress," both ancient Britain and the African wild are settings that nakedly reveal the precarious state of human life in the natural world.

Marlow's journey to Africa is as full of foreboding as is the journey of Browning's Childe Roland, and his description of its coastline seems as deeply subjective as is the imagined landscape in that poem:

We called at some more places with farcical names, where the merry dance of death and trade goes on in a still and earthy atmosphere as of an overheated catacomb; all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders; in and out of rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe at us in the extremity of an impotent despair. Nowhere did we stop long enough to get a particularized impression, but the general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares. (HD 62)

The "weary pilgrimage" of Marlow's quest takes place against a landscape that despite its abundant vegetation is as pervaded by signs of death as the "ominous tract which, all agree,/ Hides the Dark Tower" in Browning's poem. And the "lurking death" in "the forest, the creek, the mud, the river" through which he passes is just as identified with evil, a "hidden evil," a "profound darkness" (HD 92) that as suddenly discloses itself in the severed heads surrounding Kurtz's house. Marlow's journey through the Congo resembles one of those "literal journeys through actual

places, which modulate easily into symbolic landscapes traversed by a metaphorical wayfarer" that M. H. Abrams associates with Wordsworth's journey through the Alps in The Prelude (285).

Like Childe Roland, most of Conrad's protagonists are doomed men, set down in environments that are revealed to be landscapes of death. The anti-heroes of his first two novels, *Almayer* and *Willems*, play out their failed lives in the midst of a fecund but deadly forest where the exuberant tropical vegetation "seems to be all grace of colour and form, all brilliance, all smiles, but is only the blossoming of the dead" (OI 70). These early novels introduce imagery of death that Conrad uses repeatedly in his later fiction. The treacherous role played by the forest and vegetation is in other novels assumed by the sea and the weather; in each instance these images represent the paradox of the apparently sustaining yet essentially destructive forces of nature.

The following passage from Lord Jim about a storm at sea describes nature almost as the purposeful enemy of mankind possessing "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 . . . which means to smash, to destroy, to annihilate all he has seen, known, loved, enjoyed, or hated; all that is priceless and necessary--the

sunshine, the memories, the future,--which means to sweep the whole precious world utterly away from his sight by the simple and appalling act of taking his life.¹ (LJ 10-11)

The passage above uses the stormy sea as a synecdoche for nature itself, a "complication of accidents" inimical to mankind, an unconscious power whose implacability can only be viewed by the human ego as hostile. In a like way, in The Shadow-Line, "all the winds, and all the seas" are but the visible aspect of the greater "immensity that receives no impress, preserves no memories, and keeps no reckoning of lives" (SL 53). The death of a human being is not simply an unfortunate but inevitable event but an "appalling act" of a hostile force. For Conrad, human consciousness radically divorces mankind from nature. Again, he would agree with Beauvoir:

There is no such thing as a natural death: nothing that happens to a man is ever natural, since his presence calls the world into question. All men must die: but for every man, his death is an accident and, even if he knows it and consents to it, an unjustifiable violation. (106)

Just as in Heart of Darkness he mythologizes Marlow's experience of Africa as like an exiled Adam's encounter with a fallen world, in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' Conrad universalizes the ordeal of the ship and her

¹It is interesting to find a parallel to this passage from Conrad in Jung's chapter on "The Soul and Death" from his Wirklichkeit der Seele in which he speaks of "that dark wall, which threatens to swallow up irretrievably all I love, desire, possess, hope, and strive for. . . ." (213; qtd. in another context by Choron in Death and Modern Man 81).

crew on the night of the storm. Shifting into the present tense, the narrator characterizes "such nights of a culminating gale,"--a common experience that "most seamen remember"--in apocalyptic terms:

Nothing seems left of the whole universe but darkness, clamour, fury--and the ship. And like the last vestige of a shattered creation she drifts, bearing an anguished remnant of sinful mankind, through the distress, tumult, and pain of an avenging terror. (NN 54)

Exacerbating the demoralization the seamen experience because of their identification with a dying man, the violent storm's assault gives them additional proof of the fragility of their lives. Although the symbolic burial and rescue of James Wait occur during the storm and because of it, some critics have difficulty seeing the connection between the storm episode and the story of Wait. The storm's assault on the ship and its physical and psychological effect on Singleton, however, parallels the inexorable progress of Wait's disease. The bodily disintegration of Wait, the near-mutiny of the crew, and the threatening chaos of the storm differ only in scale as signs of the entropic forces that dominate Conrad's universe. Like The Shadow-Line and "The Secret Sharer," this novel reveals what often appears to be Conrad's ideal masculine world of seamen secure aboard ship against the corruption of the land as a microcosm vulnerable to an internal entropy that reflects the mortal fate of its individual

members. As David Thorburn points out, Conrad's characters are consistently threatened with both "psychic disintegration" and "literal annihilation":

The illusion, the mistake, even (most frightenly) the mischance of calm or storm over which man has no control--these things can not only maim or undermine a man's sense of himself and his commitments in life, they can, quite simply, kill him. (164-65)

In The Shadow-Line, the forces of nature, creating both fever and a "dead calm" that immobilizes the ship seem to ally themselves with its dead captain who had hoped that the ship and its crew would never reach a harbor (SL 99). With the seamen "moving in poisoned air" and the First Mate "an animated skeleton," the new captain begins to feel that only a "purposeful malevolence" can account for the sudden capricious breeze that sends the ship off course and then as suddenly ceases, and he senses a hostile intention in the "brooding stillness of the world" (SL 86-87, 101). Projecting a vision of death and decay onto the sky itself, he perceives "something going on in the sky like a decomposition, like a corruption of the air," although his reason tells him that what he sees are "mere clouds, which may or may not hold wind or rain" (SL 106). His imagination inflates the local weather condition that becalms the ship into a cosmic catastrophe: with a kind of paranoid hyperbole, he sees it as like "the end of all things," a "foretaste of annihilation" (SL 108).

When rain extinguishes the binnacle lamps, he imagines that the "last gleam of light in the universe had gone" (SL 114). In this novel as in others, nature is not mere setting but a active participant in events. Whether synecdochically seen as landscape or seascape, violent in storm or treacherous in tranquility, or suggested by the insidious process of disease, its role is consistently symbolic of the macrocosm that Conrad views as alien to human life.

As large a part as the untamed natural world plays in creating the environment of death in Conrad's fiction, almost any setting may convey an ominous and alien atmosphere. Death's presence is suggested not only in the wildernesses of the forest and the sea but everywhere. It haunts descriptions of Brussels, London, St. Petersburg, Geneva, and the imaginary South American town of Sulaco with its luxuriant orange gardens, placid gulf and sheltering mountain. In the heart of London, Adolf Verloc of The Secret Agent feels "the latent unfriendliness of all out of doors" in the "black, wet, muddy, inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates, and stones, things in themselves unlovely and unfriendly to man" (SA 48). Winnie Verloc senses that the "silent and deserted" street outside her window takes "sides" with her husband, whom she believes has murdered her brother. Her "entrance into the open air" is like "a foretaste of drowning" as

"a slimy dampness" envelopes her (SA 202). In Under Western Eyes, Razumov feels the snow-covered ground of St. Petersburg under his feet as "inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding sheet" (a description that resonates with Conrad's own childhood experience of his mother's death in Russia) (UWE 32-33).

Conrad's most extreme projection of death onto an urban setting as well as on the wilderness occurs in Heart of Darkness in his depiction of the city where Marlow begins his journey to the Congo. With the biblical allusion, "a whited sepulchre," he mocks the hypocrisy of an imperialism that disguises a ruthless and rapacious greed behind a facade of noble ideals. Yet the city's "sepulchral" quality cannot be entirely attributed to its identity as the "door" to the moral darkness and physical dangers of the Congo alone. The ominous portents of death Marlow perceives at the offices of the Company in Brussels--the "deadly" river on the map, the "dead silence," the "grass sprouting between the stones"--all have their parallels as images of death in the other novels. The "skinny forefinger" that beckons to him will appear again in The Secret Agent in the "skinny hand" of Karl Yundt and in Under Western Eyes in the "skeletal hand" of Madame de S--. The classical allusion implicit in the presence of the two women "guarding the door of Darkness, knitting

black wool as for a warm pall" lends a universal significance to the images of death in Heart of Darkness, as do the Latin words of farewell, Morituri te salutant, inserted at the end of this episode (HD 55-57). Such language not only refers to the particular nature of Marlow's destination in this novel but sounds a leitmotiv of death that recurs in the others.

Similarly, what Guerard calls the "mortuary images" (118) in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" are more than merely portents of the fatal outcome of James Wait's disease or the near-capsizing of the ship in the storm. Death's presence is latent in the very structure of a ship whose captain rises "out of the darkness of the companion" like "a phantom above a grave" (30), where berths resemble "narrow niches for coffins in a whitewashed and lighted mortuary" (8), yawn "black, like graves tenanted by uneasy corpses" (22) in a forecastle as "quiet as a sepulcher" in "the gloom of a crypt" (129). The omniscient narrator of the beginning of Lord Jim similarly describes the Patna as a place of death even before the accident, its sleeping passengers either doomed or dead already (even though in the actual event not one will even be injured). Lying on the deck of the ship, they are "all equal before sleep, death's brother," one with his throat stretched out "as if offering itself to the

knife," another "covered from head to foot like a corpse" (LJ 18). After the collision (of which they remain unaware), they resemble bodies "laid out for death" (LJ 105). Jim himself, "overburdened by the knowledge of an imminent death" (LJ 85) is "a doomed man aware of his fate, surveying the silent company of the dead. They were dead. Nothing could save them!" (LJ 86). Conrad evokes death in such passages as a potential emanant in the very structure of the visible world. In dramatic terms, it is as if the varying sets of every play in Conrad's theatre were set against the fixed backdrop of a graveyard.

"Trees, trees, millions of trees. . . ."

The "big, dead logs and whole uprooted trees" drifting down the river on the second page of Almayer's Folly become a recurring image of death in that novel, and trees and logs continue to convey this symbolism in much of the subsequent fiction. In this earliest novel, logs and uprooted trees appear eight or more times, and a pivotal scene reveals a human corpse entangled among them. A related image of a dead tree and a dead man entwined together appears in An Outcast of the Islands as well, as Willems, abandoned by Lingard and trapped in a remote village in the Malay forest, watches the "big logs and uprooted trees" drift down the river to the sea and desperately imagines

fastening himself "between the dead branches" and so escaping. But his courage fails him.

He had a terrible vision of shadowless horizons where the blue sky and the blue sea met . . . a circular and blazing emptiness where a dead tree and a dead man drifted together, endlessly, up and down, upon the brilliant undulations of the straits. No ships there. Only death. And the river led to it. (OI 330).

If one recalls this imagery of dead trees in the first two novels, one recognizes that, in Lord Jim, Marlow's description of Jim as "hugging his secret, which was known to the very up-country logs on the river" subtly underscores the idea that Jim's disgrace is a kind of symbolic death (LJ 198). Marlow again associates trees with death in that novel by his seemingly gratuitous remark that "a man's more intense life makes his death more touching than the death of a tree . . ." (LJ 223).

Even living trees paradoxically represent death and decay. In the Malay forest, the "merciless creepers" cling "to the big trunks in cable-like coils," carrying "death to their victims in an exulting riot of silent destruction"; in the "unrelieved gloom, where lay entombed and rotting, countless generations of trees," their successors stand "as if mourning, in dark green foliage, immense and helpless, awaiting their turn" (AF 165, 167). For Willems, the immense trees surround him like "a giant crowd of pitiless enemies pressing round silently to witness his slow

agony" (OI 329). In a long passage extending over a page in length, Willems imagines himself lying dead in the forest and sees "death looking at him from everywhere":

He saw the horrible form among the big trees, in the network of creepers, in the fantastic outlines of leaves, of the great indented leaves that seemed to be so many enormous hands with broad palms, with stiff fingers outspread to lay hold of him; hands gently stirring, or hands arrested in a frightful immobility, with a stillness attentive and watching for the opportunity to take him, to enlase him, to strangle him, to hold him till he died; hands that would hold him dead, that would never let go, that would cling to his body for ever till it perished--disappeared in their frantic and tenacious grasp." (OI 331).

Although Jocelyn Baines cites this passage, among others, as an example of Conrad's overwriting (163), its very overwrought quality testifies to the intensity of feeling the subject of death inspired in the author's imagination. Similarly, the African forest, a "great wall of vegetation," becomes a potential threat in Heart of Darkness--ready "to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence" (HD 98). In Victory, the trees on the desolate island of Samburan are equally ominous. Not only the "black stumps of trees" that stand charred, "miserable and sinister" in the company's clearing, but also "the shades of the forest" that surround Lena with "a sullen, dumb, menacing hostility" in which she feels "the nearness of death breathing on her and on the man with her" (V 217, 353). A recognition of the invariable association of

trees and death in Conrad is essential in understanding the significance of Heyst's attempt to send Lena to hide in the dark forest, clothed in black and purple, the traditional colors of mourning. Although his conscious motive is to save her, symbolically he renounces both Lena and life itself by this act. In sending Lena into the forest, he is abandoning her to death.

The "long grass, the burnt grass. . . ."

Conrad's images of grass and flowers derive symbolic power from Biblical language directly associating them with the ephemerality of human life, as in Isaiah 40.6, "All flesh is grass," and Psalms 103.15-16:

As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For wind passeth over it and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more.

In The Secret Agent, as Verloc makes plans for life after his expected imprisonment, there is a direct allusion to the Isaiah passage: "A quiet life it must be and, as it were, nestling in the shade, concealed among men whose flesh is grass, modest, like the life of violets" (SA 189). Verloc's murder shortly thereafter, which makes for him a very quiet future indeed, fulfills this portent of death. Three apparently innocuous references to "the long grass" in

Almayer's Folly, associated with the general neglect and decay of Almayer's property, are echoed in the succeeding novel in an unambiguous symbolism of death. Willems envisions himself dead in the forest and eaten by insects until "there would remain nothing but the white gleam of bleaching bones in the long grass; in the long grass that would shoot its feathery heads between the bare and polished ribs" (OI 332). A few pages later, imagery of grass again appears:

Willems' gaze roamed over the ground and then he watched with idiotic fixity half a dozen black ants entering courageously a tuft of long grass which, to them, must have appeared a dark and dangerous jungle. Suddenly he thought: There must be something dead in there. Some dead insect. Death everywhere! He closed his eyes again, in an access of trembling pain. Death everywhere-- wherever one looks. (OI 342)

The place of Willems's assignations with Aissa to which she keeps returning after his death is "a kind of grassy glade" (OI 365-66). There, in "Nature's workshop," Willems throws himself down "in the grass" surrounded by the "big trunks" of trees splashed with sunlight through which the heat pours, wrapping him up "in the soft and odorous folds of air heavy with the faint scent of blossoms and with the acrid smell of decaying life" (OI 74). In these early novels, there is a consistent association of blossoms with decay, as flowers as well as trees and grass act as symbols of mortality. In Almayer's Folly, "a faint and sickly perfume as of decaying flowers" surrounds Almayer's

crumbling house (AF 16) and around the house of his enemy Lakamba "the smell of decaying blossoms" mingles with "acrid smoke from the cooking fires" eddying "under the leafy boughs" and clinging "about the burnt-up grass" (AF 131-32). Parasitical plants clinging to "doomed trees" feed "on the dead and the dying alike . . . crowning their victims with pink and blue flowers . . . " (AF 167). When lovers meet with "immense red blossoms sending down on their heads a shower of great dew-sparkling petals that descended rotating slowly in a continuous and perfumed stream," this lovely image is immediately vitiated by the passage quoted in Chapter One in which "the intense work of tropical nature" is disclosed as "plants shooting upward, entwined . . . climbing madly and brutally over each other," springing out of "death and decay" (AF 71). Typical is one of the four references to decaying flowers in An Outcast of the Islands that describes Almayer's boat traveling up "a sombre creek of black water" enveloped in "the pungent acrid smell of rotting leaves, of flowers, of blossoms and plants dying in that poisonous and cruel gloom . . . amongst the everlasting and invincible shadows (OI 324).

In Heart of Darkness, when Marlow finds the remains of his predecessor, Fresleven, "the grass growing through his ribs was tall enough to hide his bones" (HD 54). As Guerard observes, although Conrad's

symbolic use of the "menace of vegetation" is limitless, it is especially evident in Heart of Darkness in the "images of deathly immobilization in grass," and this critic is surely right when he suggests that Marlow's aversion to the "darkness of passivity" may be connected to "a radical fear of death, that other darkness" (47). Loaded references associating grass with death appear at least ten times. In addition to the grass in the streets of the sepulchral city, that growing through the ribs of Marlow's predecessor, the crawling Kurtz's "broad trail through the grass," and the dead carrier "at rest in the long grass," all mentioned by Guerard, one might note the incantatory repetition in Marlow's description of the paths "through the long grass, through the burnt grass" associated with the depopulation of the colonized area (HD 70), the river's snatching away of Marlow's dead helmsman "as though he had been a wisp of grass" (HD 120), Kurtz's decaying house circled by severed heads on poles "half-buried in the high grass" (HD 121), and the procession bearing the stretcher with the dying Kurtz wading "waist deep in the grass" (HD 133).

In other novels, even seemingly casual references to long grass or trees acquire a sinister resonance because of the cumulative effect of such imagery in the novels in which it most obviously appears in the

context of death. One example is the passing allusion to "the silky swish and rustle of the long grass" in Lord Jim, as Jim, having killed one would-be assassin, drives the others before him at gun point (LJ 303). The episode in which Marlow visits Jewel's mother's grave shows dramatic and effective use of the imagery of both grass and trees to symbolize death. As he walks toward the grave, he finds that "the few big trees had been felled, the undergrowth had been cut down and the grass fired." In the "mournful, eclipse-like light" of the moon at the bottom of the chasm, Marlow says, "the stumps of felled trees uprose very dark, the heavy shadows fell at my feet on all sides . . . and across my path the shadow of a solitary grave. . . ." Concrete images from nature combine with more abstract impressions of darkness and stillness naturally evocative of death:

"The lumps of white coral shone round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls, and everything around was so quiet that when I stood still all sound and all movements in the world seemed to come to an end.

It was a great peace, as if the earth had been one grave . . ." (LJ 322-23).

Just as Aissa, who kills Willems, is associated with the "grassy glade" in An Outcast of the Islands, so here in Lord Jim Cornelius, whose treachery leads to Jim's death, bolts "vermin-like, from the long grass growing in a depression of the ground" (LJ 323)

In Victory, Mr. Jones, a personification of death, appears "enclosed by the stalks of tropical grass, almost as slender as a stalk of grass himself" (V 242). Heyst's house is surrounded by tall grass running wild until, in his absence, Wang clears it by burning, leaving a black stubble that foreshadows the fire that in the end will consume Heyst's and Lena's bodies. Such imagery of grass parallels that of "scorched and withered grass" in Nostromo in which dying men lie "on the hillsides, in the long grass, in the gloom of the forests" (N 26, 103). Cattle stand "breast-deep in grass" as the silver from the mine is transported through the campo in which the "running waves of grass" conceal rotting ox-hides (N 203). There are "bunches of grass growing at the top" of the ancient, decayed town gate of Sulaco, a relic of the dying Spanish culture (N 173). The boat that carries Decoud and Nostromo on their fatal journey moves on the waters of the Gulf "[n]ot so fast as a crawling beetle tangled in the grass" (N 263). Nostromo, returned to Sulaco, sleeps in grass, "lying still as a corpse," awakens and rises "full length from his lair in the long grass" to find a vulture waiting nearby (N 413, 411). The doomed Decoud rests in a "lair of coarse grass" on the Great Isabel near the tree under which the silver is buried (N 496). Nostromo is fatally wounded under this same

tree, which casts "a large blotch of black shade upon the grass" (N 553).

The Destructive Elements

Although it might seem paradoxical that the trees, grass, and flowers that signal the presence of the water and sunlight that are the sources of life should be used as symbols of death, Conrad uses water and sunlight themselves in the same way. The flowing river in the first two novels carries dead logs and dead men and leads to the deadly sea. In The Nigger of the "Narcissus," the stormy sea makes for the ship "roaring wildly . . . like a madman with an axe" while the tranquil sea deceives, its "glittering surface" hiding its "lightless depths" (NN 57, 155). The smooth waters through which the Patna moves in Lord Jim conceal beneath their surface what Marlow calls "wandering corpses," like the derelict craft that tears a hole in the ship's hull, "a kind of maritime ghoul on the prowl to kill ships in the dark" (LJ 159).

Conrad exploits the ambiguity of water as a traditional symbol of both life and death most conspicuously in Lord Jim in the famous "to the destructive element submit yourself" passage (LJ 214). The negative aspect of water predominates here, however, as it does in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and The Shadow-Line. Falling rain for Conrad, is never

a "gentle rain from heaven," but consistently a destructive force. A pouring rainstorm descends as Jim prepares to leave the shelter of Marlow's room after the hearing at which he loses his certificate--"a sweeping flood with a sound of unchecked overwhelming fury" that brings to Marlow's mind "the images of collapsing bridges, of uprooted trees, of undermined mountains" while the waterpipe outside the room gurgles "in odious ridicule of a swimmer fighting for his life" (LJ 181). In An Outcast of the Islands, a sudden tropical rainstorm cuts off Willems's respiration, dashing at him "as if flung from all sides by a mob of infuriated hands."

An insane dread took possession of him, the dread of all that water around him . . . water that pressed him on every side . . . that drove across his face in wavering sheets which gleamed pale red with the flicker of lightning streaming through them, as if fire and water were falling together, monstrously mixed, upon the stunned earth. (OI 283-84)

Similarly, the sudden cloudburst in The Shadow Line that extinguishes the binnacle lamps also fills the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth of the narrator as if to extinguish him as well. The deafened (and symbolically murdered) Razumov is tossed out into a drenching rainstorm in which he wanders, "like a lost mortal in a phantom world," until he is run over by a tramcar (UWE 370)

The following passage describing the voyage of the Patna reveals Conrad's almost perverse imposition of negative imagery associated with death on a seemingly neutral, natural scene of calm water and clear skies:

She held on straight for the Red Sea under a serene sky, under a sky scorching and unclouded, enveloped in a fulgor of sunshine that killed all thought, oppressed the heart, withered all impulses of strength and energy. And under the sinister splendour of that sky the sea, blue and profound, remained still, without a stir, without a ripple, without a wrinkle--viscous, stagnant, dead. . . . the ship, lonely under a wisp of smoke, held on her steadfast way black and smouldering in a luminous immensity, as if scorched by a flame flicked at her from a heaven without pity. (LJ 15-16).

Like the tranquil sea, the sun, traditionally a positive symbol of creation, here becomes a symbol of destruction; the "splendour" of an unclouded sky here is "sinister. In An Outcast of the Islands, "the sun of unclouded skies . . . dazzles and withers" (OI 72). At best it is ambiguous, both "beneficent and wicked--the giver of light, perfume, and pestilence" (OI 248). At worst it is an engine of destruction, its "light, brilliant, crude, heavy, lying on a dead land like a pall of fire" (OI 187) like "the consuming, passionate blaze of sunshine" in Victory, "all aquiver with the effort to set the earth on fire, to burn it to ashes" (V 305). In the latter novel, the "pale blinding infinity" of "all that water and all that light" of sea and sky together make Lena's "head swim" and her "heart sink" in loneliness, as if "everything that there is

had gone under" in a universal deluge. For her, the character in that novel who most represents life, the "empty space" of sky and water seems "the abomination of desolation" (V 190-91).

Although Conrad's use of the imagery of sunset to represent death is traditional, no gently elegaic tone implies acceptance of the passing of life as part of the natural cycle of light and darkness. The emphasis lies not so much on the disappearance of light as the resemblance of the crimson hue of the descending sun to blood, with its connotation of the violence of murder and war. In An Outcast of the Islands, the setting sun is an evil omen for Willems, its "bright red flush, like a splash of warm blood." It seems "ominous and ghastly with a foreboding of violent death that [beckons] him from everywhere--even from the sky" (OI 335). In Lord Jim, on the day Jim dies, the sky over Patusan is "blood-red, immense, streaming like an open vein" above the "black and forbidding face" of the forest below (LJ 413). In Nostromo, as Dr. Monygham walks toward the custom house where he will discover the body of the murdered Hirsch, the "great mass of cloud filling the head of the gulf" has "long red smears amongst its convoluted folds of grey and black, as of a floating mantle stained with blood" (N 411). In Victory, the setting sun bathes the clouds "in a mist of blood," and a "crimson crack like an open

wound" zigzags between Heyst and Lena, "with a piece of dark red sun showing at the bottom" (V 355). As Yelton points out, the placing of human events within a cosmic framework is for Conrad "an ineluctable modality of his vision of the human, as it was with the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists" (167). There is, however, a difference in Conrad's linking of human life with the cosmos. Although such passages might seem to derive from the older literature in which nature, created by God along with man, reflects and responds to human actions, in Conrad they suggest quite a different context. Conrad's cosmic imagery shows nature not as a reflection but as a source, itself the creator and destroyer, the origin and abettor of human violence and death.

"These round knobs were . . . symbolic"

Reinforcing the paradox of his life-denying natural imagery, Conrad uses a technique of emphasis through repetition of certain phrases referring to death or to something dead. An early example of such a memento mori, involving actual death's-heads, occurs in Heart of Darkness when Marlow realizes that what had appeared to be a round, carved ball at the top of a fence post in front of Kurtz's house is really a severed head, "black, dried, sunken, with closed eyelids,--a head that seemed to sleep at the top of

that pole . . . smiling continuously at some endless and jocose dream of that eternal slumber" (HD 130-31). As Marlow surveys the other posts he sees that they, too, are topped by severed heads. "These round knobs were not ornamental but symbolic . . . food for thought and also for vultures" (130-31). For several pages, Marlow's narration continues to return to the subject of "those heads on stakes," "these heads," "the head," "these . . . symbols," "those heads drying on the stakes," "these heads . . . the heads of rebels," those "rebellious heads . . . on their sticks," "the symbolic row of stakes" (HD 130-33 passim). While severed human heads left on the ground or dug up after burial, although disconcerting, are merely body parts, these, mounted on poles, are clearly death's-heads, numinous reminders of mortality, as direct in their warning significance as the skull and crossbones on a pirate's flag. Framing these images are the earlier description of Kurtz as a "disinterred body" whose "lofty frontal bone" is "like a ball--an ivory ball (HD 115) and the subsequent reference to Kurtz's "bony head" as he is carried from his hut like "an animated image of death" (HD 134. The image of the death's-head is a continuing one in Conrad, appearing in the descriptions of James Wait of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and Karl Yundt of The Secret Agent, in Under Western Eyes as the "grinning skull" of Mme. de S--, in Victory as the

skeletal head of Mr. Jones, and in The Rover as the skull and crossbones carved in the lid of Peyrol's box.

Other examples of memento mori are verbal--repeated phrases related to death that echo in the minds of certain characters. In Lord Jim, in the midst of the Patna emergency, Jim suffers vicariously "all the fear, all the horror, all the despair of eight hundred human beings pounced upon in the night by a sudden and violent death" (LJ 113). The "only distinct thought formed, vanishing, and reforming in his brain" is "eight hundred people and seven boats; eight hundred people and seven boats. . . . Eight hundred people and seven boats--and no time!" (LJ 87). In The Secret Agent, Winnie Verloc's fear of the gallows expresses itself in her obsession with the journalist's stock phrase used to describe the distance the body of the condemned was allowed to fall--in this case, "The drop given was fourteen feet." These words, repeated in the text six times, cause Winnie's throat to convulse "in waves to resist strangulation," and she seizes her head with her hands "as if to save it from being torn off her shoulders" (SA 201, 203, 219).² In a similar manner, the novel ends with the words in the newspaper that characterize Winnie's suicide as an "act of

² This exaggeration of the usual distance, which would have torn off her head according to Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid, may be or may not be deliberate. See their Note 201.30, Cambridge edition of The Secret Agent.

madness or despair," words repeating themselves over and over again in the mind of Ossipon, whose desertion is the immediate cause of her death (SA 228-31 *passim*).

In the most vivid illustration of the use of *memento mori*, Conrad combines it with negative cosmic imagery. The macabre references to the hanging "body of the late Señor Hirsch" recur at least sixteen times over thirty pages of Nostromo and in their culmination place the corpse in a cosmic context. At first the body appears only as "the shadow of a man," a "distorted shadow of broad shoulders and bowed head" (N 423). This "enormous and distorted shadow on the wall" is revealed to be Hirsch's dead body, wrists tied behind and suspended by a rope from a beam (N 427). As Nostromo and Dr. Monygham converse in the room where the body hangs, and the circumstances of the man's torture and murder are revealed in flashback, the narrative interjects repeated references to the "upright shape . . . that with projecting head and shoulders, in ghastly immobility, seemed intent on catching every word" (N 430); "the indistinct, motionless shape of the dead man . . . with his air of listening also, disregarded, forgotten," "the shape of the murdered man suspended in his awful immobility, which seemed the uncomplaining immobility of attention" (N 435-36); "the gruesome enigma of the tortured and murdered Hirsch" (N 438). After a flashback in which

"the body of Señor Hirsch" hangs tortured but still living, references to the dead body resume, becoming formulaic: "the stiff body of the late Señor Hirsch," "the body of the late Señor Hirsch" (N 450), "the late Señor Hirsch," "the body of the late Señor Hirsch," "the perpendicular and breathless immobility of the late Señor Hirsch" (N 451), and, at this point mentioning for the first time the background against which the corpse is seen, "the late Señor Hirsch, erect and shadowy against the stars" (N 452). The formula continues, with the dead man seeming at once a passive object and a mysteriously active presence in the room where he hangs: "the persistent immobility of the late Señor Hirsch," "the late Señor Hirsch, growing more distinct, seemed to have come nearer," "the body of the late Señor Hirsch," "the late Señor Hirsch preserved the immobility of a disregarded man" (N 454-58). The final climactic reference, again placing the body against the background of a starry night sky, reduces it once more to the mere shadowy form that appeared at the beginning of the episode: "the body of the late Señor Hirsch, an opaque long blotch in the semi-transparent obscurity of the room between the two tall parallelograms of the windows full of stars" (N 461). Conrad's placement of the body of the dead man against a background of stars enlarges the significance of the torture and murder of Hirsch, transforming it from a

local incident in a minor civil war into a reminder of what Conrad saw as the irrelevance of human fate within the vast order of the cosmos. For Conrad the beauty of a starry sky is a mockery rather than a comforting illumination in a dark universe, the blind gaze of stars an ominous manifestation of the indifference of the natural order. Marlow's words in Chance illustrate such an attitude:

It was one of those dewy, clear, starry nights, oppressing our spirit, crushing our pride, by the brilliant evidence of the awful loneliness, of the hopeless obscure insignificance of our globe lost in the splendid revelation of a glittering, soulless universe. I hate such skies. (C 50)

Much has been written about Conrad's imagery of darkness, but it seems plain that images of light in these novels can have almost as sinister a connotation. The common denominator for Conrad seems to be the essential emptiness of the material world, which in its light and as well as in its darkness is blind to human life, a blindness that is, in its denial of human presence, hostile.

"She was death itself--the companion of life"

As the many pages haunted by the menacing body of the dead Hirsch suggest, Conrad seems at times to present death not so much as an event or an emanent abstraction as he shows it as a mysteriously active presence. For example, the cab driven by a maimed

coachman in The Secret Agent is the "cab of Death itself." A similar capitalization of the word appears in the following sentence from The Nigger of the "Narcissus" in a passage describing the crewmen clinging to the ship during the storm: "As Death appeared unready, they began to look about" (NN 60). Although in this particular instance death remains an abstraction, the same novel repeatedly personifies it as the "stalking death" that looms over the shoulder of James Wait as his "hateful accomplice" (NN 41), his "awful and veiled familiar"(NN 43), his "bosom friend" (NN 53), and his "masterful chum" (NN 73). In Lord Jim, death, or rather the fear of it, is similarly evoked as an invisible onlooker in the description of the crew of the Patna struggling to free the jammed lifeboat: the "fear of death . . . stood behind them like an inflexible and cold-eyed taskmaster" (LJ 96). In that novel death as an implied presence is obliquely concealed in the personified "opportunity" for heroism that Jim seeks--that strange, veiled figure that Marlow calls an "Eastern bride." It sits by Jim's side as he goes up the river to Patusan, runs with him as he escapes from the Rajah's stockade, and waits beside him "still veiled" when Marlow sees him for the last time. After hearing the story of Jim's death and calling it "an extraordinary success," Marlow adds:

"For it may very well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had

beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side. . . . He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (LJ 416).

Although characterized as an "opportunity" and "a shadowy ideal of conduct," this veiled entity bears more than a coincidental resemblance to Wait's "awful and veiled familiar." In the context of Jim's dishonorable attempt to escape death on the Patna, one can only imagine that the unveiled "face of that opportunity" for heroic conduct is the face of death.

A personification of death sometimes seems to take place in particular characters. Winnie Verloc in The Secret Agent momentarily seems such a personification to Ossipon after he discovers that she has killed her husband. Although at first he sees her simply as "a degenerate . . . of a murdering type," he panics as she clings to him, "twined round him like a snake." "She was not deadly. She was death itself--the companion of life" (SA 217). In that same novel, both Karl Yundt and the Professor are characters so closely identified with death that their humanity almost disappears. Yundt, with the "skinny groping hand" of "a moribund murderer" and his desire to belong to a band of "destroyers" (SA 38), is a "spectre" (SA 45) with a "blind stare" out of "the dead blackness of . . . cavernous eyes" (SA 42), resembling an allegorical figure of death. The Professor, like Yundt, dreams of

a world like a "shambles, where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination" (SA 226). Describing himself as "deadly" and wired up as a walking bomb, in his own person he mimics "death, which knows no restraint and cannot be attacked" (SA 57). Like James Wait and Kurtz, dying men who are transformed into images of death, the ascetic Professor seems to suggest an abstract universal held within a human particular. He is both "frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable" and also an incorruptible "force," whose thoughts dwell on "images of ruin and destruction"; like some apocalyptic avenger, he is "terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world"; in the final words of the novel, as the personification of an invisible plague, he becomes entirely dehumanized: "Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men" (SA 231).

Death is mirrored as well by the very different attributes of Madame de S-- and of Necator of Under Western Eyes, both of whom, in spite of the contrast between them, also exemplify Conrad's association of death with lying. The woman, presented as a kind of charlatan consumed by personal grievances, uses the cause of revolution as a mere mechanism for a hoped-for revenge on her enemies. Not only is her association with the revolutionary cause a lie, but her every word

and gesture belies the qualities attributed to her by Ivanovitch--charm, nobility of spirit, reconciling influence, intuition, insight, and sympathy. In view of Marlow's words in Heart of Darkness about "a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies" (HD 82), it is not surprising that Madame de S-- is given the attributes of one dead. She is "dead-faced" (UWE 161); her face has a "death-like immobility" (UWE 214); her smile is like that of a "grinning skull," a "galvanized corpse," an "ancient, painted mummy" (UWE 215); she displays her false teeth "ghoulishly" (UWE 217). She has a "death's-head smile" and a "bony, inanimate" hand, a "skeleton hand" (UWE 224-25). Razumov sees her "rigidity" as "frightful, like the rigour of a corpse galvanized into harsh speech and glittering stare by the force of murderous hate" (UWE 226).

Her physical opposite, the fleshly Necator, a professional killer, is nevertheless a character in whom the abstract idea of death finds a concrete expression. Grossly obese, his enormously protruding stomach suggests an all-devouring maw. Like Mme. de S--, Necator also represents a lie; although he pretends to serve only the revolutionary cause, he secretly works as a spy and executioner for the Russian police as well. He symbolizes a deadly anarchic "force" even more than does The Secret Agent's Professor, whose ascetic appearance and physical

fragility reflect a dedication to violence that exists more in the realm of the ideal than in the arena of action. Necator represents the impartial destruction of death itself, reflecting the nature of the material universe in Conrad's vision of it as a mindless and deadly machine. While Conrad treats fat idealists such as Michaelis in the same novel and Ribiera in Nostromo ironically and even comically (or as absurd, in the modernist sense), he depicts the fat, nihilistic killer, Necator, as a true horror that illustrates what Hillis Miller calls "the hostility of matter" (49). The man's gross corporeality is obscene; he is Conrad's walking exemplar of the union of materiality with death.

James Wait of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" and Kurtz of Heart of Darkness are the two most complex characters in whom death is to some extent personified. Wait incorporates a dual identity--one human and one symbolic. At the beginning of the novel this dying seaman is seen as "a fine big man" for whom death seems an intangible entity intimately associated with but separate from him (NN 20). As his disease progresses, however, Wait himself begins to resemble a death's-head, his "fleshless head" appearing to be like "a disinterred black skull" (NN 139).

Critics have long recognized Wait's association with a force transcending his individuality, a force

that reveals itself when he first steps onto the deck of the Narcissus--dark, lordly, alien, and taller than the other men, saying, "I belong to the ship" (NN 18). His explosive cough, "metallic, hollow, and tremendously loud," seems to ring in "the dome of the sky" and the make the ship's iron plates vibrate (NN 18-19). His very presence on deck shatters the convivial mood of the crew at day's end. The following passage suggests the man's double identity; the first two sentences show the dying seaman and the last one reveals his symbolic role as an image of death that seems to darken the world:

He stepped out in a tottering stride. He looked powerful as ever, but showed a strange and affected unsteadiness in his gait; his face was perhaps a trifle thinner, and his eyes appeared rather startlingly prominent. He seemed to hasten the retreat of departing light by his very presence; the setting sun dipped sharply, as though fleeing before our nigger; a black mist emanated from him; a subtle and dismal influence; a something cold and gloomy that floated out and settled on all the faces like a mourning veil. (NN 34)

Although he plays a symbolic role, Wait's fundamental identity as a dying man is never lost, and unlike Victory's Mr. Jones, he remains one of the most human of Conrad's characters. This dying black man contains within himself both death and its frantic denial, personifying to the crewmen their own individual deaths as they recognize their own mortal selves in his negative image. Although one critic

describes him as embodying "the subconscious, instinctual but regressive quality in man" as if he were a kind of Caliban (Young 74), such a characterization, associating these qualities with Wait's blackness, seems not to comprehend the man the text describes. Wait's negroid appearance, although "pathetic and brutal" to Conrad's narrowly European aesthetic standards, is merely the "mask" of his soul, as Ian Watt so cogently argues (Conrad 106). Although subject to many of the racial prejudices common to Europeans of his time, Conrad never equates black skin with evil nor, inevitably, with primitivism, as the text of this novel reveals. Wait captures everyone's attention when he first boards ship by speaking grammatical English in a lordly manner (as many West Indians do), "enunci[at]ing] distinctly, with soft precision" in contrast to Donkin's cockney whine, Belfast's uneducated dialect, and the inarticulateness of Wamibo and the other foreigners in the crew. His behavior is, in fact, aristocratic--"naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending" (NN 18). In contrast to Singleton, he is from the beginning intensely conscious of himself and his situation, and his horror at the thought of his own extinction necessitates his "steadfastness to his untruthful attitude in the face of the inevitable truth," his "obstinate non-recognition of the only certitude"--that

of death (138-39). Although he denies it almost to the end, like the admirable Ransome in The Shadow-Line, the offensive Wait consciously carries "our common enemy" inside of him. Rather than embodying the subconscious and the instinctual, Wait is better seen as representing an abstraction in which Conrad is far more interested--human consciousness itself, superior to its unconscious surroundings and yet doomed by them. Such a reading does not ignore what seems most overtly present in the novel--an emphasis on death as an ever-present and inescapable reality that Wait has constructed a paradoxical strategem to deny and that the crew has also recognized--and rejected--in the person of their dying shipmate. The following frequently-quoted passage emphasizes the very humanity that Wait and the crew have in common:

He was demoralising. Through him we were becoming highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent: we understood the subtlety of his fear, sympathized with all his repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions--as though we had been overcivilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life. (NN 139)

In their unwilling empathy with Wait, the crew are becoming, like him--"highly humanized, tender, complex, excessively decadent," full of "repulsions, shrinkings, evasions, delusions." In sharp contrast to the more primitive Singleton, it is Wait who is "overcivilised, and rotten, and without any knowledge of the meaning of life," a condition that is reflected by his denial of

death. Conrad sees any "meaning" that life might have as inextricably linked with its arbitrary and inevitable ending, an inevitability that the stoic Singleton reluctantly recognizes but that Wait all-too-humanly refuses to accept in relation to himself.

Like Wait, Kurtz is a dying man who becomes in his dying an image of death itself. Marlow speaks of him in language that recalls the depiction of Wait and anticipates that of Jones. Kurtz's "disinterred body" parallels Wait's "disinterred black skull" (HD 115). Like Jones, a "tortured skeleton of a man," looking out of "the sunken glare of his fierce crow-footed eyes" (LJ 382, 344), Kurtz seems an "apparition, whose eyes shine darkly far in its bony head" (HD 134). He is an "initiated wraith," a "shade" (HD 117), an "atrocious phantom" whose body, "looking at least seven feet long," emerges from its covering "pitiful and appalling as from a winding sheet" (HD 133-34). He seems an "animated image of death carved out of old ivory" whose open mouth as he shouts at his followers gives him "a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (HD 134).

This last description depicts Kurtz as a veritable god of death, and Marlow discovers that he acts the role of a deity for his African followers. But Kurtz's bodily disintegration mocks his megalomania. Indeed

his very role-playing as a god may be seen, at least in part, as a psychological strategy to stave off the fear of death in a place where ordinary men die in appalling numbers. Although he is "as good as buried" (HD 138), a "hollow sham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth" (HD 147), in his own mind Kurtz has "kicked himself loose of the earth" by his assumption of a god-like role--indeed, "kicked the very earth to pieces" (HD 144). The "forgotten and brutal instincts, the "monstrous passions" (HD 144) that the wilderness awakens in Kurtz, Conrad implies, lie latent in human beings, ready to emerge when the overwhelming power of nature confronts them with their powerlessness and insignificance. Although a civilized man like Marlow sees "nothing exactly profitable in these heads" Kurtz has placed around his house, he admits the power of their primitive symbolism (HD 131). Paradoxically, for Kurtz these death's-heads are a defense against death. The "killing, the sacrifice of the other," according to Otto Rank, is one strategy by which "one buys oneself free from the penalty of dying, of being killed" (Will Therapy 130, qtd in Becker, Escape 108). According to Becker, rituals involving human or animal sacrifice, head-hunting, and cannibalism also attempt to gain control over nature, the participants seeking to

incorporate within themselves the power of a god or the strength of an enemy (107-08). He writes:

Men spill blood because it makes their hearts glad and fills out their organisms with a sense of vital power; ceremoniously killing captives is a way of affirming power over life, and therefore over death. (Escape 102)

The black heads on stakes, those "round knobs," are Kurtz's offerings to death as substitutes for his own paler skull, the "ivory ball," with its "lofty frontal bone" (HD 115). Symbolically, they are what Becker calls "visible proof of survivorship . . . and thus a demonstration of the favor of the gods" (Escape 107). Kurtz seeks an alliance with the gods by acting as one himself not simply to further his "immense plans" but also to gain control over death.

The most bizarre of Conrad's personifications of death is Mr. Jones of Victory, in whom death is less personified than caricatured, with skeletal and death's-head imagery reaching its apex (or some may think its nadir). He arrives in Samburan at the tiller of a boat, "silent, rigid, and very much like a corpse," his teeth glistening "with a death's head grin between his retracted lips" (V 230). The death's-head aspect of Jones's "hollow eyes" whose shadowed "cavities" look "perfectly empty" are mentioned some fifteen times. With his "dark, sunken stare" and his "long and loose-jointed" body in "the usual white suit of the tropics," Jones seems to be a brought-up-to-date

representation of the grim reaper himself (V 98-100 passim). In drawing this character, Conrad surrenders to his inclination to personify death to such an extent that, as Yelton observes, Jones becomes an allegorical element in a basically symbolic novel (320). On a realistic level, Jones, with his chronic lethargy and obvious weight loss seems to be, like James Wait, the victim of some wasting disease. The novel makes nothing of any illness Jones may have, however, and the circumstances of his death have nothing to do with physical illness. In spite of his "mute supineness" and corpselike poses, Conrad depicts him, as he does the dying Kurtz, as a killer rather than as a victim, his misogyny symbolizing his hatred of life. Cedric Watts writes:

In the allegoric scheme of this novel, Jones, spectral and skeletal but with a sting, patently represents sterility and death, while womankind, and particularly Lena, represents fecundity and life. ("Reflections" 74)

Although the symbolic opposition of Jones and Lena is clear and is even emphasized by the fact that they never actually meet, Watts's formula seems an overstatement in regard to the other women in the novel and even to Lena, whose individuality predominates over her symbolic role. The ladies of the orchestra do, in a limited way, represent life, as I will argue below, but poor Mrs. Schomberg hardly does so, and as the novel associates none of the women with children,

"fecund" seems an inappropriate adjective to apply to them. Unlike Jones, the women are too human to fit well into an allegoric scheme. Jones and his crew are pointedly bizarre characters in an otherwise realistic work in which the interest lies mainly in the self-defeating psychology of Heyst which, in the best modern fashion, is given a plausible basis in his childhood experiences. The very incongruity of Jones and his semi-human collaborators, the criminal cat-like predator Ricardo and the monkey-like Pedro, reveals Conrad's view of death as a grotesque intruder into a human world that lies outside of nature. Jones is "the Death that comes from elsewhere, strange and inhuman" (Beauvoir 105).

The Demonic Defense

The repetitive identification of Mr. Jones as a kind of walking Death is matched with equal clarity by allusions linking him to Satan. Jones, like Satan, is a "rebel" who is "coming and going up and down the earth" (V 317-18), or, as Schomberg perceives him, "an insolent spectre on leave from Hades" (116).³ Such imagery of supernatural evil frequently accompanies the

³See Cedric Watts "Reflections on Victory" for a discussion on Jones and Satan. It is interesting to note that three of Conrad's villains: Mr. Jones, Gentleman Brown, and the Professor in The Secret Agent have the sense of injured merit and disregarded superiority that motivate the Miltonic Satan.

presence of death in Conrad's fiction. In The Secret Agent, immediately after Ossipon thinks of Winnie as "death itself," she says: "Tom, you can't throw me off now. . . . Not unless you crush my head under your heel" (SA 217). This unlikely allusion in the mouth of the taciturn and prosaic Winnie makes the same association of death with the Satanic serpent of Genesis, and hence with evil, that appears in Victory in the episode in which Lena disarms Ricardo and imagines "the viper's head all but lying under her heel" (V 399).

In spite of Conrad's rejection of Judeo-Christian theology, his presentation of death and satanic evil as somehow connected reflects the biblical association of death and sin--or wickedness--that is part of European literary tradition. Jones's remark to Schomberg, "I am traveling west, you see," underscores his demonic aspect, since not only is the West the place of sunset and death, according to deVries, but "the kingdom of the devil" in Circlot's lexicon ("West"). Cedric Watts, defining the satanic as "dynamic," sees a contradiction in Jones's symbolic identity with both Satan and death ("Reflections" 73). There is no real contradiction here, however; it is both traditional and, as stated above, a common convergence of ideas in Conrad. Since the satanic traditionally is opposed to the creative force in the universe, its appearance of

energy is factitious. It is essentially negative, static, and ultimately self-destructive. As Circlot has it, "The aim of the devil is regression or stagnation in what is fragmentary, inferior, diverse and discontinuous" ("The Devil"). As everyone knows, Milton's Satan, on whom the modern perception of Satan as dynamic seems largely based, gives the appearance of dynamism only at the beginning of Paradise Lost; by its end, he has been reduced to the form of a crawling serpent whose defeat is foretold. Not only is Jones, like the young friend of the manager in Heart of Darkness, a "papier mache Mephistopheles" with "nothing inside but a little loose dirt" but, like Milton's Satan, he progressively dwindles in dignity and power, his essential weakness revealed in the "unpleasantly infantile expression" his face assumes when he smiles (V 378). During his childish tantrum at the thought of Ricardo's allying himself with a woman, he becomes "jerkily agitated like a grotesque toy on the end of an invisible string" (V 389). Finding himself alone and without support after Pedro is killed, "by accident--or perhaps not by accident" (V 411)--he helplessly tumbles into the harbor of Samburan to lie drowned on the bottom, a mere "heap of bones in a blue silk bag," his power, and hence the satanic mask he has assumed, exposed as factitious (411). That Conrad, whose imagination seems so haunted by death, personifies it

in this late novel in the treacherous but ultimately futile and ridiculous figure of Mr. Jones, suggests the possibility that death, while apparently victorious at the end of the novel, has, on a symbolic level, experienced a defeat.⁴

The association of death with demonic forces appears in The Shadow Line when Mr. Burns identifies the root of all the troubles besetting him and the ship as "that wicked corpse," "the old dodging Devil," the former captain (SL 70, 119). The new captain, immune to the fever but not to the contagion of fear, also begins to feel that he has been "decoyed into this awful, this death-haunted command" by some sinister power (SL 98) and to speak of "the fever-devil who has got on board this ship" as if he were in "a contest against a living enemy" rather than in a struggle with illness and the weather (SL 103-04). A definite "enemy," even an imaginary spectre, evidently seems a lesser threat to the human ego than the disinterested operations of nature that are the source of the fever and the absence of wind that immobilizes the ship. Even the tapping sound of a sudden rain momentarily seems the work of "mysterious devilry" (113). The

⁴ R. J. Lordi points out the appropriateness of Jones's death in water, the symbol of life (140). Yet water's ambiguity as a symbol is shown when Heyst gives fresh water to the travelers dying of thirst after a voyage over the undrinkable sea; water's destructive aspect is also implied in Lena's conversation with Heyst about the biblical deluge.

"evil spell," under which is subsumed the immobilizing calm, the fever, and the "malicious spectre" of the dead captain, has even been described as the "key image" of the novel (Yelton 310). Conrad makes clear, however, that the appearance of a supernatural force at work exists only in the mind of Burns and, briefly, in the mind of the narrator as a kind of defense against the neutral and unconscious powers of nature that threaten to destroy them. Burns finally laughs at this spectre as he had quelled the ill wishes of the dying man with a laugh while he still lived. The rising wind that moves the ship, a long-expected natural phenomenon, is a symbolic coincidence rather than the effect of some occult cause, as is the wind that moves the Narcissus after Wait's body slips overboard. In both novels, the forces of death have been both acknowledged and transcended.

Too much emphasis on the "occult" elements in The Shadow Line is as misplaced as it is in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" in which the demonization of Wait as "the spirit of blackness," "the infra-human visage of the satanic," "a Beelzebub" (Young 74, 79, 80), "Satan," and "evil" (Guerard 111, 112) is unsupported by a text that empathetically reveals a dying man's inner thoughts and feelings as he listens at night to the sounds on the ship, footfalls, breathing, voices, and the creak of the masts.

He was cheered by the rattling of blocks, reassured by the stir and murmur of the watch, soothed by the slow yawn of some sleepy and weary seaman settling himself deliberately for a snooze on the planks. Life seemed an indestructible thing. It went on in darkness, in sunshine, in sleep; tireless, it hovered affectionately round the imposture of his ready death. . . . It made him safe. . . . (NN 104-05).

Shortly before his death, Wait's mind is filled with "vivid reminiscences which he mistook joyfully for images of an undoubted future" (NN 149). Such passages and similar ones, such as the description of Wait's fevered nightmare (NN 113), are seen as a narrative flaw only by those whose interpretation of the novel they do not support. They reveal that Wait is no devil--in spite of Podmore's first impression on seeing his black face and the crew's fascination with his "inhuman" appearance as he "seemed to shout his denials already from beyond the awful border" between life and death. Guerard's suggestion that Wait's death is somehow "occult" is puzzling (122). There is nothing in the text to suggest that its cause is either secret, mysterious, or supernatural. It is made clear that Wait, like Kurtz, Gentleman Brown, and Teresa Viola, dies of an illness (probably, from its symptoms in Wait's case, tuberculosis) at the precise time when Donkin, out of jealousy and malice, has driven him into an emotional and physical frenzy, fatal in the last stages of such a disease, by forcing him to face the dreaded truth that he truly is what he has pretended to

be--a dying man. Events in Conrad's novels are rooted in the actuality of natural phenomena. Any suggestion of the "occult" diminishes the impact of the novel's intense concentration on human mortality and the intrinsic psychological horror of what is called a "natural" death. The suggestion of the satanic in connection with Wait relates to Conrad's understanding of the human tendency to associate death with evil, a tendency that he ironically exploits. Although Vernon Young quotes Conrad as conceding the "power of occult forces which rule the fascinating aspects of the visible world" (81), such "aspects" must be considered equivalent to the world's "vain and floating appearance" that Conrad always considers illusory in its negative as well as its positive manifestations (Letters 2:30). Decisive in the rejection of any literal role for the occult in Conrad's fiction is that prerequisite to such a role is the supposition that forces in the structure of reality take an interest in mankind--a view Conrad consistently denies. What Conrad sees as the enemy of mankind is not some occult force beyond nature but nature itself. His evocation of the occult deliberately exposes the irrational human preference for imagining the action of evil forces rather than for recognizing the immense indifference of the universe.

Rejecting religious transcendence, Conrad ironically includes negative transcendent imagery in the metaphorical pattern of his novels as a "dark" power. The tone of irony is especially plain in what Yelton calls the "spectral imagery" in *Nostromo* (172, 177). The political conflict in Costaguana is "a struggle of lust between bands of absurd devils" (N 88); the silver carts rush through the town "as if chased by a devil" (N 114); people fear the decent bandit Hernandez "as if he were a devil" (N 381); Gamacho's speech is "like the howling of an inferior sort of devil cast into a white-hot furnace" (N 392); to the corrupt Pedro Montero Charles Gould is "a stony fiend" (N 403); Nostromo considers Dr. Monygham, who gives his services to the poor, as having been sent by "the king of the devils" and sees him in the devil's role as "an enemy of the people--a tempter" (N 462, 469). The "spirits of good and evil that hover near every concealed treasure" according to the narrator are equally illusory (N 501), since twice he excludes both the power of God and the power of the devil from the blind darkness of the Placid Gulf surrounding the island on which the treasure lies concealed. The Gulf, a commanding image in the novel that rivals that of the silver, stands both for the primal void out of which life has inexplicably arisen and for the enduring abyss at the heart of human consciousness. Its dreadful

quality for Conrad, like that of all of nature, is not its evil but its blind neutrality.

In his use of this imagery that I have called "the demonic defense," Conrad reveals his awareness of a deep human discontent at being subject to the laws of nature--what he calls in a letter to Cunningham Graham the "slavery" of being part of the animal kingdom (Letters 2:30). The idea that the fate of human beings is subject to indifferent physical forces seems more intolerable to human vanity, Conrad suggests, than the menace of a malicious ghost or a devil. By such imagery he reveals his understanding of the dread expressed by John Wesley in a letter to his brother: "If I have any fear, it is not of falling into hell but of falling into nothing" (82). These "evil spirits" and "absurd devils" so prevalent in Conrad's novels are masks superimposed by human beings over the blankness of nature and the inadvertantly insulting operations of chance. They act as grotesque defenses against the fear of nothingness that Wesley articulates.⁵

The Imagery of Absence

Conrad's repeated use of the metaphor of the "abyss" witnesses to the central place in his

⁵Mark A. Wollaeger expresses this same insight when he writes that Conrad's "recourse to polarized language of good and evil . . . defends against a more troubling perception of nothingness" (190).

imagination held by the idea of nothingness. In Lord Jim, time itself is seen as continually falling away into emptiness as the ill-fated Patna moves over the sea with "the days, still, hot, heavy, disappearing one by one into the past, as if falling into an abyss for ever open in the wake of the ship" (LJ 16). Not only is the image of the abyss, as Yelton says, "the principle metaphoric undercurrent" in Lord Jim (171), it is present throughout Conrad's fiction. For example, in An Outcast of the Islands, Aissa, brooding over her discovery that Willems has a son by his wife, looks down, "as though she had watched at the bottom of a gloomy abyss the mournful procession of her thoughts" (OI 356). The Narcissus sails surrounded by "the abysses of sky and sea," and during the storm, a black cloud of "abysmal darkness" overhangs her (NN 29, 53). In The Secret Agent, London, "sunk in a hopeless night," lies "at the bottom of a black abyss" (SA 203). The "abyss of waters and darkness, without earth or sky" (N 433) through which Nostromo swims is more symbolic than physical, as is the "open abyss of desolation" in which Giorgio Viola's soul descends as he sits mourning the death of his wife (N 467) and the darkness that is like "the bottom of an abyss" in which the despairing Razumov speaks to Haldin as the dusk deepens in his room (UWE 23). Such repeated evocations of the abyss of emptiness in nature and in human life,

in association with imagery of darkness, is only the most obvious aspect of what might be called Conrad's imagery of absence. Its emphasis on what is not there exists in tension with his declared purpose "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe" (NN xi)--a universe of appearances, that like Kurtz, is "hollow at the core." One critic writes of Conrad's conception of the formlessness underneath the appearance of things, a reality "free of all characteristics of light and mass," ephemeral and dark, which "inexplicably [takes] on more and more complex characteristics" and "has given birth to the mechanical order of our world" (Roussel 4). For Conrad, the immense presence of this mechanical order paradoxically conceals not only formlessness but emptiness--an absence. He presents the material world as a void, radically alien to human consciousness, which, nevertheless, it is always on the verge of absorbing into itself. In his metaphor of the abyss of materiality, Conrad almost seems to have intuited the concept in contemporary physics of the black hole--an unimaginably dense, yet paradoxically invisible and all-engulfing maw--and extended it to describe the entire physical universe. To Conrad, matter is densely empty, "impenetrable" and yet all-absorbing. In Nostromo, this oxymoronic concept is reflected in the description of Dr. Monygham's "lifeless" stare, which

seems to have an "impenetrable emptiness like the black depth of an abyss" (N 350). In the story, "The Secret Sharer," from the collection, 'Twixt Land and Sea, this conflation of density and emptiness appears in the image of the "towering black mass" of Koh-ring; the huge mass of land against whose rocks the captain risks grounding his ship is at the same time like an open gateway--"the gate of the everlasting night," the "very gateway of Erebus"--looming before them waiting to draw the ship and its crew through its solidity into the bottomless abyss of death (TLS 142-43 passim).

A recognition that this apparent paradox of impenetrable emptiness may be in itself an illusion is suggested in Conrad's letter to Cunninghame Graham in which he speaks of the world that "whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror is always but a vain and floating appearance" (Letters 2:30). These words imply that both convexity, or presence, and concavity, or absence, are illusions, that the seeming presence that extends itself out into the world and the empty space that presence seems to fill are both shifting appearances. If this idea has a contemporary sound, it is because Conrad in his fiction metaphorically deconstructs the world itself. As a writer for whom constructing a literary text was immensely hard work, who saw words as "symbols of life" and asserted that "things 'as they are' exist in words" (Letters 2:200),

Conrad would probably not have looked kindly on the technique of literary analysis called deconstruction. Yet for Conrad, as for deconstructionists, the contingency, the fragility of presence is a given; he sees being not as primary but as a transient phenomenon emerging out of non-being, out of a universal unconsciousness which is to him the equivalent of death.

For the artist, "silence is like death"

Related to Conrad's imagery of absence is his consistent use of silence, the absence of sound, to suggest the presence of death or death-like states of mind. In the sepulchral city in Heart of Darkness, the street where the two black knitters guard "the door of Darkness" is filled with "a dead silence" (HD 55), and in Africa there is "a mournful stillness" in the grove of death (HD 55,66). Winnie Verloc's horror of death by hanging is made more intense by the idea that "the murderer [is] brought out to be executed, with a horrible quietness" (SA 201). In Under Western Eyes, Mrs. Haldin mourns her son "through long days of motionless silence" (UWE 115). In The Shadow-Line, when the smothering rain ceases, it is followed by "perfect silence, joined to perfect immobility" that is a foretaste of universal death (SL 115). As his boat moves "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness"

toward Kurtz, Marlow says, "It was very quiet there" (HD 95). Like the traditional association of sunset with death discussed earlier, the relationship of silence with death might seem so natural, even automatic, as not to be worth mentioning; what makes Conrad's use of silence worthy of consideration however, is its implication that silence signals a primary reality in which the sound of life has but a contingent and passing existence. The symbolic use of silence in these novels also bears on the interpretation of certain passages that do not have an obvious association with death. For instance, Kurtz at first presents himself to Marlow's imagination "as a voice," and his "gift of expression," "his ability to talk," seems to carry "with it a sense of real presence"; but Marlow subsequently discovers this voice to be merely meaningless noise, "the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness," and the doomed Kurtz's "presence" a mask for emptiness (HD 113-14). On his journey up the Congo river, Marlow's own past life comes back to him "in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence" (emphasis added). He says:

"And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable

intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect" (HD 93).

This "implacable force" of nature, in spite of the personification of it as something with the ability to look and have an intention and possibly to seek vengeance, nevertheless represents an absence. Just as the metaphor of darkness stands for nature's blindness, so the metaphor of silence stands for its dumbness and its deafness, and by extension its unconscious deadness. The "great wilderness" in An Outcast of the Islands is a place of "great silence full of struggle and death" (OI 326). Plants locked in a competitive struggle for survival in Almayer's Folly climb "madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence" (AF 71). The tropical forest in Conrad's world is a silent place not because forests tend to be silent in actuality but because it is a place of death.

Even in a seemingly benign context, Conrad employs the quality of "silence" or "stillness" as a negative symbol associated with death. In Lord Jim, silence is prelude to the pivotal accident to the Patna which leads eventually to Jim's death in Patusan. A "marvellous stillness pervaded the world" immediately before the collision, and afterward, Jim feels "that awful stillness preceding a catastrophe . . ." (LJ 19, 89). In Nostromo, although the "great waters" of the Placid Gulf in actuality would be dense, heavy, and

teeming with marine life, its "enormous stillness, without light or sound" absorbs and cancels all sense of its substance and life for Decoud and Nostromo, making both it and its surroundings an abyss in which "land, sea, sky, the mountains, and the rocks were as if they had not been"; a place of "silence, and breathless peace," its darkness and stillness a "foretaste of eternal peace," its "perfect quietness" and "solid stillness" (N 261-76 passim) is the silence of death, a portent of the "absolute silence" (N 496) on the Great Isabel in which Decoud's personality dissolves .

Silence in these novels also signals psychological or symbolic death. As Jim describes his feelings just before he jumped, Marlow observes the "suggestion of awful stillness in his face, in his movements, in his very voice . . ." (LJ 110). After his jump, Jim says, he becomes "conscious of the silence":

A silence of the sea, of the sky, merged into one indefinite immensity still as death around these saved, palpitating lives. . . . A silence! . . . "I don't think any spot on earth could be so still," he said. . . . not a sound. Everything was gone and--all was over . . . with me. (LJ 114)

When at last he ends his story, Jim falls silent, and Marlow realizes that his disgrace will be a living death for him, as if he were "walled up quick in a roomy grave" (LJ 120).

[T]he meaning of this stillness sank to the bottom of my soul like lead into the water, and made it so heavy that for a second I wished heartily that the only course left open for me were to pay for his funeral. Even the law had done with him. To bury him would have been such an easy kindness (LJ 174).

A "fear of silence" overcomes Aissa when Willems stops speaking to her (OI 252). She realizes that his absence would be a kind of death, leaving her in "the night without end . . . the last darkness of cold and silence without hope of another sunrise" (OI 249). Razumov's deafening by Necator amounts to a symbolic death, as he is plunged into a world of total silence, cut off from the sounds of life and the voices of the living.

Silence plays an especially significant role in the symbolism of Victory, a novel that presents a melodramatic struggle between life and death. The narrator insists on the "great stillness" (V 190), the "great silence" (V 218) of the desolate island of Samburan where the doomed Heyst, who has "a taste for silence" (V 66), is "keeping hold" of a property that Captain Davidson calls "as dead as Julius Caesar" (V 23). Silence is "the genius of the locality," and the forest there is "so still . . . that the very ground" seems "to exhale silence into the shade" (V 349). After Heyst symbolically abandons Lena by instructing her to hide in this forest, the "sense of the heavy brooding silence in the outside world" seems "to enter

and fill the room--the oppressive infinity of it, without breath, without light" (V 373). Like natural phenomena elsewhere in Conrad's fiction, silence is almost personified in the suggestion of malevolent intention, as Heyst finds "something cruel in the dumbness of the night" as he walks with Ricardo to Jones's cabin, leaving Lena behind (V 374). Heyst's fatal inertia on his return walk with Jones toward his cabin, where Jones will shoot Lena, is characterized as a silence: "In [Heyst's] breast dwelt a deep silence, the complete silence of unused faculties" (V 390).

In light of the consistently negative implications of silence in the novels and its close association with death, there is a special significance in Heyst's revulsion against the sound of the ladies' orchestra at Schomberg's hotel:

In the quick time of that music, in the varied, piercing clamour of the strings, in the movements of the bare arms, in the low dresses, the coarse faces, the stony eyes of the executants, there was a suggestion of something cruel, sensual and repulsive. (V 68)

Heyst's dislike of what he hears as an "instrumental uproar, screaming, grunting, whining, sobbing, scraping, squeaking some kind of lively air" (almost all the participles representing sounds made by living creatures) suggests more than a fastidiousness of musical taste or an aversion to the vulgar sensuality

that he senses in the performers. Heyst's reaction contrasts to the response by the rest of the audience:

[I]t seemed marvellous to see the people sitting so quietly on their chairs, drinking so calmly out of their glasses, and giving no signs of distress, anger or fear. Heyst averted his gaze from the unnatural spectacle of their indifference.

When the piece of music came to an end, the relief was so great that he felt slightly dizzy, as if a chasm of silence had yawned at this feet. When he raised his eyes, the audience, most perversely, was exhibiting signs of animation and interest in their faces. . . . (V 69)

Any supposition that the "animation and interest" of the other men is occasioned simply by the sexual attractiveness and presumed availability of the musicians is dispelled by the information that, except for Lena, none of them appear to be either young or desirable. Since the men in the audience show little interest in the women personally, it must be concluded that while the ladies' orchestra plays loudly, mechanically, and perhaps not very well, they find the concert novel, diverting, and even amusing enough to be pleasurable in the backwater of a small eastern port. The placement of Heyst's dizziness when the music ends in the sinister context of a yawning "chasm of silence" associates it with the abyssal image so consistently negative in Conrad's fiction. It is the intensity of Heyst's negative physical reaction against the concert that seems "unnatural" and perverse rather than the response of the audience. Of course Heyst prefers silence, since he is oriented toward death, and even

the suggestion of sensuality in the women's orchestral performance repels him because of its association with the sexual means of life's continuation.

When Heyst's aversion to life and to the feminine is temporarily overcome when he meets Lena, his change of heart is expressed by his response to the way she sounds--he becomes open to the "warm nobility of sound" in her voice that finds it "way into [his] heart" (V 75). The aristocratic Heyst's positive reaction to the unrefined voice of a girl of the working class (whom Ricardo instantly recognizes as of his own social background) is important in its relation to Conrad's use of the symbolic value of sound and its absence. The "amazing quality" he hears in the voice of this girl is the sound of life that, when he momentarily responds to it, gives him "a greater sense of his own reality than he had ever known in all his life" (V 74, 200). In a revealing essay on Henry James, Conrad writes that the artist "is so much of a voice that, for him, silence is like death" (NLL 14). Although he is not referring here to figurative language, in regard to his own imagery perhaps it is not reaching too far to take this statement as literally true.

Conrad's preoccupation with silence and darkness clearly relates to his preoccupation with the greater silence and darkness of the abyss of space surrounding a tiny, peopled earth. Heyst's revulsion against the

ladies' orchestra is not simply against the wretchedness of the music but against what the music reflects: the incongruous noise of humanity in the abyssal silence of the universe. It is this macrocosm to which Conrad alludes even in describing the loneliness felt by an individual in the midst of some personal crisis. When Lena senses that Heyst is abandoning her, she feels "as if the heart of hearts had ceased to beat and the end of all things had come" (V 373). This sense of cosmic death is clearly the same that almost overwhelms the captain in The Shadow-Line in vastly different circumstances when he feels his ship immobilized not just in the darkness of a cloudy, moonless, windless night on the ocean but caught in a process of cosmic entropy in the blackness of space itself, where "by thrusting one's hand over the side one could touch some unearthly substance."

When the time came the blackness would overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of all things would come without a sign, stir, or murmur of any kind, and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks.

It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness. (SL 108)

The death of the individual and the eventual return of human life to the darkness and silence of the abyss out of which it had inexplicably emerged are here conflated. This conflation of personal extinction with

an inevitable annihilation of all life in the universe forms the continuing subtext in all the variations of imagery in these novels.

The Vehicle of Death

As death is the tenor of much of the metaphoric structure of these novels, so too is it the vehicle in metaphors that Conrad uses to characterize certain other abstractions and even inanimate objects. For Conrad, death is the metaphor of choice to signify failure, loss, and paralysis of will and feeling. For example, in Victory, Mrs. Schomberg's "rigid immobility" and "lifeless" appearance are physical manifestations of the fact that Schomberg "had murdered the poor woman morally years ago" (V 120). In Almayer's Folly, Almayer transforms Nina's desertion into her symbolic death by erasing her footprints on the beach, piling up "small heaps of sand, leaving behind him a line of miniature graves right down to the water" (AF 195). He walks away from the "graves" with a face "that was like the face of a man that has died struck from behind--a face from which all feelings and all expression are suddenly wiped off by the hand of unexpected death" (AF 196). A few pages later, he contemplates the derelict office of Lingard & Co.: "The desk, the paper, the torn books, and the broken shelves, all under a thick coat of dust. The very dust and bones of a dead and gone business" (AF 199-200).

Acknowledging by another symbolic act the failure of all his ambitions, he rakes together the papers, breaks the furniture, piles it up together in a kind of funeral pyre which he sets alight to destroy not only his office but his house as well in a prelude to his own willed death, which is announced eight pages later.

Marlow in Heart of Darkness, repeatedly associates abstract concepts with death. The "unhappy savages" in a chain gang ignore him with a "complete, deathlike indifference" (HD 64). The "imbecile rapacity" of the white men at the Central Station seems to him "like a whiff from some corpse" (HD 76). When he wants to explain why a lie "appalls me," he says, "There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies--which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world--what I want to forget" (HD 82). But Marlow cannot forget death; he is a death-haunted man, always tasting "the flavour of mortality" --and smelling it as well in the odor of the African crew's "hippo meat which went rotten," that "made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils" (94). The "mystery of the wilderness"--its otherness and immense indifference to the conscious superiority of the European invaders--converges in Marlow's mind with the smell of dead meat that constantly reminds him of the deadly potential of the natural world.

When, in Lord Jim, Marlow is struggling with his doubt "of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct," a subject of supreme importance to him, he describes the quality of this doubt with the imagery of death: his doubt is "an obstinate ghost;" it rises "like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death. . . ." (LJ 50). The language Jim employs to describe the symbolic destruction of his ideal self when he jumped from the Patna is like that he uses to describe his fear of drowning when he believes the ship is sinking, showing an equation between the two. On the supposedly sinking ship, Jim anticipates "the grasp of the abyss . . . the struggle without hope, the starlight closing over his head forever like the vault of a tomb--the revolt of his young life--the black end" (LJ 96). After jumping into the boat and looking back up at the ship, he tells Marlow, "I wished I could die . . . There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well--into an everlasting deep hole. . . ." (LJ 111). In the darkness, he and the others, having abandoned responsibility and community, are "like men walled up quick in a roomy grave" (LJ 120). Jim's first act after the Patna crew's dereliction of duty becomes public knowledge is to submit to the symbolic death represented by the official hearing at which he is disgraced and deprived of his profession, proceedings

which, in Marlow's words, "had all the cold vengefulness of a sentence of death, had all the cruelty of a sentence of exile" (LJ 158). Jim seems "eager to go through the ceremony of execution" (LJ 153), but, sequestered in Marlow's room after the hearing, he silently mourns the death of his heroic persona. He submits to another form of symbolic death by accepting prosaic work in commerce--"his adventurous fancy . . . suffering all the pangs of starvation" (LJ 151), although he tries to maintain a death-defying reputation by his reckless physical courage as Engstrom and Blake's unnecessarily daredevil water clerk. Later, he experiences the easy job with De Jongh as "killing work" (LJ 201) because the duties have no scope for heroic action. The strategy by which Jim is enabled to become truly 'dead' to the world, however, and is allowed to "creep twenty feet underground and stay there," as Brierly suggests that he should (LJ 202), is by exiling himself to Patusan, where, although he will live a rich and full life, albeit brief, "it would be for the outside world as though he had never existed" (LJ 232). If death were not such a pervasive theme in Conrad's work, it might seem as if in Lord Jim it simply acts as a metaphor for his failure to play an heroic role in the eyes of his peers, a failure that is so consistently described in terms of dying.

In using death as a metaphorical vehicle, Conrad personifies objects as if they were sentient forms of life, subject to death. The drifting tree on the second page of Almayer's Folly looks like the corpse of a human being, rolling "slowly over, raising upwards a long, denuded branch, like a hand lifted in mute appeal to heaven against the river's brutal and unnecessary violence" (AF 4). In Heart of Darkness, Marlow characterizes almost everything he encounters in Africa with metaphors of death. On encountering abandoned inanimate objects, he personifies them as "dead." An "undersized railway-truck lying there on its back with its wheels in the air" looks to him "as dead as the carcass of some animal"; everywhere he finds "more pieces of decaying machinery" (HD 63-64). Later he will find his wrecked steamer equally as "dead"-- "hailed up on the slope like a carcass of some big river animal" (HD 81). Even repaired, this boat's continued 'existence' is in doubt; on its journey upriver, "the steamer seemed at her last gasp. . . . It was like watching the last flickers of a life" (HD 100).

Going beyond the conventional designation of a vessel as "she," the narrator of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" shows his empathy with the storm-battered ship's confrontation with the violence of nature by giving it the personality of a human being threatened

with death. Struggling to make way through enormous waves, the ship, "asked to do too much, appeared to lose heart altogether. . . ."

She refused to rise, and bored her way sullenly through the seas. Twice running, as though she had been blind or weary of life, she put her nose deliberately into a big wave and swept the decks from end to end." (NN 52)

Then the half-capsized ship seems to rally and begins to struggle against the ocean as a woman might struggle with a murderous assailant, at last managing to swing violently to one side "as though she had torn herself out from a deadly grasp."

The torn canvas and the end of broken gear streamed in the wind like wisps of hair. Through the clear sunshine, over the flashing turmoil and uproar of the seas, the ship ran blindly, disheveled and headlong, as if fleeing for her life. . . . (NN 88)

This vivid, anthropomorphic depiction of the Narcissus's flight from an engulfing sea reveals the cathexis of Conrad's creative energy centered on a resistance to death. Yet the ship's hard-won escape is short-lived. Conrad manifests death's inevitable victory as what begins as a description of the ship's triumphant homecoming modulates into a minor key as the Narcissus is swallowed up by the land. Roped into harbor, the ship ceases its forward movement and is immobilized as if in a grave, and the narrator says, "She had ceased to live" (NN 165). That these words parallel those used to announce the death of James

Wait, "he had ceased to breathe," suggests an equation between the two deaths, as if the living presence of the man is as illusory as that of the ship. That life is a temporary illusion--that la vida es sueño with no waking into a transcendent realm of higher reality--is the grim conclusion suggested by the unrelenting emphasis on death in the world depicted by Conrad's imagery. In his attempt "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe," he shows that beneath "its forms . . . its colors . . . its light . . . its shadows," the "aspects of matter and . . . facts of life," death is "the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect" (NN xi).

Chapter Four
Conrad's Convergent Modes:
Death and the Question of Genre

. . . the romantic feeling of reality
 was in me an inborn faculty. . . . such
 romanticism is not a sin. It is none
 the worse for the knowledge of truth.
 It only tries to make the best of it.
Within the Tides, v-vi.

. . . [I]n human affairs the comic and
 the tragic jostle each other at every
 step. . . .
 Letter to Clifford, January 25, 1919.

In spite of the overwhelming sense of mortality that evidences itself so strongly in his fiction, in 1922 Conrad could write to Richard Curle, "I don't believe myself that my tales are gloomy, or even very tragic, that is, not with a pessimistic intention (114). Indeed, Conrad's novels resist easy placement into the generic subcategories of romantic, tragic, comic, or satiric, although all these elements are to be found in them. Touching on this question, Conrad himself said in a in a 1917 letter to Sir Sidney Colvin:

Perhaps you won't find it presumption if, after 22 years of work, I may say that I have not been very well understood. I have been called a writer of the sea, of the tropics, a descriptive writer, a romantic writer--and also a realist. But as a matter of fact all my concern has been with the "ideal" value of things, events and people. That and nothing else. The humorous, the pathetic, the passionate, the sentimental aspects come in of themselves. . . . (Jean-Aubry 2:185)

Conrad here shows his impatience with the placement of his work into conventional categories according to its subject matter or style or its relegation to the genre of romance together with the novels of Stevenson for which he had little regard. His stated concern with "the 'ideal' value of things, events and people" argues a larger ambition that seeks to go beyond such limitations. Although The Nigger of the "Narcissus," was praised by Henry James as "the very finest and strongest picture of the sea and sea-life that our language possesses--the masterpiece in a whole great class" (232), such praise, in concentrating on the setting of the novel and on Conrad's descriptive power, tends to treat the work as a less complex kind of narrative than it is. The adventure genre of tales about "the sea and sea life" serves to frame the novel's concern with a deeper theme, its "'ideal' value"--the created value human beings give to their activity in the world by which they attribute a special significance to lives that Conrad could never forget hang suspended, like those of the pilgrims on the Patna, "held by an invisible hand on the brink of annihilation" (LJ 97)

J. A. Cudden calls Conrad "a supreme 'romancer,'" citing Lord Jim, Romance, and The Shadow Line ("romance"). In this listing, however, it is uncertain how much to hold Conrad accountable for Romance, and

The Shadow Line is surely less romantic than either Chance or The Arrow of Gold, the latter a work in which the genuinely autobiographical elements seemingly have been romanticized out of existence. David Thorburn sees Conrad as simultaneously indulging and resisting the romantic strain in his work (99). Whatever its romantic elements, Conrad always insisted that his fiction reflected the truth of actual experience. It is perhaps this concern to give an impression of truth that leads him in such novels as Lord Jim, Under Western Eyes, and The Arrow of Gold to employ an eighteenth-century novelistic convention of references to documents that purport to anchor a work of fiction in fact. The truth of Conrad's work, however, lies in an emotional power derived from its origin in the genuine concerns of his life, a power that transcends not only its romanticism but all of its other aspects as well. Chief among these concerns is the puzzle of human life itself--so valueless from any objective point of view and yet in which those who suffer it sense some profound though obscure significance.

Even as he evokes the romantic, Conrad questions and ironically undercuts it and exposes its limitations. A pointed example occurs in the two earliest novels in which he places the scenes of lovers' trysts amid the beauty and decay of tropical vegetation where "the faint scent of blossoms" is mixed

with "the acrid smell of decaying life" (OI 74), where plants struggle towards the sun "as if struck with sudden horror at the seething mass of corruption below, at the death and decay from which they sprang" (AF 71). In these passages Conrad places a romanticized treatment of the sexual impulse in the context of a relentless Darwinian struggle in which reproduction is mired in death and even for the fittest survival is agonized and brief.

By this emphasis on death Conrad not only challenges the romantic notion that human wishes and desires can be fulfilled and have an intrinsic value in themselves but also erodes the fundamental difference between the tragic and the comic. Literary modes and the different ways of imagining the world they imply confront each other in Conrad's fiction. That Conrad himself was aware of this confrontation is suggested by such passages as Marlow's mental debate in Chance as to whether Flora's disappearance from the Fyne household is "a tragedy" or "a farce" (C 55), or Decoud's description of the brutal revolutions in Costaguano as a "tragic comedy" (N 176). Such categories conflict with each other in a particularly striking way in three novels: Lord Jim, The Secret Agent, and Victory.

The Romantic, the Absurd, and the Tragic in Lord Jim

The Patusan portion of Lord Jim has been criticized for contaminating a serious novel of character with a frivolous element of romance, but its romantic quality is clearly a fragile creation of Jim's own ideals and expectations to which Conrad calls attention by Jim's triumphant comment to Marlow that Doramin and his wife "are like people out of a book" (LJ 260). Conrad himself deliberately couples the question of literary mode with the illusory nature of Jim's romantic view of life at the beginning of the novel when he describes Jim as having been influenced in his choice of vocation by reading "light holiday literature" describing the heroic adventures of seamen. In the Patna episode, not only does Jim fail to emulate a romantic hero, but by his jump into "the same boat" with its grotesque crew (LJ 124,125) he associates himself with the absurd--the "knockabout clowns in a farce" whose "capers of . . . fright" and "antics . . . displayed their extreme aversion to die" (LJ 104,102). Referring to what he calls the "context of black comedy" in the novel, Jacques Berthoud writes that Jim "has imagined himself the hero of an epic romance: the Patna emergency will force him to participate in a squalid farce" (76). The novel reveals itself to be not only a study of character with a tragic denouement like Jude the Obscure, somewhat awkwardly united to a

tale of romantic adventure, but also a work that in flashes anticipates such a darkly comic novel as Waugh's A Handful of Dust. Tony Last, the idealistic protagonist of Waugh's novel, is fatally "rescued" in the depths of the Brazilian forest by the apparently kindly but actually monomaniacal Mr. Todd who reserves him for a more absurd fate than starvation and disease. In Lord Jim, only intervention by Marlow protects Jim from the grotesque possibilities of the "confoundedly generous" job offer by the entrepreneurial Chester and his ancient partner, the cannibalistic "Holy Terror," Captain Robinson, whose doomed expedition would have placed him "up to his knees in guano," as "supreme boss" of forty coolies on the waterless and inaccessible Walpole Reef (LJ 167). Marlow decides that "Chester and his antique partner" are "too phantasmal and extravagant to enter into anyone's fate," thus saving the romantic Jim from this grotesque and sordid end (LJ 174). Viewed in the context of this possibility, however, Jim's actual fate as the focus of the resentment, envy and rage of friend and enemy alike on Patusan can be seen as only slightly less brutal and absurd than the one Chester would have provided him.

With the possible exception of The Secret Agent and the earliest work that is strongly influenced by Maupassant and Flaubert, in spite of his ironic posture Conrad seldom achieves the "perfect indifference"

toward his characters that is characteristic of Waugh and that he himself recommends as a technique to Galsworthy (Letters 2:359). David Daiches writes in The Novel and the Modern World that "the same story may be tragic or comic" depending on the author's attitude toward the events and characters he depicts, especially on whether or not he shows a "sense of community with the life he creates" (63). The importance of community is one of Conrad's great subjects, and his sense of alliance with certain of his characters is strong. Marlow is the chief example, and also Jim, through Marlow's insistence that Jim is "one of us."¹ This assertion reveals Marlow's realization that Jim's ambition to perform heroic actions is related in an immature way to his own desire to believe in "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct." Yet because Jim fails the challenge to his conduct when faced with a meaningless, accidental death, Marlow displays an ambivalence about Jim and about his own feelings toward him that is plain throughout the novel. The detachment of his remark that Jim's personal disaster on the Patna is "an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an ant heap" conflicts with his feeling of

¹Conrad wrote that Marlow and he "lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony. . . . Of all my people, he's the one that has never been a vexation to my spirit" (Author's Note to Youth x).

community with Jim and works against both the romantic and the tragic potential of the events on Patusan as well (LJ 93). Since it cannot be by chance that the simile "the flooding of an ant heap" would be particularly apt even were the drowning of the eight hundred pilgrims the circumstance referred to, these words also imply the essential triviality of that hypothetical event. The reader is challenged not only by the question of whether Jim's forfeiture of his life is tragically "heroic" or simply suicidal, but also, in a world where one ruined life or the extinction of many lives is essentially "devoid of importance," of whether the very concept of the "heroic" or the "tragic" has any essential validity.

Yet, as Daiches asserts, viewpoint not events determine genre. In the absence of an authorial or an authoritative viewpoint, perhaps, as Pirandello suggests, characters have the right to tell their own stories. If Marlow (and hence Conrad) leaves open the question of the interpretation of Jim's life, the views of the character himself may be allowed to have some weight. Jim imposes a particular literary form upon his life, and the novel implies that this action is not necessarily an error but a necessity--that individuals not only can but must overlay their own structure on the phenomenal world, arbitrary though it may be. Jim finds Patusan the perfect stage on which he can not

only fulfill his ideal role of romantic hero, but also, as it eventuates, seem to move up into a higher genre as he achieves a greater validation of his courage as the tragic hero who dies at the end of the play. He has fitted his life not only into the pattern of "light holiday literature" but at great cost created what seems to have the dignity of a tragic mode, finding the readiness to die that is all. The "fiendish and appalling joke" fate plays on Jim on the Patna and, through the agency of Cornelius and Brown, on Patusan as well, remains absurd (LJ 121); but as his last "proud and unflinching glance" reveals, Jim achieves an epiphany that one suspects is denied to Tony Last (LJ 416).

Farce, Melodrama, and Tragedy in The Secret Agent

In contrast to Lord Jim, The Secret Agent exhibits not a shred of Conrad's "romantic feeling of reality." Its farcial contest among futile anarchists, sinister provocateurs, and self-serving police is juxtaposed with the ironic psychological melodrama of the Verloc family, and in the process both elements acquire an enriching ambiguity. The Verlocs, basically preservers of the status quo, blindly misinterpret their circumstances and each other and blunder toward their violent deaths by explosion, murder, and suicide, while the supposedly dangerous and endangered "anarchists"

survive unscathed. This incongruity, among other things, opens the novel to the comic interpretations given it by critics such as Albert Guerard, Eloise Knapp Hay, and Ian Watt. The real suffering reflected in the life of at least one of the novel's lower middle class characters however, mirrors the pathos in a modern domestic tragedy such as Death of a Salesman. Although it could never be suggested that Conrad feels that "attention must be paid" to the death of Verloc or even of Stevie, "Winnie Verloc's story" with its "anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness, and despair" is another matter (Author's Note to SA 8). As Conrad himself asserted, Winnie's situation and character are the pivot of the novel. The radical loneliness experienced by this character on her night journey on the dark channel crossing is not a subject to be viewed with "perfect indifference" by the writer whose depiction of psychologically-isolated individuals reflects an insight that such loneliness seems "a hard and absolute condition of existence" (LJ 180) derived from his life's experience as an alien in every milieu, even that of his native country. At the same time, his ironic depiction of such characters as the bald and toothless Karl Yundt, the self-pitying and begrimed scrubwoman, Mrs. Neale, and the maimed coachman of the Cab of Death with his gaunt "steed of apocalyptic misery" (SA 128) prepares the way for the even more

savage black humor and anti-tragic farce of later fiction by Beckett. Even more, it is Conrad's depiction of the character of Stevie, the center of Winnie's world, that shifts the novel away from its investment in the older forms of satirical farce, tragedy, and melodrama forward into an anticipation of the mid-twentieth-century literature of the Absurd.

It is important to realize that Stevie represents more in the novel than a pathetic and deluded victim of political warfare whose death (ironically, consequent upon his mother's sacrificial attempt to assure his safety) leads to the deaths of the others. The novel validates his inchoate anxiety about the suffering and injustice in his world, a point that may be missed if he is considered to be an 'idiot' in its current sense of an extreme mental defective, as some critics continue to label him. He is plainly not that. Whatever the degree of Stevie's mental and emotional defect, it arises not from simple mental deficiency but from a more complex condition that combines childlike reasoning with a peculiar sensitivity. He reads well enough to get the gist of anarchist pamphlets whose atrocity stories reinforce his indignation at injustice and pain acquired in early childhood from his father's cruel treatment. He does not understand but feels keenly the real terrors of the world around him and his own helpless vulnerability. What is worse is that his

unindividuated ego can neither distance itself from the suffering of others nor discriminate, identifying equally with the misery of the maimed hackney driver and with that of his emaciated horse. He suffers to an acute degree and at all times the emotion felt momentarily by Chief Inspector Heat when he views the exploded fragments of Stevie's body: "the force of sympathy, which is a form of fear" (SA 71)--that "tenderness to suffering" that Conrad exposes in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" as ambivalent as to the true object of its concern. An intensely conscious being, Stevie has an undefended personality which, unlike that of 'normal' people, cannot suppress an awareness of chaos or through rationalization achieve a specious feeling of security in a dangerous world of random violence. His elegantly simple conclusion--"Bad world for poor people"--rings with truth, with the ambiguous adjective "poor" carrying a double meaning (SA 132). Stevie is a degenerated form of the traditional 'wise fool' character, and his inarticulateness is the negative counterpart of the chaotic gush of language that pours from Beckett's afflicted character "Lucky," in Waiting for Godot; both are psychically-maimed characters who reflect the existential disaster of the human condition.

The depiction of Stevie and the accidental nature of his death are central to the novel and consonant

with Conrad's comparison of the universe to a knitting machine that has made itself and mankind by accident and that mindlessly "knits us in and . . . knits us out" (Letters 1:425). Stevie is an inadvertant victim to whom no one intends harm, neither the ruling class as represented by Vladimir (and Verloc as well) nor the anarchists, although as one of "the weak" he is, in theory, a legitimate target of the Professor's bomb. Neither does he simply destroy himself, as Verloc self-servingly claims. He dies an absurd death because the universe blindly and without malice has grown a tree root in his path.

The bitterness of Stevie's violent death lies in the very fact that his simple intelligence joins with a sensitive imagination that can not only react with horror to stories about the cruelty of German officers but can also sense the injustice and pain that fills a world blind to the individual being. Both Conrad's fiction and his correspondence reflect the idea that human life exists in a universe in which it does not fit. Stevie also instinctively feels the disjuncture between what a human being needs the world to be and what it is. His endless circles, lines doubling back upon themselves with a machine-like repetition, repeat a pattern without progress that is "a rendering of cosmic chaos" (SA 40). They depict the universe of which Hannah Arendt has written, in which the

individual human life is an anomaly that moves "along a rectilinear line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical order" (19). Unlike Stevie, the ineffective "anarchists," Karl Yundt, Michaelis, Ossipon, and even the Professor, essentially motivated by their own egoistic needs, cannot recognize the truly anarchic universe in which they live, and certainly the obtuse Verlocs cannot. Adolf and Winnie Verloc serve as foils for Stevie in the same way that the commonplace bourgeois couple on the bench in the park in Geneva are foils for the suffering Razumov and Natalia in the eyes of the narrator in Under Western Eyes, and the ordinary inhabitants of Brussels are for the traumatized Marlow on his return from the Congo in Heart of Darkness. Paradoxically, it is not his 'normal' sister and uncle but the defective Stevie who, like Razumov and Marlow, more accurately senses the chaos and dissolution that is potential in the dangerous Conradian world and manifest in much late modern fiction.

Victory as "Ironic Romance," Spoiled Tragedy and Failed Allegory

The convergence of genres in Victory has pleased few critics, and the novel is a good example of a work that, in Conrad's words, has "not been very well understood." Elements of romance, allegory, farce, and

melodrama compete with what appears in the novel's denouement as a classic tragic pattern: Baron Heyst, a good man with a flaw, finds himself enmeshed in a fatal catastrophe and in his final speech belatedly recognizes its source in himself. Gary Geddes calls the novel "an ironic romance," writing that "no one can agree about Lena's 'sacrifice' or the meaning of Heyst's final words" (47-48). Viewing both the romantic and tragic aspects of the novel as mere blinds, William W. Bonney sees it as a "viciously ironic" work with a subversive, nihilistic subtext designed to mock those naive readers who might take seriously Heyst's final anagnoristic speech (131). Most critics would agree that the introduction of Mr. Jones as a seemingly allegorical figure representing both Death and the Devil fits poorly with the novel's initial quality of psychological realism.

The element of "ironic romance" in Victory centers on Lena, and, like Jim, this character seems to move from a romantic into a tragic mode. Helplessly trapped in the sordid circumstances of life in Zangiacomo's orchestra, she seeks to escape by attaching her "urge to cosmic heroism onto another person in the form of a love object," choosing what Becker, quoting Otto Rank calls "'the romantic solution'" (Denial 160). It is her romantic vision alone that transforms her meaningless accidental death into a sacrifice. It is

also she, not Heyst, who takes the tragic action that leads to death, and thus she seems to move out of the confines of sentimental romance into the mode of tragedy, joining Jim and Jewel, of whom Marlow says: "They had mastered their fates. They were tragic" (LJ 316). Yet even more than in The Secret Agent or Lord Jim, Victory is dominated by elements of farce that seriously contaminate such a straightforward interpretation. Not only is there a comic exaggeration in the characters, Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro, but Schomberg and Zangiacomo in their ridiculous fight and pursuit of the escaping Heyst and Lena replicate the classic comic situation of the chase. Even the romantic motivation of Lena's sacrifice ultimately fails to be validated by the novel. The nature of its object, Heyst, remains too anti-heroic and uncomprehending. And, finally, Lena's own lack of insight into the course of events leading to her death vitiates her potential as a tragic heroine, leaving her merely a pathetic victim.

If Lena's sacrifice and death fails to be tragic, so also does Heyst fail as the focus of a tragic structure. Heyst feels permanently caught in a net of evil circumstances, yet, unlike Hamlet, for instance, he can assign no cause and envision no solution. He struggles neither against himself, although he seems to sense some personal lack, nor against circumstances.

For him it is not the time that is out of joint but the entire universe--as Lena says, "everything that there is," which Heyst presumes to judge negatively but feels helpless to oppose (V 213). The paradox in Conrad's use of a tragic pattern in this novel centers on the nature of Heyst's 'tragic flaw.' It seems not to be the hubris of the Greeks--an arrogant self-confidence that claims too much as one's portion--but rather a presumption of a different kind--a modern, so to speak minimalist, claim of too little. Seeking to follow his philosopher father's final injunction: "Look on--make no sound," spoken in the bitterness of disappointment that the world had paid no heed to his own "blasts upon a terrible trumpet," Heyst seems to want nothing at all (V 175).

It was the very essence of his life to be a solitary achievement, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of an impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he had perceived the means of passing through life without suffering. . . . (V 90)

Although the last-mentioned intention--to pass through life "without suffering"--might be viewed as hubristic in itself, Heyst's is a more complex offence than simply attempting to escape the common lot of mankind. If hubris means "to ignore the warnings of the gods and to transgress their laws and commands," as Cuddon defines it, Heyst seems to become guilty of it when he

disobeys the instructions of his father, the "destroyer of systems," to avoid all attachments. He shows that he has placed his father in the role of a deity when he uses a theological term to characterize his befriending of Morrison as "a useless apostasy" against him (V 65). He drifts into this relationship most unwillingly, however for, contrary to the opinion of some critics, although Heyst fails to observe the letter of his father's law, he is at no time a rebel against it. It is, in fact, his failure to rebel against his created deity that becomes his fatal error.

Although most critics seem to assume, taking Heyst's own view of the matter for gospel, that it is his association first with Morrison and then with Lena that undermines a stance of detachment that up to that time had been intact, this is clearly a mistake. Heyst has never achieved the detachment his father preached. Ironically, it is the "few, slow tears" that roll down his face after his father's death that first signal Heyst's incorrigible attachment to the "flesh and blood" that his father scorns. He realizes that it "was because he had looked at him so long that he missed him so much. The dead man had kept him on the bank by his side" (V 175)--and Heyst remains by his father's side emotionally almost until the end of his life. Heyst can in no way be blamed for the human failing of keeping "his father's pale, distinguished

face in affectionate memory" (V 91), but it makes ironic indeed his belief, inspired by his father, that "he who forms a tie is lost" (V 199-200).

For it is his attachment to his father amounting to deification that becomes, paradoxically, Heyst's first "apostasy" against his father's philosophy. Mere intellectual agreement with his father's ideas would have allowed him look on the elder Heyst with indifference, or even with "that form of contempt which is called pity," the attitude that his father had recommended be taken toward "flesh and blood" if contempt itself were not possible (V 174). Heyst is not so much convinced by his father's philosophy as he is infected by the man's disappointment in life and the world's rejection of his wisdom. It soon becomes clear that Heyst has formed an unbreakable tie with this dead man that extends not only to his ideas but even to his possessions. He becomes "surprisingly distressed" upon learning of the expiration of the lease and the scheduled destruction of the London house filled with all his father's furniture, waiting "reproachful and mute, shrouded and locked up" (V 174-76 *passim*). The pathetic fallacy of Heyst's projection of emotion onto these objects reveals his inability to detach himself from his dead father, whose possessions have "attached him to the island" after the failure of the coal company. "I am keeping hold," he says to Davidson, to

which the captain replies, "But all this is as dead as Julius Caesar," words applicable not only to the defunct company but to the objects and the allegiance to which Heyst is clinging (V 28). Heyst's fatal attachment to his father is revealed after Morrison's death when he abandons his original plan to eschew "a hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility" and live a free life of wandering; instead he imitates his father's reaction to disappointment, and importing the paternal furniture, books and portrait ("these relics") to Samburan, immures himself with them, "a remorseful apostate" (V 177).

Heyst, "not a shining success" at school, is the mediocre son of a brilliant father whose very bitterness against those who disagreed with him philosophically shows that he could be pleased only by an unquestioning acceptance of his view of reality. Heyst's conformity with this expectation reveals the destructive dependency relationship that Becker describes in his chapter on depression. Heyst not only suffers from the guilt of the "useless apostasy" of his friendship with Morrison, but from the "existential" guilt experienced by the depressed individual that represents, according to Becker, "the failure to live one's own life, to fulfill one's own potential because of the twisting and turning to be 'good' in the eyes of the other" (Denial 213). Heyst's statement to Lena, "I

am my father, except for the genius," is plainly untrue and an almost pathological denial of his own individuality. It is, in fact, his futile attempt to be his father that is Heyst's undoing. For, as the narrator reveals, he "was not a hermit by temperament. . . . He had not the hermit's vocation" (V 31). He is instead "irrationally moved" by a "sense of loneliness which had come to him in the hour of renunciation. It hurt him" (V 66). When because of this loneliness, Heyst is again "tempted into action" and rescues, or as he guiltily thinks of it, "steals" Lena out of the ladies' orchestra, the emotional conflict arising from this competing attachment determines him "never to lift a little finger again" (V 54). He chooses to be loyal to the dead--and to death--even if it means betraying his link, through Lena, with life itself. Although he says that "when one takes a hand one must play the game," he cannot do so (V 203); "seduced . . . by a negation," he feels himself "bound hand and foot" before the invaders of Samburan. Like so many characters in modern fiction, Heyst finds himself in a double bind: for him action means apostasy while passivity means death. He defies neither his God nor the novel's stand-in for Satan (and here the two are symbolically conflated) but rather surrenders the field to both.

Although Heyst rejects Jones's attempt to draw a parallel between the two of them, the narrator's description of Heyst on the first page as "an inert body" seems to compare with the novel's insistence on Jones's "mute supineness" (V 121). Heyst's aimless wanderings resemble Jones's peripatetic travels as, in Schomberg's words, "a gentleman at large" (V 100), and the implied association with Satan is underscored when his supposed business rivals call Heyst by Satan's designation, "the Enemy" (V 24). While Heyst is contemptuous of Jones's pretentious pose of a fallen Satan, he seems helpless to oppose or even to recognize the threat inherent in what Jones truly mirrors: not a mythical figure out of an emblem book but Heyst's own nihilism and that of his beloved father.² The grotesque characterization of the trio of villains, Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro, distracts attention from the far more thematically important trio of Jones, Heyst, and his father. Jones's Satanic contempt for humanity, as critics have recognized, resembles that of the elder Heyst, who, like Jones and even, one might say, like Satan, the fallen angel himself, "had quarrelled with his people" and left home (V 33). On the novel's

²Calling Jones "Heyst's perverted and accusing double," Donald A. Dike discusses the parallels between them (103). Girard A. Pilecki neatly summarizes the thematic and textual links between Jones and the elder Heyst. Paul Kirschner writes that Jones's contempt for ordinary people sounds "like an evil parody of the doctrines of Heyst's father" (162).

realistic level, Jones is a corrupt and rejected member of society; on its symbolic level, he represents a dead man, and so his passivity is appropriate. Heyst is disarmed before Jones not only because he has no gun and has given up his keys but also because he is helpless to oppose this grotesque parody of his father's and his own rejection of life.

The events that confront Heyst on his last night in Samburan "seem to him an incomprehensible dream, or perhaps an elaborate other-world joke, contrived by that spectre in a gorgeous dressing-gown," a reference to Jones that might apply as well to his dead father (V 389). Heyst could have said of Jones what he said of his father, "He dominated me without difficulty" (V 196). Walking docilely with Jones toward his bungalow, Heyst could easily have overcome and even disarmed the weaker man but does "not even think of that"; his "very will seemed dead of weariness. He moved automatically, his head low, like a prisoner captured by the evil power of a masquerading skeleton out of a grave. Mr. Jones took charge of the direction" (V 390-91). As Heyst had allowed his father to take charge of the direction of his life, so he allows Jones to lead him to his own cottage. Passively going along, refusing to resist Jones either psychologically or physically, Heyst grants him the power to kill Lena.

The novel's incremental presentation of details of Heyst's past relationship with his father, as if dropping clues to the mystery of his behavior, encourages the reader to treat Heyst as a psychological 'case.' The novel's consequent vulnerability to psychological interpretation is one factor that works against its tragic aspect, since the determinism implicit in psychological pathology destroys the classic view of tragedy. Although Greek tragedy shows irreversible forces moving against the hero, it also suggests that at the beginning of the action he has unknowingly but freely set them on their path. If the novel is interpreted psychologically the question is left open as to whether Heyst ever possessed such freedom. If not, his fate seems not tragic but, even as Stevie's, merely pathetic or absurd. Heyst's final conversation with Davidson implicitly blames his father for his failures, and even his final speech fails as a true "recognition":

Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love--and to put its trust in life! (V 410)

This statement is a subtle transfer of responsibility for what has happened from himself to his father. Like Jim, who makes boyish excuses after the Patna fiasco ("He didn't know. It had happened somehow"; "It was their doing. . .") (LJ 111,123), Heyst betrays a deep-rooted immaturity. Since Heyst and anyone relying on

him is doomed, not through his mistaken action but through his pathological passivity, his tragic identity fails to cohere. The man's crucial failure to act at any decisive moment after he and Lena arrive on Samburan eliminates the element of struggle--the hero's losing battle against forces greater than himself--that is essential to the tragic form.

The intrusion of Jones and his companions also counters the novel's tragic and romantic potentials with an element that has a strong element of the comic and farcial. In spite of the "whole armoury of weapons in their trunks" discovered by Mrs. Schomberg, the potential threat of irresistible physical force they seem to pose should not be taken at face value (V 119). As even Schomberg recognizes, Ricardo's stories are suspect, and his suspicions that Schomberg's story about Heyst is "a blessed fairy tale" arise from the fact that he himself is a spinner of such tales and judges Schomberg "in the light of his own experiences and prejudices," as the narrator suggests (V 157). For all his talk of "ranging over the world and doing great things, and taking fortune by the scruff of the neck," Jones and Ricardo linger on and on at Schomberg's hotel gambling for "paltry" stakes with the local low rollers (V 149). Ricardo's "savage talk," as Schomberg says, is "out of proportion" (V 153). That Schomberg himself is villainous does not invalidate this remark. Conrad,

like Shakespeare, often makes his villains speak truth without cancelling their villainy.

Once settled on Samburan, Jones's inertia is striking. Despite Ricardo's show of violence against Lena and Pedro, what he and Jones truly reflect after their arrival on Samburan is Heyst's own passivity and indecision. Neither he nor Ricardo have a plan for getting at Heyst's money; Jones is full of sinister talk but otherwise takes no action, and Ricardo's ferocity seems oddly tentative, as his first encounter with Lena reveals; as for Pedro, the supposedly "murderous" wild man, he is a model of docility once his thirst is quenched. That Jones, Ricardo, and Pedro are such grotesque figures deliberately set against a realistic background exposes their menace as somehow specious. When Lena resists Ricardo's brutal sexual assault it dissipates, but Heyst's "unused faculties" fail him in his encounter with Jones, although Heyst is clearly the stronger. Jones seems more and more like stereotypical and banal stage villain, and this quality of being a caricature diminishes the menace he attempts to exude. Although he and his cohorts are a deadly psychological threat, the danger they pose to Heyst and Lena could have been resisted on a practical level; any reader can think of strategies Heyst might have used. But since not only has Heyst given up all action, but, as he says to Captain Davidson, he is also "done" with

"intelligent observation of facts," he fails at first even to perceive the threat from the unexpected arrivals that Wang instantly recognizes (V 54). Even on a symbolic level, Jones is Heyst's "retribution that waits its time" only because Heyst passively allows him to jabber "into his ear in spectral fellowship" his fanatic misperceptions about Lena's relationship with Ricardo. In the context of the Lena's accidental death followed by Davidson's arrival just too late, the deadly denouement Jones and Heyst create between themselves seems more and more to lack tragic inevitability, or even justification as a romantic sacrificial death. In Nostromo, Captain Mitchell scorns the genuinely dangerous Sotillo and triumphs against him; how much more would the equally down-to-earth Captain Davidson have scorned Jones's specious power, put the trio aboard his ship, and returned them to Sourabaya to frighten Schomberg again. Jones, Ricardo and Pedro operate within the novel as fictions within a fiction; like the spectres and devils of Nostromo, The Nigger of the "Narcissus," and The Shadow Line, they are dangerous only to the extent that they are given power. They act against the novel's romantic and tragic potential without convincingly acquiring any reality of their own.

Although faulted by many critics as a moralistic allegory, the novel's allegorical structure also fails.

As suggested above, Jones and his companions seem to represent a comic diminution of evil and death rather than its allegorical inflation. If the novel is viewed strictly as a contest between Life and Death, Life (Lena) loses, believing it has won, Death (Jones) loses, knowing it has lost, and Everyman (Heyst) also loses, having taken no real part in the contest. Allegory presupposes a stable referent outside of the microcosmic human world--a presupposition that Conrad denies; rather, the emptiness of that 'outside' is his continual preoccupation.

That Conrad juxtaposes the incongruous elements of these three novels and others seems to me deliberate. This convergence of genres is an extension of his narrative technique of using shifting points of view. It reflects "the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms" that he saw as making life "so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous--" and, paradoxically, "so full of hope" (Letters 2:348-49). The resulting ambiguity that Forster calls "a central obscurity," reflects the actual ambiguity of human experience, and leads not only to narrative techniques like "delayed decoding" but also to an avoidance of the implied conclusions and judgments of events and characters associated with generic literary categories. Although Conrad's preoccupation with death would seem to find a congenial

expression in the tragic form, this does not happen. He not only undermines the integrative effect of the romantic and the comic and the moral force of the satiric, but questions the high seriousness of the tragic as well. In a universal shambles, a tragic mode in particular can be seen as out of place, a false posturing that suggests a comic self-importance. Instead of reinforcing a tragic viewpoint, or even a nihilistic one, death becomes instead the ally of Conrad's stance of irony and skepticism.

Conrad's presentation of a competition of available fictional forms shows how arbitrary and subjective these structures are amidst the complex net of circumstances that he has created to surround his characters; implicitly it implies how much more this uncertainty of interpretation holds for their prototypes in the actual world caught in random and patternless circumstances that end arbitrarily in death. Mark A. Wollaeger relates Conrad's refusal "to accept any one literary mode or perspective as accurate and true" to his skepticism and to "the skepticism inherent in the discourse of the novel" (79). Somewhat different is my reading that Conrad's novels reflect by their internal contradictions the broader idea that the human world itself is a form imposed by consciousness on the chaos of natural phenomena of which the most intractable is death, which obliterates all other

forms. Conrad shows death as the archetypal non
sequitur to all structures of human discourse.

Chapter Five

"Imperishable Consciousness":
Conrad's "Second World"

Wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver me from
this body of death?

Romans 7:24 RSV

The real world is simply too terrible to admit; it tells man that he is a small, trembling animal who will decay and die. Illusion changes all this, makes man seem important, vital to the universe, immortal in some way.

Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

Just as Conrad could not believe in the possibility of the transcendence of death in an afterlife, neither could he soften or idealize it by writing in a purely romantic mode, ennoble it by a tragic mode, ignore it by a comic or satiric mode, nor treat it with either the stoic acceptance of what may be called realism or with the nihilistic mockery of the literature of the absurd, even while exploiting all the these literary forms. Although he rejected all "literary formulas" as fatal to the liberty of the novelist's imagination (NLL 7-8), he places these various ways of transforming the events of life into literature in juxtaposition in his novels, subsuming all of them under a consistently ironic tone. By this rather paradoxical way of attempting to create in his fiction "a world in which he can honestly believe,"

which is what he considered to be the novelist's job (NLL 6), Conrad opens up the broadest of questions: what is the nature of reality in human life, upon which death imposes the most arbitrary and incongruous of structures? By so displaying the nature of literary genre as form arbitrarily imposed on the indeterminate flux of phenomena from which literature draws its raw material, he illuminates the discovery that meaning is an arbitrary gloss on the indeterminate text of the surrounding material world. The narrow focus of generic form reflects in a general way the selectivity of the individual mind in creating its unique vision of the world, and Conrad repeatedly shows the arbitrary quality of this projected vision. When, in An Outcast of the Islands, Willems and Aissa face each other, they are

surrounded each by the impenetrable wall of their aspirations . . . hopelessly alone, out of sight, out of earshot of each other; each the centre of dissimilar and distant horizons; standing each on a different earth, under a different sky (OI 333-34).

Such characters occupy a human world that, in its qualities and values, they have created; it is a fragile structure that can be shared only in part with others and yet is for them more "real" than the material world that surrounds them with an opaque and empty solidarity.

"All that is priceless and necessary"

For many of Conrad's characters, their sense of identity is so welded to their own vision of what is 'out there' as to seem inseparable from it, and this becomes especially evident when they are faced with death. For instance, the convergence of Willems's identity with the world he knows is so compelling to him that he views his own impending death in universal terms.

[Willems] was cowed by the immense cataclysm of his disaster. Like most men, he had carried solemnly within his breast the whole universe, and the approaching end of all things in the destruction of his own personality filled him with paralyzing awe (OI 341-42).

Willems's idea that the universe would be destroyed along with his own life might be taken as a sign of pathology--a "delusion of grandeur"--but it has a certain validity of which Conrad shows that he is keenly aware. Willems's knowledge and experience of things, the untransferable vision of the world that is truly the reality of any individual, would indeed disappear with his death. His fantasy of "the approaching end of all things" does not suggest an errant solipsism so much as it reflects Conrad's sense of the nature of operative reality in the meaning of life and death for human beings. A similar passage occurs in the early pages of Lord Jim in which Jim, caught in a storm at sea, feels that the storm, by

destroying him, will annihilate not only "all he has seen, known, loved, enjoyed, or hated" but also "all that is priceless and necessary--the sunshine, the memories, the future. . . ." (LJ 11). Nostromo, also, like Willems and Jim, identifies his continuance with that of the earth itself. He cannot "imagine himself dead," since he is "possessed too strongly by the sense of his own existence, a thing of infinite duration in its changes, to grasp the notion of finality. The earth goes on forever" (N 525-26). This persistent motif reappears in Marlow's philosophical musing in Lord Jim that the "human heart is vast enough to contain all the world" (LJ 323) and in Heart of Darkness that "everything" is in the human mind, "all the past as well as all the future" (HD 96).

Paradoxically, Willems's insistent fantasy of himself dead reveals his refusal to consent to the disappearance of "his" universe. Unwilling to surrender it, he is compelled to extend his observing eye beyond the moment of his death, since he cannot imagine the existence of the world without himself watching it. Similarly, Marlow, on the evening before he is to leave Patusan, expresses his feeling that "when I left it to-morrow [sic] for ever, it would slip out of existence, to live only in my memory till I myself passed into oblivion" (LJ 323). In Victory, speaking fancifully and yet half-seriously, Lena tells

Heyst that it seems to her that if he were to stop thinking of her, "I shouldn't be in the world at all!" (V 187). Investing her whole identity into her relationship with this man, even to accepting from him a new first name, and doubtful of the permanence of her place in his reality, she asks him, "When you don't see me, do you believe that I exist?" (V 247).

An "infinity of universes"

The passages quoted above seem related to a conversation Conrad had in 1898 with Dr. John McIntyre, a pioneer in radiology, described in a letter to Edward Garnett. Besides the "nonexistence of, so-called, matter," the two men discussed the "secret of the universe," which lies "in the existence of horizontal waves whose varied vibrations are at the bottom of all states of consciousness." Conrad and Dr. McIntyre discussed the possibility of two universes or an "infinity of universes" existing "in the same place and in the same time . . . if by universe we mean a set of states of consciousness" (Letters 2:94-95; emphasis added). These words posit a relationship between the existence of universal phenomena and the perceptions of the mind. This insight has been fulfilled in twentieth century experiments in quantum physics that indicate that "to observe is to disturb," and hence, at least on the atomic level, "reality depends upon our choices of

what and how we choose to observe" (Wolf 117, 128). Conrad's letter emphasizes his own contributions to the conversation ("These things I said to the Dr. . . . It was so--said the Doctor. . ."). This emphasis and the fact that the passage about Willems was written more than three years earlier than the conversation suggests Conrad's previous exposure to and incorporation of these modern physical hypotheses into his creative imagination, exploiting and extending them in his fiction to imply a separate universe for each consciousness. In this view, the psychic isolation of the individual seems at bottom to be built into the very structure of things. It is Conrad's contemplation of such ideas, as much as personal experience, that underlies Marlow's words about loneliness as "a hard and absolute condition of existence" (LJ 180).

Thus the idea that what is "real" depends on point of view seems not merely a manner of speaking for Conrad that inspired a modernist approach to narrative technique but, in a more than psychological sense, profoundly true. The novels reflect Conrad's overwhelming concern with what he calls in A Personal Record "the living universe reflected in our consciousness" (PR 92)--the created world of illusion that forms an indivisible continuum with the dimensional world of transient phenomena through which human beings move.

Marlow speaks of "us dwellers in the flesh" as "forlorn magicians"--creators of imperfect illusions that sometimes fail to cohere (LJ 315). Such a failure occurs when Jewel's story of her mother's wretched death carries him away from the safety of his own world into the contrasting danger and darkness of hers, for him a deeply unsettling experience. He says, "There came upon me, as though I had felt myself losing my footing in the midst of waters, a sudden dread, the dread of the unknown depths" (LJ 312). The tone of Jewel's voice, he says, "had the power to drive me out of my conception of existence. . . ."

For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive. But still--it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must--don't you know?--though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge. (LJ 313)

Marlow here admits the fragility of the "shell," the "sheltering conception," protecting what he realizes is a seaman's tidy (and Western European) world view organized around ideas of rationality and order that he, on one level, shares with his English listeners but which his ironic tone reveals that he, unwillingly, can see through. Marlow's assertion that "in truth" the world is a "sunny . . . arrangement of small

conveniences" is Conrad's subtle exposure of what Anthony Mansur called the complacent bourgeois "belief that basically everything is in order as it is" (194b). The passage quoted reveals the imagination's powerful negative potential that can pose a greater danger than any outward threat. Like Wordsworth, Conrad recognizes the imagination as "[t]hat awful Power . . . from the mind's abyss" (239; 6.594), holding within itself chaos as well as cosmos.¹ The imagination is the only source of those "faint screams--day after day" that Jim hears after his fatal jump; it creates the accusing images that inhabit the place of emptiness that Decoud, like Kurtz, projects outward upon the face of nature, and it constructs the nightmare of world of guilt and alienation that Razumov carries with him wherever he goes.

The "suddenly steadied glance fixed upon nothing"

The mind's dual potential to act as both blessing and curse reveals itself in those many passages in which Conrad's characters look towards one another but clearly see something else--scenes that overlie the visible world before them. In An Outcast of the Islands, Willems's wife begs for his attention only to find that his eyes, blind to her, "in the fascinated

¹ See Conrad's affinities with Wordsworth in Thorburn, Conrad's Romanticism.

immobility of shining pupils," look "far away, far beyond her, beyond the river, beyond this land, through days, weeks, months . . . into liberty, into the future, into his triumph . . . into the great possibility of a startling revenge" (OI 347). In The Nigger of the "Narcissus," James Wait, having been hectorred by Podmore about the imminent danger to his soul that death will bring, looks through his captain standing before him "into the very hell" (NN 127). In Nostromo, as Charles Gould contemplates the news of his father's despairing death, he looks toward his beloved Emelia but not at her, staring "at nothing past a young girl's head" (N 63). A later passage identifies such inner vision not only as a source of "evil" but also as a quintessentially human act. Rousing himself after a long sleep, Nostromo is "as natural and free from evil in the moment of waking as a magnificent and unconscious wild beast," but a moment later, "in the suddenly steadied glance fixed upon nothing from under a thoughtful frown," appears "the man" (N 412).

Apparently looking at "nothing," Conrad's characters see things that act in their lives with a compelling reality. In The Secret Agent, Winnie, her features set "into a frozen, contemplative immobility," stares past Verloc at the blank wall behind him, seeing the desolation of her shattered dream of Stevie's safety (SA 182):

It was not a wild stare, and it was not inattentive, but its attention was peculiar and not satisfactory, inasmuch that it seemed concentrated upon some point beyond Mr. Verloc's person. The impression was so strong that Mr. Verloc glanced over his shoulder. There was nothing behind him: there was just the white-washed wall. (SA 181)

For Winnie, consumed by the one thought that her husband had taken her brother away to kill him, the exterior world becomes not only invisible but inaudible as well:

And across that thought (not across the kitchen) the form of Mr. Verloc went to and fro, familiarly in hat and overcoat, stamping with his boots upon her brain. He was probably talking too; but Mrs. Verloc's thought for the most part covered the voice. (SA 188).

The narrator's ironic commentary on Verloc's walk home from the embassy in a complete "detachment from the material world" so that he seemed "borne from west to east on the wings of a great wind" reveals the man's subjectivity, amounting to obliviousness to what is happening around him, that will be fatal (SA 33).

In Under Western Eyes, Razumov's hallucination of Haldin's body lying on the snowy pathway before him offers Conrad's most extreme example of the imposition of inner vision upon an outward scene. This image assumes a reality of its own, reappearing unexpectedly, like the personality of Mr. Hyde within Dr. Jekyll, whether it is summoned or not. As Razumov is interviewed by Mikulin, his very brain seems to merge with a vision of Haldin's supine figure:

At that moment Razumov beheld his own brain suffering on the rack--a long, pale figure drawn asunder horizontally with terrific force in the darkness of a vault, whose face he failed to see. . . . The mysterious impossibility to see the face . . . inspired a sort of terror. (UWE 88)

The face of "his own brain" that he fails to see, it is implied, would appear as the face of Haldin, the man who, intruding himself into Razumov's world of prudence and circumspection, has shattered it, implicating him in a violent act of a fanatic idealism foreign to his own philosophy. Haunted by Haldin's image, Razumov must tear apart his bed to prove that the dead man is no longer there, only to confront an hallucination that materializes another dominating idea--the staring eyes of General T-- and Councillor Mikulin watching him for signs of guilt (UWE 302). Razumov walks the streets of Geneva as Verloc walks in London, "a somnambulist struggling with . . . [a] dream," staring through his acquaintances into his own private nightmare (UWE 299). Irrationally, this man of reason experiences a momentary fear that Madame de S--, who claims to see into his "very soul," can also see the figure of Haldin: her eyes have "a dry, intense stare, which, missing Razumov, gave him an absurd notion that she was looking at something which was visible to her behind him" (UWE 224).

Similarly, in Lord Jim, Jim, on the witness stand, notices Marlow looking at him and thinks: "This fellow

looks at me as though he could see somebody or something past my shoulder" (LJ 33), and Marlow observes that Stein's eyes, as he is telling Marlow a story from his past, seem "to look far beyond the wall at which they stared" (LJ 208). Jim himself, living most intensely in his interior world of heroics derived from fiction, consistently looks through the scene before him into another dimension, into the "secret truth," the "hidden reality" of his life (LJ 20). In these passages Conrad does what Paul deMan says that Wordsworth did: he "puts into question the ontological priority of the sensory object" (16). Perhaps more than any other of Conrad's characters, Jim's 'real' life is created by his imagination. It is clear to Marlow that even as Jim attempts to explain himself, "he was not speaking to me, he was only speaking before me, in a dispute with an invisible personality, an antagonistic and inseparable partner of his existence--another possessor of his soul" (LJ 93). Out "of all mankind," Marlow says, "Jim had no dealings but with himself" (LJ 339). Stein characterizes Jim in universal terms as typical of "man" who "every time he shuts his eyes . . . sees himself as a very fine fellow--so fine as he can never be. . . . In a dream. . . ." (LJ 213). He had, Marlow says, "that faculty of beholding at a hint the face of his desire and the shape of his dream" (LJ 175). Sitting with him at

dinner before the Patna inquiry, Marlow notices his eyes looking "straight before him as if reading something written on the body of the night" (LJ 81), and he realizes that Jim is thinking of what might have been if he had remained on board the Patna, the "chance missed" for heroic action:

I could see in his glance darted into the night all his inner being carried on, projected headlong into the fanciful realm of recklessly heroic aspirations. . . . He was very far away from me who watched him across three feet of space. With every instant he was penetrating deeper into the impossible world of romantic achievements. He got to the heart of it at last! A strange look of beatitude overspread his features, his eyes sparkled in the light of the candle burning between us; he positively smiled! He had penetrated to the very heart--to the very heart. (LJ 83)

Unfortunately, Jim's imagination not only creates his heroic ideal but at the beginning of the novel makes its fulfillment impossible by his paralyzing anticipation of disaster that transforms his "dream" into a nightmare as terrible as Razumov's. His faculty of "swift and forestalling vision" immobilizes him on the damaged Patna, creating a "hot dance of thoughts in his head, a dance of lame, blind, mute thoughts--a whirl of awful cripples" (LJ 97). Watching the ominous slant of the deck,

[Jim] could depict to himself without hindrance the sudden swing upwards of the dark sky-line, the sudden tilt up of the vast plain of the seas, the swift still rise, the brutal fling, the grasp of the abyss, the struggle without hope, the starlight closing over his head forever like the vault of a tomb--the revolt of his young life--the black end. (LJ 96)

In the "created terror of his imagination," Jim experiences this event that happens only in his own mind--not only his own extinction but "all the fear, all the horror, all the despair of eight hundred human beings pounced upon in the night by a sudden and violent death" (LJ 113). Marlow observes that as Jim recalls it, his stare, "missing me altogether, seemed to probe at the heart of some awful vision. . . ." (LJ 100).

Marlow wonders why Jim seems to him "symbolic" (LJ 265), but it is clear that, among other things, Jim symbolizes both the positive and negative powers of human imagination that define both identity and fate. He represents "youth on the brink, looking with shining eyes upon that glitter of that vast surface [of the sea] which is only a reflection of his own glances full of fire" (LJ 129) as well as those Marlow designates as "us," of whom he suggests that "our imagination alone . . . could set loose upon us the might of an overwhelming destiny" (LJ 342). In his "exalted egoism" (LJ 416), Jim represents "mankind itself, pushing on its blind way, driven by a dream of its greatness and its power upon the dark paths of excessive cruelty and excessive devotion" (LJ 349-50).

"To the destructive element submit yourself"

In The Mirror of the Sea, Conrad writes that human beings are imprisoned "in the house of personal illusions" (MS 183). Countering the suggestion that such an imprisoning limitation is wholly negative, however, Stein's famous simile comparing human life to treading water characterizes the "dream"--man's creative consciousness of himself and his fate--as the "destructive element" from which he cannot escape but which can also save him (LJ 214). Although Lord Jim fully justifies Marlow's doubt of "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (LJ 50), in its place the novel shows what Bruce Johnson describes as "the power of human ego and imagination to confer value upon abstractions and idealize its own desires" (65)--a power that is able either to destroy or to save. Conrad confronts the reader with the epistemological problem involved in evaluating what is the nature of reality for another mind. Marlow cannot conclude that Jim's 'reality' is false or even misguided, however unfortunate its consequences are both for him and for those who participate in his fate. As suggested in Chapter Four, Conrad seems to imply that the life of each individual is a fiction created by himself the final meaning of which, in the absence of an Ultimate Reader, must remain within its author

and so be forever undetermined. The deepest concern of Lord Jim is not Jim's cowardice or courage but his power to make his particular version of reality come true as a saving power rather than a destructive one. Its story of Jim's life and death anticipates Becker's description of the symbolic nature of the human experience:

[M]an . . . lives in a world of symbols and dreams and not merely matter. His sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols, on an abstract idea of his own worth, an idea composed of sounds, words, and images, in the air, in the mind, on paper. And this means that man's natural yearning for organismic activity . . . can be fed limitlessly in the domain of symbols and so into immortality. The single organism can expand into dimensions of worlds and times without moving a physical limb; it can take eternity into itself even as it gaspingly dies. (Denial 3)

Conrad shows that the tragedy and the perceived evil in human lives lies primarily with the human condition itself--a state of existence in which an intensely sensitive consciousness, absurdly convinced of its own significance, confronts overwhelming evidence of its irrelevancy in the universe. Thus, individuals are doomed to live in what seems "an overwhelmingly tragic and demonic world" (Becker, Denial 281) to which their own passions and weaknesses are contributory rather than causal. Confronting the fact of meaningless death, Conrad illuminates the dynamics of what Becker calls the individual's "'second' world . . . of humanly created meaning, a new

reality that he can live, dramatize, nourish himself in"--in which "illusion" is not a negative concept but "means creative play at its highest level" for "a small, trembling animal who will decay and die" (Denial 189, 133). In his essay on Henry James, Conrad pays tribute to the magical power of "creative art" that creates "the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values--the permanence of memory," thus taking human beings "out of [their] "perishable activity into the light of imperishable consciousness," even though it is "imperishable only as against the short-lived work of our industrious hands" (NLL 13; emphasis added). In his novels Conrad shows that this creative power of consciousness is possessed not only by artists but by ordinary people who shape the raw material of their experience into their own reality. For although Conrad characterizes mankind's consciousness of being "victims of nature" as tragic (Letters 2:30), his fiction shows that consciousness transcends its environment, placing the individual firmly within an inner, symbolic world that, as the passage from Becker at the beginning of this chapter asserts, can counter even the bleak realization of mortality. No writer has shown himself more aware of the truth expressed by Milton in the words of the fallen angel: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n"

(Paradise Lost I.254-55). Although in discussing the character, Singleton, with Cunninghame Graham, Conrad treats the development of consciousness as a kind of fall out of bliss of animal unconsciousness (Letters 1.423), he shows in his fiction that it can be transformed into a fortunate one. Conrad, like Becker, seizes upon man's "tragic" self-consciousness--his power to see himself in the center of a world in which his perceptions, his desires and his destiny seem to have an intrinsic value--as the one doorway through which he may escape his animal fate and move into another and freer dimension. In the timeless present of such an internal universe, the intractable problem of meaninglessness consequent upon death becomes moot. Although the solution to the problem posed through Marlow and Stein of "how to be" remains elusive, basic to understanding Conrad's vision is a recognition of the insight most openly expressed in Lord Jim: the dual nature of the imagination as both destroyer and creator, the "very source of sorrow" and its consolation as well (LJ 235), the "destructive element" that will "keep you up" (LJ 214), the threatening angel that each individual can wrestle with until it blesses him.

Chapter Six

"How to Be": The Opportunity of Emptiness

We picture the world as thick with
conquering and elate humanity, but here,
with the bugles of the tempest pealing,
it was hard to imagine a peopled earth.
One viewed the existence of man then as
a marvel, and conceded a glamour of
wonder to these lice which were caused
to cling to a whirling, fire-smitten,
ice-locked, disease-stricken, space-
lost bulb. The conceit of man was
explained by this storm to be the very
engine of life. One was a coxcomb not
to die in it.

Stephen Crane

I have set before you life and
death, blessing and cursing:
therefore choose life. . . .
Deuteronomy 30:19

In spite of his insight that consciousness experiences the world almost entirely on a subjective and symbolic level, Conrad's emphasis on action and choice precludes a surrender to solipsism. As he characterizes his work to William Blackwood, "it is not an endless analysis of affected sentiments but in its essence it is action . . . action of human beings that will bleed to a prick, and are moving in a visible world" (Letters 2.418). Certain characters in the novels confront death and the material contingency that negates them as human beings with strategies of action the success of which is problematical but the value of which, it may be argued, lies in their subjective

transcendence of the instinct for simple survival. "I am overwhelmed by the sense of our mortality and it is that--not death--that kills us," Conrad once wrote to a friend when he was ill and depressed (Letters 3.65). It is not the fact of death that is overwhelming, he is saying, but the "sense of our mortality"--the inward surrender to the thought of it--what Conrad identifies in The Shadow Line as "the creeping paralysis of a hopeless outlook" (SL 93). Radically pessimistic, even nihilistic, as certain passages in Conrad's correspondence are, such despairing feelings are not simply transferred untransmuted into the fiction. His creative work is the medium in which he wrestles with the philosophical problem presented by death. The quality most honored by the authorial voice in the novels, whether in words or by implication, is what Marlow, Conrad's favored persona, identifies in Lord Jim as the highest form of courage: the ability "to fight a losing battle to the last (LJ 88). Having once failed this ultimate test of courage on the deck of the Patna, Jim recognizes the irretrievable disaster in Patusan as a chance to appropriate death even as it is imposed on him, to integrate it into the self-created heroic story of his life. By this strategy, called by Otto Rank a "creative appropriation" (64), characters such as Lena in Victory, Dr. Monygham in Nostromo, and Razumov in Under Western Eyes incorporate death into

their personal myths of meaningfulness in a sacrificial action and thus symbolically triumph against it.

These novels maintain a tension between an emphasis on the finitude and absurdity of the material world and a celebration of humanity's expansive and self-actualizing sense of being. Raymond Williams's comment on Waiting for Godot might be justly applied to them.

[T]he pattern is desperate and yet the movement, paradoxically, hopeful; the feeling is bitter and dark, yet the speech lively, irrepressible; in an essential way comic and accepting. . . . [I]t is . . . this tension that is the real action. . . .
(305).

Conrad insists on the centrality of the inner life, its priority over the most extreme and irreversible circumstances. As he wrote in a letter of advice to an aspiring writer, "Remember that death is not the most pathetic--the most poignant thing--and you must treat events only as illustrative of human sensation--as the outward sign of inward feelings--of live feelings--which alone are truly pathetic and interesting" (Letters 1.252). Even in his last novels, as David Schwarz argues, Conrad continued to dramatize "states of consciousness" ("Continuity" 152). He reveals the inward consciousness of his characters as a creative power, the resource of last resort upon which they may draw when faced by death's negative answer to the question of the meaning of their lives.

"But it was a victory!"

For Jim, drawing on an ancient warrior ethic, his personal myth of meaningfulness is the ideal of his own heroism in the face of death--what Marlow calls his "shadowy ideal of conduct," which he refuses to surrender even when it is unfulfilled by his actions (LJ 416). To overcome his fear of death, Jim must find a setting in which his death can seem to be a coherent element in the structured romantic world of his imagination where he can act out his chosen role as hero. His identification with the invulnerable heroes of boys' adventure stories at the center of this symbolic world becomes the "secret truth" of life and this fictional realm of romance "its hidden reality"--as long as he can cling to the identification (LJ 20). A "forlorn magician," trying to restore the broken remnants of his life to wholeness, Jim recognizes Stein's gift of Doramin's ring--"like something you read of in books"--to be a "sort of credential" (LJ 233-34), a "talisman" that he sees as validating his heroic identity (LJ 415). Symbolically, it becomes for him a magic ring of virtue and power from the tradition of fairy tales, its efficacy apparently unailing until Gentleman Brown's "sickening suggestion of common guilt" in such acts as "saving one's life in the dark" reminds him of his past failure, breaking the magic spell of his fragile belief in his own virtue (and

hence his invulnerability) (LJ 386). Jim's removal of the ring from his finger to send as a token to Dain Waris becomes an act imbued with dramatic irony, symbolizing the loss of this enchanted state. The disaster that follows is, in this symbolic sense, what Tamb' Itam believes it to be: "the failure of a potent charm in a supreme moment" (LJ 351). But Jim grasps the catastrophe with desperate resourcefulness as an opportunity to play a variation on the heroic role: to keep his promise "to answer with his life for any harm that should come" from his mercy to Brown (LJ 392), taking the responsibility "upon his own head" (LJ 415). Thus, "under his own little cloud," Jim contrives, as Marlow had observed once before, to "draw consolation from the very source of sorrow" (LJ 235) and transform the disaster into a triumphal restoration of his lost honor. His death becomes a "success" both as an internal experience and as an outward performance as he fulfills an action he sees as heroic and honorable before the fascinated gaze of a hundred people who show from their murmured words, "He hath taken it upon himself," that they do as well. Jim acts out a ritual of reparation and self-sacrifice that is for him and the onlookers coherent and appropriate. Because of his--and their--conviction, the waste of his life becomes tragic, and its potential for absurdity, latent in the events themselves, remains unrealized.

In choosing the "romantic solution," Lena, in Victory, abandons passivity and becomes an actor rather than a pawn in the events that end her life. She seizes upon the presence of the sinister strangers in Samburan as an opportunity to participate in a mythic dimension which connects her with an ancient legend of her culture; Ricardo's knife becomes for her a symbol of "every danger and menace on the death-ridden earth"--the very sting of death," and, in capturing it, she imagines "the venom of the viper in her paradise extracted, safe in her possession--and the viper's head all but lying under her heel" (V 399). With her naive hyperbole taking the form of this biblical allusion that pervades the entire episode, she transforms Ricardo's knife from a weapon into the trophy and symbol of her triumphal "victory over death" that has "saved" Heyst. "There will be no more!" she says (V 405-06). Although Lena's "victory" is illusory because she cannot save Heyst (who does not even wish to be saved), she achieves for herself the same kind of "extraordinary success" that Jim experiences at the moment of his death. That Lena's altruism, like Jim's, is mixed with egoism does not negate it. As physical beings, they are programmed by nature to fight for survival, but, failing this, their imagination gives them the option of 'saving' themselves symbolically, and they do so.

Although in much current criticism Lena's final affirmation, like that of Heyst, is considered to be parodic, Conrad does not use the denouement of his novel merely to mock the delusion of an ignorant girl, disoriented by her surroundings and demoralized by the helplessness of her emotionally moribund lover. Her "tremendous achievement" becomes a death blow for Heyst rather than his rescue, yet it is of a piece with the dying Jim's "extraordinary success" that Tamb' Itam sees as failure and Jewel sees as desertion. Such a "success," rooted though it is in an "exalted egoism" not only "excessively romantic" but characteristically human in its inflated sense of the power and importance of the individual, must nevertheless be counted as the real achievement that Marlow, in the subtlety of his understanding, considers it to be (LJ 416). Such romantic egoism is, as Stein remarks, "very bad" but "very good, too," because it permits both Jim and Lena to experience a moment of heroic magnanimity as real as anything else in a world that Conrad described as "always but a vain and floating appearance" (Letters 2:30). One may smile at the inflated sense of self-importance of a Lena or a Jim, and indeed there is irony in the narrative tone of these passages that describe their costly triumphs, but it is resigned irony like that of the narrator of The Nigger of the "Narcissus" who realizes the legitimate claims of the

beseiged ego. Conrad recognizes such egoism, according to a 1901 letter to the New York Times, as "the moving force of the world" (Letters 2.348) or as his friend Stephen Crane describes it in his story, "The Blue Hotel," the "very engine of life."

Although the dark and abysmal vision of the dying Kurtz is accepted by some critics as an authentic reflection of an authorially-privileged nihilism, Jim's "proud and unflinching glance" on beholding the face of death (LJ 416) and Lena's final affirmation of her "tremendous victory, capturing the very sting of death in the service of love" (V 405) are epiphanies as universally symbolic and as characteristically Conradian.¹ It is important to note that Marlow describes Kurtz's cry of horror as a summation and a judgment of his life rather than as a negation of life itself. That he also calls it "the expression of some sort of belief" and a "victory" suggests a parallel to Lena's "victory" and Jim's "extraordinary success." "It was an affirmation," says Marlow, "a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory!" (HD 151). That in their final moments the experiences of

¹Conrad's denial of a parallel between Kurtz's point of view and his own in a letter to Arthur Symonds is worth noting: "I did not know that I had 'a heart of darkness' and 'an unlawful soul.' Mr. Kurtz had, and I have not treated him with the easy nonchalance of an amateur" (Letters 4.100).

Kurtz and Lena are described by the same word--
victory--is more than coincidental. To assume that
while Lena remains entirely deluded about reality,
Kurtz achieves at last a true insight into life is
unwarranted. Both of them have struggled to come to
terms with their experience of life in ways that
reflect their own capacities and ideals. Neither is
Lena's inflated aspiration to altruism negated by her
wish to possess Heyst but is rooted in the same impulse
as Kurtz's hubristic intention to "exert a power for
good practically unbounded" while extracting ivory from
Africa--the failed intention that makes possible his
final triumphant word of judgment. The "victories" of
each of these three characters in the face of death
would be for Conrad inescapably subjective and their
"glimpsed truth," if any, partial and unprovable. Yet
in regard to them Conrad seems to take the stance for
which he praises Henry James who, he writes, knew how
"to drape the robe of spiritual honour about the
drooping form of a victor in a barren strife" (NLL 14).
Jim and Lena, and Kurtz as well, reflect an "exalted
egoism" that is neither to be taken at face value nor
to be despised but to be wondered at as part of the
mystery and the spectacle of human life. To say that
these subjective victories are not 'real' is to divorce
what is human from reality almost at the threshold of

perception. Since any reality outside perception is forever inaccessible, vanishing as the senses encounter it, to deny the effective existence of such triumphs as Jim and Lena's is truly to invoke nothingness and posit a total negativism not characteristic of the main thrust of Conrad's fiction.

The "supreme energy of an act of renunciation"

Conrad repeatedly shows heroic action as sacrificial behavior in a dubious and doomed cause: in Lord Jim, not only Jim's surrender to Doramin and the actions of the Malay steersmen on the Patna, but little Bob Stanton's hopeless attempt to rescue the lady's maid from a sinking ship; in Victory, Lena's compromising and dangerous attempt to save Heyst; in The Secret Agent, Stevie's mother's departure to a charity home to protect Stevie; in Nostromo, Dr. Monygham's risk of his life to save the Gould Concession, in The Shadow Line, Ransom's life-threatening exertions to help save the ship "without a crew"; in The Rover, Peyrol's suicidal voyage in support of the French cause. In Under Western Eyes, no fewer than five prominent and opposed characters exhibit this behavior: the radical revolutionists Haldin and Sophia Antonovna, the self-abnegating humanitarians, Tekla and Natalia, and Razumov, the

individualistic, conservative student who risks physical violence and death not only to save Natalia from loving her brother's murderer, but to regain his moral integrity from soul-destroying imprisonment in a lie.

Conrad generalizes on the creative force of sacrificial actions in two of his essays on literature. Writing on Maupassant, he says that "all great virtues" are "based primarily on self-denial," and, discussing the work of Henry James, that "[a]ll adventure, all love, every success is resumed in the supreme energy of an act of renunciation. It is the uttermost limit of our power; it is the most potent and effective force at our disposal" (NLL 25, 16). These words make clear that Conrad sees self-denial and renunciation as acts of empowerment rather than humility, and in his fiction he shows them to be so.

Although Conrad found the "impossible standards" of Christianity to be a source of much human suffering, he thus employs its ideal of self-sacrifice as an effective strategy of moral survival. Such sacrificial acts retain no traditional Christian content; they have, for instance, nothing to do with humility or obedience, and Conrad expressed contempt for the idea of "atonement through suffering" (Letters 1.95). Neither, however, are they suicidal acts of despair.

They are, in a way, acts of self-assertion. Although in a meaningless world such acts obviously are meaningless, Conrad seems to treat them as self-fulfilling, as if by their very performance they create the meaning that justifies them. As one critic writes, Conrad shows that "mind and will are potentially more powerful than the absurdity of the universe; they are capable of inventing values upon which paradoxically men can base triumphant, even though defeated, action" (Lois A. Michel 136). For Conrad, sacrificial action can act as an extension of identity in which the self is not diminished but rather enlarged.

Dr. Monygham in Nostromo and Razumov in Under Western Eyes, in particular, embrace self-sacrifice as such a strategy at the risk of their lives. In associating with and serving the poor, Dr. Monygham follows the example of one "who made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant" (Phil. 2.7), and he is, consequently, "despised and rejected of men" (IS 53.3). In his dangerous deception of Sotillo about the location of the treasure that eventuates in his waiting with a rope around his neck to be hanged, he demonstrates that other Christ-like characteristic of "greater love"-- the willingness of to "lay down his life for his friends" (John 15.13)--or at least for one of them. While there is no allusion

to these scriptural passages in the text, it seems significant that the character chosen by Conrad to be one of the two moral spokesmen against the "material interests" in a novel filled with religious imagery should be a man who acts in a manner so obviously upholding scriptural values. Although the fair-haired and aristocratic horseman, Charles Gould, riding "straight out of some green meadow at the other side of the world," might better seem to exemplify the chivalric idealism that grew from a Christian root, it is Dr. Monygham who most closely follows the paradigm of chivalry. The cause Gould idealizes is compromised by its material object, while the cause for which Monygham is willing to die is both more noble and, if not intangible, at least untouchable---the unattainable lady, Emelia. Such parallels make Monygham neither a Christ-figure nor a chivalric hero but do reveal Conrad's retention of the heroic models of the mythos of his childhood that, once dominant in European culture, is obsolete in the modern secular, capitalistic society of which the novel takes a negative view. These types, Conrad implies, still represent admirable and effective forms of human behavior despite the dissolution in the modern world of the ground that formerly supported them.

In Under Western Eyes, Razumov, like Jim and Dr. Monygham, through a sacrificial act that risks his life, restores his integrity in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. Like Jim, who abandons the passengers on the Patna in attempting to save his own life, Razumov, attempting to save his career and his freedom by betraying Haldin, at first fails the test of fidelity to the human cause only to realize too late that "it was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed most basely" (UWE 361). For from the moment he finds Haldin in his rooms, Razumov is trapped in the classic 'no-win' pattern of tragedy as is, in Conrad's view, mankind itself. The autocratic machine of the Russian state with its immense indifference to the individual parallels the inexorable machine of the universe that, in Conrad's view, "knits us in and ... knits us out." Compounding his betrayal of Haldin by concealing his hatred and telling Haldin to "depend on me," Razumov experiences the kind of spiritual or moral death that Conrad associates with lying, afterward rising in the morning at the sound of the maid's morning knock, "pale like a corpse obeying the dread summons of judgment" (UWE 303). Having deceived Natalia and the revolutionists, Razumov chokes on the "fumes of falsehood" that take him "by the throat" as he converses with Sophia Antonovna on the grounds of the Chateau Borel, and "that tainted atmosphere" is only

dispersed by his confessions (UWE 163). By confessing, Razumov, like Jim and Lena, chooses encounter disaster rather than fly from it, as if the voluntary acceptance of the worst that could happen were his way of retaining a measure of control over fate. The "shadowy ideal of conduct" by which the hero of Lord Jim both condemns and (in his own eyes) redeems himself has the same redemptive power for Razumov. Although he writes to Natalia that he must "go out--and perish," and believes that he is "done with life" (UWE 361-62) his confessions are in a psychological sense a choice of life over death. Afterward, when attacked by the universal killer, Necator, he fights back. Deafened, crippled, and slowly dying, his reputation and ambitions blasted, Razumov chooses to live on with Tekla, receiving visits from revolutionists like Sophia Antonovna, who find that he "has ideas," and "talks well, too" (UWE 379). Like Natalia, whose "self-suppression" in returning to Russia to serve the poor and oppressed the narrator calls "a great victory," Razumov takes the kind of sacrificial action that Conrad sees as life-enhancing rather than suicidal (UWE 375). Thus, although rejecting Christianity, Conrad retains its model of heroism, its images of transcendence emptied of theological content but retaining their

power as processes that are in essence symbolic actions that resist death's negation of significance.²

"I had to watch the steering"

Conrad employs the imagery of "steering" and "the helm" as a metaphor of action and control opposing the forces of dissolution surrounding every human enterprise, and thus it represents a resistance to death. This running image is closely associated with the virtue of "Fidelity," which for Conrad represents not passive adherence to a cause or an ideal but rather a stubborn determination to act in support of a chosen value or obligation. Conrad's idea of "Fidelity" seems parallel to some extent with Gabriel Marcel's interpretation of what he calls "creative fidelity" that "implies an active and continuous struggle against the forces of interior dissipation" (34-35). Conrad consistently identifies "steering," as an active and engaged response to the dynamic forces of nature, with heroic behavior, beginning with the example of Singleton in The Nigger of the "Narcissus," who, after thirty hours of holding on to the wheel in the storm still "steered with care" (NN 89). The ship's successful battle against the engulfing sea is signaled

² For a different view on Conrad's biblical allusions, see Purdy on their parodic nature and Bonney's argument that they are "synonymous with inevitable destruction" (131).

by his triumphant cry, "She is steering," as the Narcissus rises, lurches and tears itself out of the sea's "deadly grasp" (NN 87-88). Among the many sins of the villain, Donkin, who hurries James Wait along to his inevitable death, is that he is "the man that cannot steer" (NN 10). The two Malay helmsmen who remain "holding to the wheel" in Lord Jim stand as foils to Jim and the other officers who abandon the ship to its fate. "So these two lascars stuck to the helm of that ship without steerage-way," Marlow says, "where death would have found them if such had been their destiny" (LJ 99). In Heart of Darkness, having "to watch the steering" of his steamer on the Congo River saves Marlow's fragile morale from collapsing amid the "wild and passionate uproar" on shore as the metaphorical darkness of encroaching nature closes in around him (HD 96-97). His African helmsman, for all his imperfections, "had done something, he had steered" (HD 119), and, significantly, it is because this helmsman abandons the wheel that Marlow must crowd the boat into deep water near the bank where a spear pierces the man, killing him. In The Shadow Line, the sentence, "There was still no man at the helm," reveals the destructive inertia of the young captain-narrator of the becalmed ship who cannot shake off a "sense of finality"; when his "seaman's instinct" responds to the challenge of an approaching storm hidden behind the

black stillness surrounding the ship like "the end of all things," his returning energy for life expresses itself in his thought that "there ought to be a man at the helm" (SL 108-10). At the end of this novel, when keeping the "wildly rushing ship full of dying men" under control is all that can be done, the captain, like Marlow on the Congo River, is saved from demoralization because he has "to give all [his] mind to the steering" (SL 124). On two occasions in The Shadow-Line, Conrad directly reveals the significance of this metaphor: once, when the captain observes that the "strong brown hands grasping the spokes of the wheel stood out lighted on the darkness like a symbol of mankind's claim to the direction of its own fate" (SL 76) and again when he observes that the "bare forearm extended over the upper spokes seemed to shine with a light of its own" (SL 110). In Conrad's last effort at fiction, the uncompleted historical novel, Suspense, the same symbolism appears in the image of the "ancient steersman . . . in an unexpectedly erect attitude" who "with hardly any breath left in his body and a mere helpless victim of other men's will, had a strange appearance of the man in command" (S 270-71)). This aged man at the tiller of a small boat ignores the approach of the "dark galley" called by Guerard "an archetype of the crossing into death" (291), and the final juxtaposition of these two images defines the

dynamic opposition of the forces of life and death that runs through Conrad's fiction.

Since a ship is a traditional symbol for a community, the metaphor of steering and the helm stands for an action that concerns more than the individual. Conrad's strong sense of hierarchy, moral in nature, makes a rather sharp division between those who feel a sense of obligation to some larger community and those who don't--for whom there is nothing, or no one, to whom they would feel an obligation to "render an account" of their lives. Such people, says Marlow, "do not count" (LJ 222). This harsh judgment must color the interpretation of characters such as Decoud and Heyst who seem to be merely playing at action and commitment. They may possess charm but they lack Conrad's primary virtue of "Fidelity" that presupposes an identification with something--be it a person, a community, or an ideal--beyond the self. Through indifference and a fastidious negativism toward what is ordinary, they become radically detached even towards their own lives, and, significantly, they both commit suicide. Conrad sees such characters as in alliance with death. Just as the "high-minded resignation which prevented him lifting as much as his little finger" paralyzes Jim on the Patna (LJ 95), a nihilistic "conviction of the utter uselessness of all effort" (N 500) condemns Decoud to death, and a corresponding

negation of effort is a death sentence for Heyst and four others on Samburan.³ As the omniscient observor of Decoud's gradual disintegration observes, "In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part" (N 497). When characters such as Decoud and Heyst reject a creative vision of human significance, they are left to share the fate of what Conrad saw as a mechanical material universe in its irreversible progress towards entropy and extinction.

Heyst is the last of Conrad's modernist anti-heroes, a type of literary character which has been defined as "the man who is given the vocation of failure" (Cudden). Since he "never did care . . . for being alive," his suicide at the end of the novel is simply the culmination of the life-long movement toward death that his encounter with Lena has only briefly interrupted (V 212). Some critics have questioned the author's intention in writing Heyst's final speech. While the speech certainly is not a sudden, sentimental affirmation of life, in view of the dialectical processes in Conrad's fiction neither does it seem likely that it is a parody that privileges its

³Contrary to Bonney's reading that it is "Lena's deluded obsession" that "leads to the ugly deaths of five people including herself" (128), it is Heyst's passivity that creates the vacuum that her reckless actions fill.

opposite: negation. Heyst's words may be read as a simple recognition that his own negation of life has cooperated fatally in creating the disaster. The words are not an abandonment of intellectual skepticism on Heyst's part, since they do not refer to the mind at all but to the heart. Heyst does not say that "life" deserves or rewards one's trust but simply that it is sure that one whose heart does not hope, love, and trust in life will experience woe, as he is experiencing it--that the emotions of hope, love, and trust are life-enhancing even if not based on any final truth.

Davidson's last remark after the deaths of Lena and Heyst--"There was nothing to be done there. . . . Nothing"--has been cited as an affirmation of nihilism (Bonney 129). But these words seem rather to be another of those truisms about death that Conrad seems compelled to state: the banal but terrible fact that death has closed off all options and ended all opportunities for action; "there" is a place where everyone is dead, and nothing can be done about that. Flawed though it is, Victory exemplifies what is present but not so baldly presented in much of Conrad's other fiction--the insight cogently stated by Becker that, "as reality is partly the result of human effort, the person who prides himself on being a 'hard-headed

realist' and refrains from hopeful action is really abdicating the human task" (Denial 278).

"The victories are not perhaps so barren. . . ."

Conrad's novels make plain that ultimate failure--the loss of consciousness to death--is inevitable for all. Paradoxically, his constant emphasis on the theme of death in a meaningless universe reinforces rather than denies the importance of action and choice for his characters. It is because the phenomenal world is essentially meaningless until human beings interpret it to themselves that, in Guerard's words, for Conrad "all conduct signifies" (302).⁴ That Conrad's affirmations are grounded in the subjective realm rather than in the observed actuality of the phenomenal world does not invalidate them. They are operational. He sees that pragmatic strategies of conduct such as "Fidelity" have enormous momentary value in structuring a life in which "momentary" is all the time there is. A meaningless universe has room for the creation of meaning, just as a blank canvas gives scope for the painter's imagination. Artist that he is, Conrad in his best work reveals an intuitive vision of the world that may

⁴The idea that human beings have the freedom to create meaning "precisely because there is no provision for meaning in the world 'over' man's head" (emphasis added) is developed by Choron (Modern 188-93) in his discussion of Nicolai Hartmann's critique of teleological thinking.

be compared to an abstract painting that, although emptied of conventional content, still retains what the eye seeks and will find in--or impose on--its elements: an implicit structure, a balance of tensions, the potential for symmetry sensed in an assymetric balance of dynamic forces. Like the achievement of art, human life, for Conrad, is an ordering of chaos.

Conrad shows death to be the victorious enemy that in its arbitrary and absolute limitation of human significance--of the idea of "meaning" itself--consciousness continues to deny and he as an artist must confront. The ubiquity of death in both plot and background in Conrad's novels does not derive merely from personal despair or fin de siècle gloom but from his determination to take into the fullest account the action of death on human life so as to create in his fiction "a world in which he [could] actually believe" (NLL 6). This willingness to foreground the event of death that makes irrelevant all human values and yet not abandon those values in despair emerges as a defining characteristic of his unique vision.

Conrad's treatment of death may be associated with what Otto Rank in Art and Artist defines as the creative response to the human condition in contrast to a non-productive, neurotic one: it is "the volitional affirmation of the obligatory" (65). Such a creative affirmation may be seen in the action of Hawthorne's

Hester Prynne when she transforms the obligatory label of her disgrace into an artifact of gold embroidery, not concealing the ugly fact but transforming it. "The artistic reaction," Rank writes, is "an overcoming of the trauma . . . whether this is achieved by a single effort or is spread over the whole life work" (64). For Conrad, the acute consciousness of death that reveals itself in his novels is the trauma to be overcome by what Rank calls a "creative appropriation," the "deliberate affirmation of the existence forced on us by fate" (65) that contains it within an integrative process. By opposing the metaphors of inertia with those of action, he counters the nihilistic implications of his presentation of the impenetrable and blank opacity of a material world and the abyssal darkness and emptiness of death. As he never lets the reader forget, these are simply the given conditions faced by human beings. For him, the very existence of mankind's observing and self-asserting consciousness in a blind and deaf universe is an act of absurd hubris fated to be put down. Yet in his essay on James he speculates that when "the last word [is] uttered in the stilled workshop of the earth," it "will formulate some hope," and that the victories of a mankind that "will sleep on the battlefield among its own dead" and "will not know when it is beaten" are "not, perhaps, so barren as it may appear from a purely strategic,

utilitarian point of view." They are, as Conrad wryly says of the struggles of James's protagonists, "heroic (in the modern sense)" (NLL 14-15). And despite Conrad's fracturing of the tragic form, it can also be held that some of his defeated characters are tragic, if only "in the modern sense" that the meaning of their lives and deaths is self-created.

Conrad looks without evasion on the bleak prospect of an existence subject to arbitrary termination and places in counterbalance the divergent reality of an internal world of the imagination where memory transforms human life into a coherent structure. It is there--if only there--that human beings may affirm or negate themselves and that their values can endure. The formidable challenge Conrad takes up in the novels is to hold these two opposed realities in tension, to live, as it were, with a foot in both worlds, sustaining a dual vision that lives with the confrontation of "outer" with "inner," of death with life. He has that courage of which Becker speaks that is able "to face up to the eternal contradictions of the real world. . . to absorb into [his] own being the maximum amount of non-being. . . . to take into his own organization the maximum amount of the problematic of life" (Denial 279). In so doing, Conrad displays the quality that Keats called "Negative Capability," the attribute that Lionel Trilling gives to Keats

himself: an "unremitting urge toward the dialectical view of any deep question . . . [a] refusal to allow himself to be fixed in a final judgment on the nature of life" (28). This is another form of the "intellectual . . . humility" that Conrad recognized as "the way of excellence" in opposing what he calls "moral Nihilism" in fiction. Aware that the limited vision of any individual precludes the drawing of final conclusions, Conrad identifies the hubristic root of such nihilism when he writes:

What one feels so hopelessly barren in declared pessimism is just its arrogance. It seems as if the discovery made by many men at various times that there is much evil in the world were a source of proud and unholy joy unto some of the modern writers. (NLL 8).

Although Conrad is aware that things--and meanings--fall apart, the novels do not document the absence of meaning so much as they celebrate the fact that it keeps reappearing. Just as such an inconstant thing as meaning in language achieves so much, its fragile structure carrying so much weight, meaning in life, Conrad discovers, is also an absence that keeps answering "present." Conrad's sense of a void at the center of things, the abyss that haunts him, includes an awareness that this nothingness is space to be filled--the realm of possibility and potential. Hillis Miller suggests that Conrad gives man the radical freedom "to make of his own nothingness what he will"

(58). Human beings, as Conrad sees them, may be "forlorn magicians," but they are magicians indeed, for what they create is everything that matters. Like Job, faced with the questions quoted at the beginning of this study, Conrad does not try to answer unanswerable questions. Although he had "seen the doorkeepers of the place of darkness," he could not presume to comprehend "the vast expanse of the world," yet he recognizes in it an "amazing spectacle," so rich in its variety of potential forms mysteriously unfolding, illusive but inescapable, that the "living universe reflected in our consciousness" is all human beings need--or can--be concerned about (PR 92-93 passim). It may be only a "vain and floating appearance" (Letters 2:30), but, like the blank pages on which Conrad struggled so painfully to create his fiction, it is the nothingness out of which human beings create the world.

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