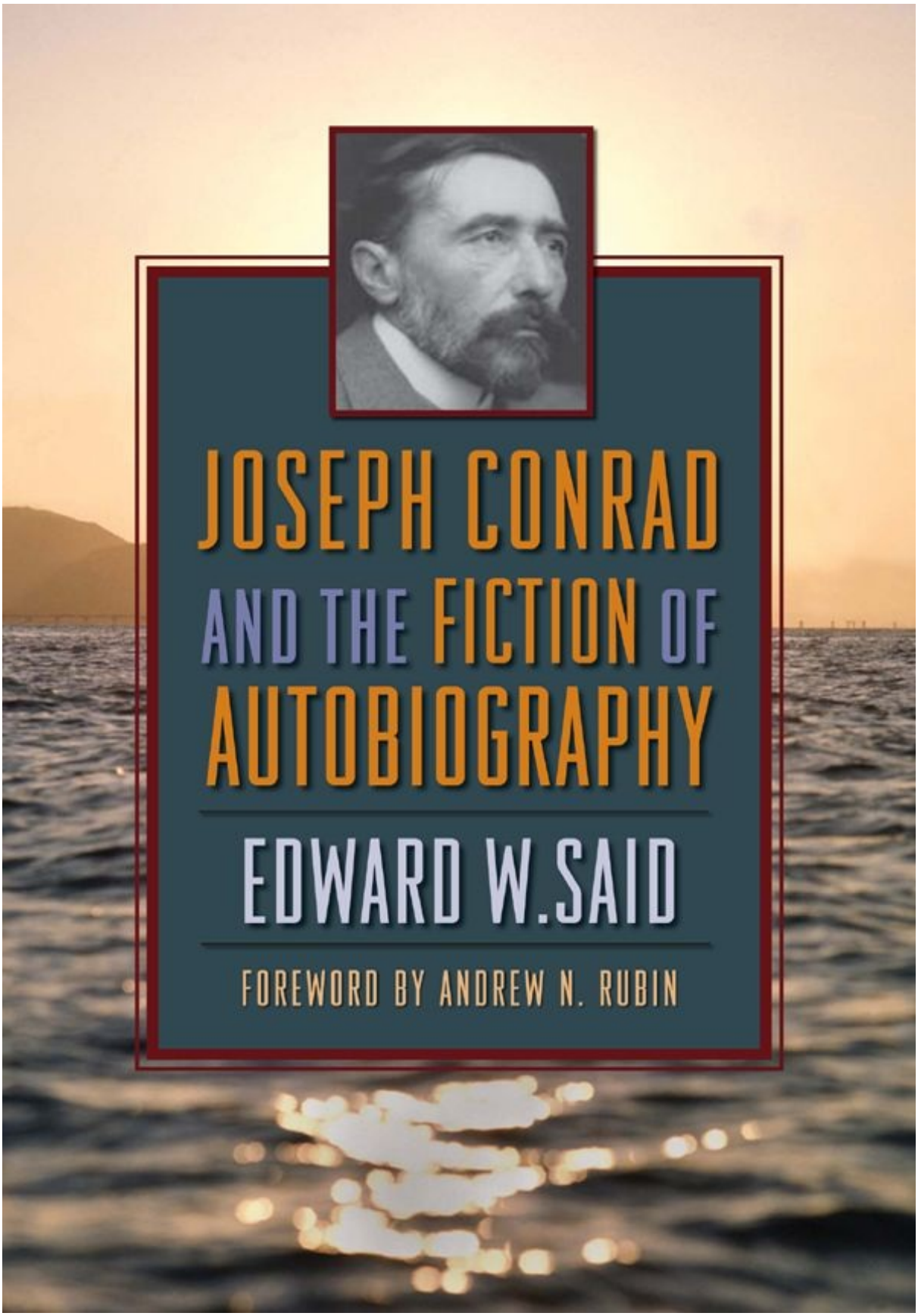
JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE FICTION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

EDWARD W. SAID

FOREWORD BY ANDREW N. RUBIN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Edward W. Said

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TO MY PARENTS

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Foreword

OF ALL THE AUTHORS to whom Edward Said gravitated constantly throughout his career as a literary critic, Joseph Conrad was, as he remarks, “like a *cantus firmus*, a steady ground bass to much that I have experienced.” “No one,” he writes, “could represent the fate of lostness and disorientation better than Conrad did, and no one was more ironic about the effort of trying to replace that condition with arrangements and accommodations.”[1]

On the face of it, there is a great deal in Joseph Conrad’s life with which Said could identify. Both were born and lived under the dictates of foreign or colonial rule. Driven out of their native homelands, the two wrote in a language that was not their native tongue. They shared the unsettling experiences of dislocation, exile, and marginalization. Caught in the disjuncture between two worlds (the disappearing *anciens régimes* or colonial worlds from which they were displaced and the new, unfamiliar, and uncertain worlds where they would arrive and would ultimately remain), their cultural and political uprooting demanded, to echo Said, adjustments and certain “arrangements and accommodations.” Their exile afforded both Said and Conrad a remarkable acuity to comprehend the diversity, variety, and particularity of human experience while being conscious of its exclusions, its silences, and its prejudices. And in many respects, the condition of exile expanded their consciousness even more broadly; in their awareness of at least two cultures, their diversity of vision “gave rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that … [was] contrapuntal.”[2]

Yet the similarities of their experiences are far less important to Said as critic than the trajectory of their lives would suggest.[3] No other writer, he says, is so capable of conveying the “aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness.”[4] “The overtones, the accents, the slippages, the sense of being in and out of language, being in and out of worlds, the skepticism, the radical uncertainty, the sense that you always feel that something terribly important is going on, but you cannot tell what it is

(what Forster made fun of), has just gripped me more than any other writer, in some ways, like an echo chamber," he observed in an interview.[5]

Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography, Said's revision of his dissertation originally written under the supervision of Monroe Engel and Harry Levin at Harvard University, is "a phenomenological exploration of Conrad's consciousness." It is a sustained and rigorous examination of how Conrad's short fiction is mediated and then reinforced by his letters, which G. Jean-Aubury had edited and published in 1927, three years after Conrad's death. The examination of Conrad's letters is not, however, an effort to relate the lived realities of the writer to his work, reducing the narrative of Conrad's life to the narratives of his short fiction. Rather, Said uses the dynamic between the letters and Conrad's short fiction to investigate the conditions that express the menacing ambiguities and peculiarly unsettling overtones of his literature. If the letters represent Conrad's tormented relationship to himself—one mediated by the problem of language—they elaborate the inexplicable tensions and complex literary forces in his short fiction.

His letters (the most fascinating being those to the writer Robert Cunninghame Graham) portray Conrad in an embattled self-conflict from which he is entirely incapable of deriving any meaning at all. They repeatedly express his frustrations with the inadequacy of words, their slippages of meaning, and the overall inability of language to circumscribe or fully enclose experience in a word or phrase. He tells his friend Arthur Symons how he is "quarrying his English" out of some "dark pit."[6] To Edward Garnett he describes the exigencies of writing as futile, like "lifting the world without a fulcrum."[7] In one letter that Said cites, Conrad writes, "I see nothing, I read nothing. It is like a sort of tomb, which would be a hell, where one must write, write, write."[8] For Conrad, writing happens—if it happens at all—in the presence of nothing in particular and in the absence of everything in general. The demand to "write, write, write" becomes the nearly absurd necessity to render this contradiction visible or spoken. Literary activity is essentially a process of capturing the particularity of words that disappear in a spectral opacity before they may be briefly embodied in any form at all.

The representation of the discrepancy between the subject of language and the object of writing is in essence a crisis in mimesis,

whose only ironic solution is the willful exertion of various arrangements and accommodations. “If the world is a conflict of willful egoism,” Said writes, then the need for recognition is the original egoism, the root from which everything else springs. In seeking the kinship of reflective understanding however, the performer of an action inevitably is forced to reduce himself to a level below the normal limits of active human life. There is a draining of strength as the past action is sapped of all content by the reflecting present. Only the surrounding darkness remains substantially palpable. In the present the corroding power of thought and interpretation completely absorbs the actualized situation and leads to an anarchic enlargement of the self. The mute, or nearly mute, agent who wishes himself fully understood grows more simple and direct, becomes less accessible to the complex reflecting mind. And the reflecting, enervated mind, desiring relief in action, becomes even more complex, less and less able to grasp things *as they are*.[9]

Said’s emphasis on this phenomenological preoccupation (being condemned to meaning) and the existential predicament (being condemned to living) provides the coordinates of an antinomy (an opposition between an embattled subject and a dynamic object) that gets transposed onto the works themselves. He designates three distinct phases in Conrad’s literary development: 1896 to 1913 (from his decision to become a writer to his recognition as a writer); 1914 to 1918 (the turmoil of war and the dissolution of the *anciens régimes*); and finally 1918 to 1924 (when Conrad, like Europe, underwent an uneasy reconciliation).

Once he re-coordinates Conrad in the conjunctures of these sociohistorical processes, the active interplay between the letters and the short fiction discloses patterns precisely because the antinomy strengthens Said’s capacity to describe and analyze Conrad’s literary procedures and narrative strategies. Thus, in Conrad’s early short fiction, there is a motivated attempt to comprehend an action that, at the time of its inexplicable occurrence, intransigently resists thought.[10] The “ominous quiet”[11] that initiates such tales as “An Outpost of Progress,” *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,*” “Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, “Tomorrow,” “The Secret Sharer,” and “Freya and the Seven Islands” is made all the more resonant by the stories’ settings in unfamiliar and remote places. A

retrospective pattern repeated in stories such as “Falk,” “Lagoon,” “Typhoon,” “Karain,” *Heart of Darkness*, and *Narcissus* in different variations unifies in all of them the idea that the discourse of the present cannot possibly enclose or circumscribe the past.[12] The tension between the condition of narration and the story itself often produces the strange literary phenomenon whereby “both the story and the teller recede” into each other.[13] Furthermore, the impossibility of reflecting directly the cause of a series of fixed and particular occurrences leads only to a further search for causes and the origins of them—an infinitely interesting and meaninglessly infinite process, which can only be rendered as obscure, inscrutable, impenetrable, and intransigent.[14] Generally speaking, the stories record illusions, but the true meaning behind them is never supplied, except in the enigmatic form of reported speech: “the horror, the horror.”

Nowhere are the implications of Said’s first examination of Conrad’s techniques more powerfully expressed than in his later interpretation, “Two Visions of *Heart of Darkness*,” in *Culture and Imperialism*. While Conrad’s novella provides an extraordinary account of the imperial attitudes of conquest and the tremendous devastation that accompanied it, what differentiates it from the works of other colonial writers of the late nineteenth century is that Conrad does not provide a simple, directly narrated account of Marlow’s search for Kurtz. He argues that *Heart of Darkness* is a “dramatization of Marlow himself.”[15] By framing Marlow’s narrative as a winding tale told to a group of business figures listening to him as they wait on the deck of the *Nellie* for the tide to turn on the Thames, Conrad stresses its contingency. Marlow’s narrative is, he says, performed, “acted out,” calling attention to the activity of the multiple registers involved in its telling. While his accounts are carefully staged, there are also “dislocations in the narrator’s language.”[16] Marlow is never straightforward, and he seems capable only of rendering the story more and more obscure.[17] The text is complicated, Said argues elsewhere, by the fact that there are nearly half a dozen “languages” or registers in it, each with its own particular set of modes of address and idioms, each contained by its own sphere of time, and each with its own angular standpoints. These distinctions, he suggests, are Conrad’s way of attempting to reconcile the mimetic crisis that frustrated him throughout his career. “By disposing and redispersing, then reassembling, language

into voices," he writes, "he could stage his work as a writer."[18]

This literary tension disturbs the entire construction of reality in the novella, but at the same time discloses the contingency of writing as an act of sheer human will to put language into textual form. Yet in precisely that way, "Conrad can show that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention, the same is true of empire, of venerating the idea. With Conrad, then, we are in a world being made and unmade more or less at the same time."[19] Conrad's dramatization of the crisis of the mimetic powers of language, Said argues, shows imperialism in its historical rarity and contingency, and at the same time documents the prevailing and principal ideas that sustain it. Conrad, he writes, "permits his later readers to *imagine something other* than an Africa carved into dozens of European colonies, even if … he had little notion of what that Africa might be."[20] At the time of Conrad's writing (1898–1899) there was no other coherent and available discourse of anticolonial resistance to challenge the systematic violence that Europe perpetrated at an enormous human cost in Africa and elsewhere. Yet it is crucial to emphasize Said's remark that Conrad provides the conditions for an "imagined" and alternative consciousness while preserving the text's autonomy as a work of art. Only after Said shifts from the elucidation of the text's particular elements involved in the dramatization of Marlow's narrative does he adduce that *Heart of Darkness* provides the literary conditions of possibility for *imagining* another space or geography that is not subjected to imperial domination and conquest.

The working through of this technique has rather significant implications for Said's approach as a whole because the problems Conrad raises entail the radical possibility of representing and knowing the world in nondominating and noncoercive ways—essentially the main aim and overriding intention of Said's *oeuvre*. This observation permits us to see the contours of his project and the dialectics of its overall critical drive within the larger scope of his literary and cultural theory and criticism: from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) to *Orientalism* (1978) to the last work published during his life, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2003).

Conrad's radical view of language is an occasion for critical explication. It is the subject of a sustained focus, multiple

reconsiderations,[21] and various theoretical turns and subsequently becomes the object of Said's own restless questioning and skepticism. He arguably first discovers this skepticism in his early reading of Conrad's letters, but whatever its source, the subject of Conrad's literature gripped him throughout his life. Conrad's literary techniques and the problems they posed led Said to the works of Nietzsche and Foucault. What is crucial, however, is that Conrad's preoccupation with the mimetic powers of language and the willful activity of writing becomes a critical element in *Orientalism*.

Orientalism is informed by Said's engagement with Conrad's radical view of language. "The Orient was a *word* [emphasis mine]," Said writes, "which later accrued to it a wide field of meanings, associations, and connotations. … These did not necessarily refer to the real Orient but to the field surrounding the *word*," enabling the "Orient" to become the object of Western discourse.[22] "By showing that all human activity depends on controlling a radically unstable reality to which words approximate only by will or convention,"[23] Conrad anticipates Said's Nietzschean claim that the "Orient" becomes "a will … not only to understand what [was] non-European, but also to control and manipulate what was manifestly different."[24] Nietzsche, to whom he compares Conrad,[25] asks: What is truth? But a mobile host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, the sum of all human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which after long usage, seem to people to be fixed, canonical and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have been worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins that have lost their embossing and now are considered metal and no longer as coins.[26]

To understand human relationships and the rhetorical techniques by which they have been consolidated requires us, as Said observes, to displace words that stand in for existence and for the uneven relations between human beings. Such an interpretation demands the invention of new idioms activated by a memory of the realities silenced and buried in language.[27] In the "space of words,"[28] a critically aware knowledge of the multiple interactions of cultures and traditions can establish the conditions for liberation and, most important, an awareness of imagined

alternatives that may, as this and his other books show, be discovered in literature.

Andrew N. Rubin

Notes

1. Edward W. Said, “Between Worlds,” *London Review of Books* 20, no. 9 (May 7, 1998): 3.
2. Edward W. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Reflections on Exile* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.
3. Said’s engagement with Conrad’s exile developed more fully several years after *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Autobiography*. In an interview he said, “The whole question of exile and language in Conrad really came to a climax in 1972 when I went to Poland for the first time for a conference on Conrad at Polish Academy of Science. People such as Ian Watt were there, so was Thomas Moser—many people whom I had read, but whom I had never met. It was shortly after the end of Gomulka’s rule. The situation was very repressive. Immersed in a world I had no idea about, I found myself speaking about Conrad to a Polish audience that did not necessarily understand what I was talking about. It was a very strange experience. The fact that the experience did not settle into some kind of easy pattern has haunted me ever since. After that, I pressed on with Conrad, and Conrad always seems to come back [to me] in one way or another.” Interview with author, July 16, 1999.
4. Said, “Between Worlds,” 3.
5. Edward W. Said, *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage, 2000), 421.
6. Qtd. in Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 55.
7. Qtd. in ibid., 54.
8. Qtd. in ibid., 51.
9. Ibid., 112–113.
10. Ibid., 88.
11. Ibid., 92.
12. Ibid., 92.
13. Ibid., 95.
14. Ibid., 95.
15. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 23.
16. Ibid., 29.
17. Ibid., 29.
18. Edward W. Said, “Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative,” *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 99.
19. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.
20. Ibid., 26.
21. See, for example, Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975); “Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative,” *Novel* (Winter 1974); Edward W. Said, “Conrad and Nietzsche,” *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Macmillan, 1976); Edward W. Said, “Two Visions of Heart of Darkness,” *Culture and Imperialism*, 19–43.
22. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 203.
23. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 29.
24. Said, *Orientalism*, 12.
25. Said, “Conrad and Nietzsche,” 70–82.
26. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large, trans. Daniel Breazeale (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 117. Said cites most of this quotation from Nietzsche in *Orientalism* (203), but he uses Kaufmann’s translation, which is slightly different than Breazeale’s, from which I quote here.
27. Edward W. Said, “Identity, Authority and Freedom,” *Reflections on Exile*, 404.
28. Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 83.

Preface

CONRAD'S LETTERS (now amounting to eight published volumes) provide us with an almost embarrassingly rich testimonial to the intensity and variety of his intellectual life. Yet his critics have not made much use of them. His biographers cite them only to illustrate his state of mind at a given moment, or to make an incidental point about his thinking on one or another matter. His exegetes have ignored the letters for the most part, arguing correctly that one should either develop a working relationship to the whole body of letters or leave them alone. I have undertaken the first, and more interesting, alternative because it seemed to me that if Conrad wrote of himself, of the problem of self-definition, with such sustained urgency, some of what he wrote must have had meaning for his fiction. In short, I found it difficult to believe that a man would be so uneconomical as to pour himself out in letter after letter and then not use and reformulate his insights and discoveries in his fiction.

I first studied the letters in chronological order. After a time they appeared both to form an organic whole and to fall naturally into groups that corresponded to stages in Conrad's developing sense of himself as a man and as a writer. Certain dominant themes, patterns, and images recurred, much as they do in his highly patterned fiction. In addition, I was able to discover, recorded in the letters, a curious phenomenon in Conrad's life. This was the creation of a public personality that was to camouflage his deeper and more problematic difficulties with himself and with his work. The intellectual and spiritual climax of the letters—when they are considered as Conrad's personal history—coincided not only with the fulfillment of his desire for self-discovery, but also with the climax of an important phase of European history: this is the period of World War One. A radical transformation in outlook occurred, and it influenced his spiritual and artistic activity until his death in 1924.

The inner dynamics of Conrad's letters seem to be paralleled especially closely in his shorter fiction. First, Conrad always believed (or perhaps made himself believe) that artistic distinction was more tellingly

demonstrated in a shorter rather than a longer work. Second, he felt that he had more control over the shorter forms than over the novels and was therefore doing his most authentic work in his shorter pieces; the origin of this notion is to be found in his uncertainty about himself, an obsessive concern of his letters. He believed that his life was like a series of short episodes (rather than a long, continuous, and orderly narrative) because he was himself so many different people, each one living a life unconnected with the others: he was a Pole and an Englishman, a sailor and a writer. Hence it was natural for him to express himself more effectively in short works, even if it is not always true that his tales are less imperfect than the novels. But I hope that my study of the letters and the shorter fiction together is sufficiently large in its major concerns to provide the outline for an integral reading of Conrad's total *oeuvre*. I found that the thirty or so tales accompany, reflect, and criticize his intimate writings because nearly every one of these tales is written in variations of what can be called a "retrospective mode," and that mode, also varied, is the very same one he uses in his letters. It then became possible to read the tales not only as objects of literature but, with the letters, as objects that were of spiritual use and significance to Conrad the man. Such a reading not only gives new insights into and solutions for the difficulties of the fiction, but also accounts for much of the fiction's success and power. Finally, I hope that such a reading enriches and deepens our admiration for Conrad as an eminently self-aware, responsible, and serious artist. This portrait of his mind and work will, I think, balance the current view of him as a writer of "mythic" or "unconscious" fiction.

In its original form this study was a doctoral dissertation done at Harvard University. I am greatly indebted to Monroe Engel and Harry Levin (both of whom read and commented on the original manuscript) for their generous encouragement and consideration. E. Duncan Aswell very kindly read and commented on the manuscript; his suggestions were of great assistance to me as I made the final revisions. I am very grateful to Joyce Lebowitz of Harvard University Press for her sympathetic and expert editorial guidance. To the never-failing support and interest of my wife Maire, the words "debt" and "thanks" do not begin to do justice.

E. W. S.

New York
October 1965

Blackwood—Joseph Conrad: Letters to William Blackwood and David S. Meldrum (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958).

Curl—Conrad to a Friend, 150 Selected Letters from Joseph Conrad to Richard Curie (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1928).

Garnett—Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895–1924 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1928).

Lettres—Conrad, *Lettres françaises* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930).

LL, I or II—G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1927).

Poradowska—Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska, 1890–1920 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940).

Roman and arabic numerals—Conrad, *Complete Works, 26* vols. (Garden City, NY Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925), volume and page, as follows:

I. *The Arrow of Gold*
II. *Chance*
III. *Notes on Life and Letters*
IV. *The Mirror of the Sea*
V. *The Inheritors*
VI. *A Personal Record*
VII. *Romance*
VIII. *Tales of Unrest* (“Karain: A Memory,” “The Idiots,” “An Outpost of Progress,” “The Lagoon,” “The Return”)
IX. *Nostromo*
X. *Within the Tides* (“The Planter of Malata,” “The Partner,” “The Inn of the Two Witches,” “Because of the Dollars”)
XI. *Almayer’s Folly*
XII. *The Rescue*
XIII. *The Secret Agent*

XIV. *An Outcast of the Islands*

XV. *Victory*

XVI. *Youth* (“Youth,” *Heart of Darkness*, “The End of the Tether”)

XVII. *The Shadow Line*

XVIII. *A Set of Six* (“Gaspar Ruiz,” “The Informer,” “The Brute,” “An Anarchist,” “The Duel,” “Il Conde”)

XIX. ’*Twixt Land and Sea* (“A Smile of Fortune,” “The Secret Sharer,” “Freya and the Seven Isles”)

XX. *Typhoon* (“Typhoon,” “Amy Foster,” “Falk: A Reminiscence,” “Tomorrow”)

XXI. *Lord Jim*

XXII. *Under Western Eyes*

XXIII. *The Nigger of the “Narcissus*”

XXIV. *The Rover*

XXV. *Suspense*

XXVI. *Tales of Hearsay* (“The Warrior’s Soul,” “Prince Roman,” “The Tale,” “The Black Mate”)

Part One

Conrad’s Letters

Language surrounds each speaking subject, like an instrument with its own inertia, its own demands, constraints, and internal logic, and nevertheless remains open to the initiatives of the subject (as well as to the brute contributions of invasions, fashions, and historical events).

Merleau-Ponty, “The Metaphysical in Man”

I

The Claims of Individuality

ON November 1, 1906, having received an affectionately inscribed copy of *The Mirror of the Sea* from Conrad, Henry James wrote to his odd Anglo-Polish colleague: “No one has *known*—for intellectual use—the things you know, and you have as artist of the whole matter, an authority that no one has approached.”[1] Conrad could scarcely have wished for more eloquent tribute to the mastery with which, in the little book of sea sketches, he had consciously mediated claims of memory and artifice. *The Mirror of the Sea*, however, was an agreeable item fashioned by Conrad out of what James called “the prodigy of your past experience.” To the casual observer—which James was not—Conrad’s experience was largely a matter of ships and foreign ports, seas and storms: that, anyway, was what *The Mirror of the Sea* seemed to be about. Yet to Conrad, and to his fellow expatriate James speaking from a shared community of “afflicted existence,” experience was a spiritual struggle filling what Flaubert had called the long patience of artistic life. When in *The Mirror* Conrad covered his deeply felt experience with a surface that showed very little of what his life had really cost him, he was acting like Almayer, one of his characters, who in erasing his daughter’s footsteps in the sand was denying the pain she had caused him.

Even in the best of Conrad’s fiction there is very often a distracting surface of overrhetorical, melodramatic prose that critics like F. R. Leavis, sensitive to the precise and most efficient use of language, have severely disparaged. Yet it is not enough, I think, to criticize these imprecisions as the effusions of a writer calling attention to himself. On the contrary, Conrad was hiding himself within rhetoric, using it for his personal needs without considering the niceties of tone and style that later writers have wished he had had. He was a self-conscious foreigner writing of obscure experiences in an alien language, and he was only too aware of this. Thus his extravagant or chatty prose—when it is most noticeable—is the groping of an uncertain Anglo-Pole for the least awkward, most “stylistic”

mode of expression. It is also the easiest way to conceal the embarrassments and the difficulties of an overwhelmingly untidy existence as a French-speaking, self-exiled, extremely articulate Pole, who had been a sailor and was now, for reasons not quite clear to him, a writer of so-called adventure stories. Conrad's prose is not the unearned prolixity of a careless writer, but rather the concrete and particular result of his immense struggle with himself. If at times he is too adjectival, it is because he failed to find a better way of making his experience clear. That failure is, in his earliest works, the true theme of his fiction. He had failed, in the putting down of words, to rescue meaning from his undisciplined experience. Nor had he rescued himself from the difficulties of his life: this is why his letters, where all of these problems are explicitly treated, are necessary to a full understanding of his fiction.

Pain and intense effort are the profound keynotes of Conrad's spiritual history, and his letters attest to this. There is good reason for recalling Newman's impassioned reminder in the *Apologia* that any autobiographical document (and a letter is certainly that) is not only a chronicle of states of mind, but also an attempt to render the individual energy of one's life. That energy has been urgently apparent, and pressing for attention ever since the publication in 1927 of Jean-Aubry's *Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters*.

The abundant difficulties with which the letters teem are, nevertheless, the difficulties of Conrad's spiritual life, so that critics are almost forced to associate the problems of his life with the problems of his fiction; the task here, different but related, is to see how the letters relate first to the man and then to his work. Each letter is an exercise of Conrad's individuality as it connects his present with his past by forging a new link of self-awareness. Taken in their available entirety, Conrad's letters present a slowly unfolding discovery of his mind, his temperament, his character—a discovery, in short, that is Conrad's spiritual history as written by Conrad himself.

The accurate grasp of someone else's deepest concerns is never an easy matter. But even in the case of a writer like Conrad, whose self-concern was so intense, it is possible to view his letters in the essential, even simple, terms of their internal disposition. To cite "pain" and "effort" as hallmarks of Conrad's experience, for example, reveals little

specifically of the man other than that he allowed himself repeated encounters with what caused pain and required effort. Yet there is a way of picturing Conrad in a characteristic and consistent stance or attitude of being, which enables us to perceive just what it was he was struggling against, and this way is to apply Richard Curle's wise observation that Conrad "was absorbed … in the whole mechanism of existence."[2] In these terms not only is it possible to apprehend the degree and kind of Conrad's pain and effort, but one can also discover the immediate reasons for them. Granted, of course, that Curle's phrase is perhaps unintentionally wise, and granted that the letters are informal and personal rather than formal or systematic, a peculiar kind of "absorption" is everywhere apparent in Conrad's letters, particularly since the existence to which he was committed was so manifestly enduring in its trials. For Conrad's absorption, as I understand it, was that he consciously felt a large measure of unrestful submission to the complexities of life, on the one hand and, on the other, that he remained interested in the submission not as a *fait accompli* but as a constantly renewed act of living, as a *condition humanisée* and not as a *condition humaine*. "The whole mechanism of existence" further explains Conrad's preoccupations by allowing him the assumption that life itself was the total of a series of particular occurrences. Certain of these occurrences, and especially those concerning his own welfare, were connected and informed by a mechanical and perverse inevitability; nothing like cosmic optimism could be attributed to the structures of such events. He was, he felt, simply a man tortured by a finite number of intolerably fixed situations to which he seemed to return everlastingly, and this very fact had a curious pull on him. The dynamics of these persisting situations are what gripped Conrad almost from the beginning of his recorded writings to their end. And it is both the situations themselves and the way they unfold (their metaphorical expression) that the letters record in prodigious detail.

There is more to be said about this haunting phrase, "the whole mechanism of existence." From Conrad's point of view—for the phrase has sympathetic echoes in the letters—it is a statement about a certain kind of conscious psychology. At first sight it is reminiscent of eighteenth-century mechanistic psychology, say of Hartley's theory of association and elementary determinism. To the contemporary mind, however, the

phrase appeals easily to the commonplaces of the Freudian or Jungian psychologies, to the “mechanism” of the unconscious, to the complexes, myths, archetypes, and rituals in which each individual is somehow implicated. Yet, in his remarkable study, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, Jean-Paul Sartre points up the inherent contradiction in a psychology confined to the unconscious. He writes there: “It is the profound contradiction of all psychoanalysis to introduce *both* a bond of causality and a bond of comprehension between the phenomena which it studies. These two types of connection are incompatible.”[3] Sartre’s distinction between causality and comprehension is a useful way of remarking that an analysis of a hypothetical *cause* does not logically make the *effect* comprehensible. If the unconscious can be said ultimately to determine the conscious—and this point is not at issue—we are hardly closer to comprehending the conscious as it presents itself to us. The literary critic is, I think, most interested in comprehension, because the critical act is first of all an act of comprehension: a particular comprehension of the written work, and not of its origins in a general theory of the unconscious. Comprehension, furthermore, is a phenomenon of consciousness, and it is in the openness of the conscious mind that critic and writer meet to engage in the act of knowing and being aware of an experience. Only that engagement, made in the interests of literary and historical fidelity, can prevent Conrad’s remark “I am living a nightmare” from being accepted (or dismissed) as a hyperbolic effusion, instead of as an authentic and intense fact of experience.

As a writer, Conrad’s job was to make intellectual use of what he had known, and “use,” in this Jamesian employment of the term, means rendering, making overt. It would not, furthermore, be overinterpreting James’s compliment if I emphasize that Conrad recognized the difference between the rendering of personal experience for public consumption on one side and, on the other, for the eyes of a few close friends. Now it is precisely with this process of making experience overt and intelligible for the benefit of his intimates that Conrad’s letters, and consequently my discussion, are concerned. First of all we should investigate the *idiom* of Conrad’s rendering of his experience: the words and the images he chose to express himself. In philosophical terms, this study attempts a phenomenological exploration of Conrad’s consciousness, so that the

kind of mind he had, both in its distinction and energy, will become apparent. The great value of the letters, therefore, is that they make such a study possible by disclosing the background of speculation and insight that strengthens the fiction.[4]

When “knowing” and “knowing for intellectual use” are spoken of in the same breath, when what is being described and the idiom of that description are taken together as an indissoluble unity, Conrad himself emerges from the letters as a significantly developing intellectual and spiritual reality. The mechanisms of existence he describes and his way of describing them are Conrad’s very own. At his most rhetorical (and surely in this the letters often surpass the works) there is a discoverable mind working habitually, though perhaps with less energy than usual. Far more often the flurries of “big” words he uses—such as *life, the incomprehensible, the soul*—carry with them the proud muscularity of the European tradition of empirical morality, for the important recurring touchstone here is Conrad’s sense of *vécu*: he has lived what he describes. Often he will bring the ceaseless activity of his mind to a kind of brief nervous stop, in much the same way that a man presenting a detailed argument stops because he needs to reflect, to take stock of what he has said. Then the movement of his thought resumes. Conrad saw in certain fiction, for example, the quality of an understated simplicity whose deeper recesses, like his own during those summary stops that fill the letters, cover a vital mechanism of lived knowledge. Yet he was bothered by the elegance of a rich narrative that went forward so smoothly and at the same time withheld its inner workings. No wonder that Maupassant was a discouraging master: “I am afraid I am too much under the influence of Maupassant. I have studied *Pierre et Jean*—thought, method, and everything—with the deepest discouragement. It seems to be nothing at all, but the mechanics are so complex that they make me tear out my hair. You want to weep with rage in reading it. That’s a fact!” (*Poradowska*, 84).

Despite the rhetoric, however, and the pauses it creates, to speak of Conrad’s spiritual and intellectual reality is also to recognize a long, remarkable continuity in his abiding concerns. For this continuity, eminently Conrad’s own, is precisely his emerging individuality, and this is the measure of his absorption in, and knowledge of, the mechanisms of existence. Conrad’s individuality resides in a continuous exposure of

his sense of himself to a sense of what is not himself: he set himself, lumpish and problematic, against the dynamic, fluid processes of life. Because of this, then, the great human appeal and distinction of Conrad's life is the dramatic spirit of partnership, however uneasy or indecorous, his life exemplifies, a partnership between himself and the external world. I am speaking of the full exposition of his soul to the vast panorama of existence it has discerned outside itself. He had the courage to risk a full confrontation with what, most of the time, seemed to him to be a threatening and unpleasant world. Moreover, the outcome of this dialectic is an experiencing of existential reality at that deepest level of alternative and potentiality which is the true life of the mind. Now the vocabulary and rhetoric of this experience (which I have called its idiom) is what the letters provide us with to such a degree that we are able to discover the contours of Conrad's mind as it engages itself in a partnership with existence. For "exposure" of the mind and soul has its literary paradigm: it is a habitual verbal exercise (hence, *idiom*) whose purpose is to arbitrate the relations between a problematic subject and a dynamic object. The more distinguished a mind, the greater need there is that this habitual exercise be disciplined, regulated by serious and satisfying moral norms that derive from one's personal experience. Basically, of course, I am equating distinction of mind with individuality of mind. There can be little doubt that Conrad had such a mind, and the problem of discipline is one that caused him deep concern as both man and artist.

All of this is, I think, as it should be. Because Conrad could, in his finest essay, praise James as the "historian of fine consciences" (VI.17) and acknowledge him as his master, Conrad himself had to know what it meant to write the history of conscience, to record the growth of the faculty that grants one a moral awareness of conduct. And where but in his own mind could his apprenticeship have taken place? For, he wrote in the James essay,

action in its essence, the creative art of a writer of fiction may be compared to rescue work carried out in darkness against cross gusts of wind swaying the action of a great multitude. It is rescue work, this snatching of vanishing phases of turbulence, disguised in fair words, out of the native obscurity into a light where the struggling forms may be seen, seized upon, endowed with the only possible form of permanence

in this world of relative values—the permanence of memory. And the multitude feels it obscurely too; since the demand of the individual to the artist is, in effect, the cry, “Take me out of myself!” meaning really, out of my perishable activity … But everything is relative, and the light of consciousness is only enduring, merely the most enduring of the things of this earth, imperishable only as against the short-lived work of our industrious hands. (III.13)

It was the winning of a “sense of truth, of necessity—before all, of conduct,” for the characters of his fiction that the writer literally possessed his subject—the history of conscience. The task was even more difficult when the writer’s values themselves had to be rescued from a “native obscurity” too dark and confused for easy acceptance. The real adventure of Conrad’s life is the effort to rescue significance and value in their “struggling forms” from within his own existence. Just as he had to rescue his experience for the satisfaction of his consciousness, to believe that he had put down the important parts of the truth as he saw it, so also his critic has to relive that rescue, without heroism, alas, but with equal determination.

Conrad does not make the task easy, of course. His combination of evasion with a seemingly artless candor in his autobiographical pronouncements poses intricate problems for the student of his fiction. His bent for the revisional, sometimes petulant interpretation of his life needs, for the moment, only the briefest recall. There is one story told by R. L. Megroz concerning an interchange between Conrad and his wife: “On one of his naughty days he said that the Black Mate was his first work, and when I [Jessie] said ‘No, *Almayer’s Folly* was the first thing you ever did,’ he burst out: ‘If I like to say *The Black Mate* was my first work, I shall say so.’” [5] The often willful inaccuracy of Conrad’s memory about his works and life—of which this is almost certainly an example—is too persistent a habit to be glossed over. He chose to consider the facts of his life as an historian, according to Huizinga, considers his subject, as if the actual facts are not yet determined. Huizinga writes:

The historian … must always maintain towards his subject an indeterminist point of view. He must constantly put himself at a point in the past at which the known factors still seem to permit different

outcomes. If he speaks of Salamis, then it must be as if the Persians might still win; if he speaks of the *coup d'état* of Brumaire, then it must remain to be seen if Bonaparte will be ignominiously repulsed. Only by continually recognizing that possibilities are unlimited can the historian do justice to the fulness of life.[6]

The link of self-awareness forged by Conrad in each letter (of which I spoke earlier) in reality describes the spiritual act of comprehension he performed as he viewed his own being in the past in connection with his being in the present. The indeterminist viewpoint to which Huizinga refers is a constant feature of Conrad's recollection of his past and, necessarily, a function of that harassed insecurity which spurs the novelist-historian to execute judgment. Between Conrad's life, then, and his fiction there exists much the same relation as between the two divisions (past and present) of his life. The critic's job is to seek out the common denominator of the two sets of relations. As Conrad's history of his past is to his present, so his historical being as a man is to his fiction. And the only way the relation can be articulated is, as I said earlier, to identify certain dynamic movements or structures of experience (mechanisms) that emerge from the letters. In one of his earliest works, *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukacs has described structures similar to these: Lucien Goldmann calls them *significant dynamic structures*, because they maintain a context by which every human act preserves an individual's past evolution as well as the inner tendencies that drive him toward the future.[7] But the Marxist conclusion, class consciousness, does not suit the bias of this study. Because I am more concerned with the individual, I shall concentrate on the exigencies of Conrad's personal situation.

Conrad's stake in the structures of experience he had created was absolutely crucial, since it was rooted in the human desire to make a character of and for himself. Character is what enables the individual to make his way through the world, the faculty of rational self-possession that regulates the exchange between the world and the self; the more cogent the identity, the more certain a course of action. One of the curious facts of history is that it is the compulsive man of action who feels the need for character more strongly than the man who is only on the verge of action. T. E. Lawrence, Conrad's notorious near-contemporary,

has been described by R. P. Blackmur as a man capable only of creating a personality for himself: his failure to forge a character, Blackmur argues, is the secret of his life and writing.[8] Conrad's predicament was, I think, not unlike Lawrence's: he, too, was a man of action urgently in need of a role to play so that he could locate himself solidly in existence. But whereas Lawrence failed, Conrad succeeded (although at immense cost). This is another aspect of Conrad's life of adventure. To Conrad it seemed as if he had to *rescue himself*, and, not surprisingly, this is one of the themes of his short fiction. Marlow and Falk, to take two examples, are faced with the terrible dilemma of either allowing themselves to vanish into "native obscurity" or, equally oppressive, undertaking to save themselves by the compromising deceit of egoism: nothingness on one side or shameful pride on the other. That is, either one loses one's sense of identity and thereby seems to vanish into the chaotic, undifferentiated, and anonymous flux of passing time, or one asserts oneself so strongly as to become a hard and monstrous egoist.

It is important, therefore, to distinguish the dominant mode of Conrad's structures of experience: quite simply, it can be called their radical either/or posture. By this I mean a habitual view of experience that allows *either* a surrender to chaos *or* a comparably frightful surrender to egoistic order. There is no middle way, and there is no other method of putting the issues. Either one allows that meaningless chaos is the hopeless restriction upon human behavior, or one must admit that order and significance depend only upon man's will to live at all costs. This, of course, is the Schopenhauerian dilemma, and we shall consider later how close Conrad is to the German arch-pessimist. Now, however, we shall trace Conrad's speculations on the either/or dilemma in order to follow the history of his solutions to the problem. For his solutions always had one end in view—the achievement of character—and his fiction is a vital reflection of his developing character. The mechanisms of existence discernible in the letters are Conrad's portrayal of himself in the process of living. They are sections of a long drama in which the arrangements of setting, act, and actor are Conrad's consciousness of himself in the struggle toward the equilibrium of character.

Conrad's earliest preserved letter, written on September 27, 1885, to Spiridion Kliszczewski, a Polish watchmaker in Cardiff who had

welcomed the young sailor to British shores, contains the following lines: “old Father Time, always diligent in his business, has put his eraser over many men, things and memories: yet I defy him to obliterate from my mind and heart the recollection of the kindness you and yours have shown to a stranger, on the strength of a distant national connection. I fear I have not expressed adequately to your wife and yourself all my gratitude: I do not pretend to do so now, for in my case when the heart is full the words are scarce, and the more so the more intense is the feeling I wish to express” (*LL*, I.80). The lines radiate the courtly grace of the “aristocracy” that Bertrand Russell noted in Conrad’s bearing.[9] There is more here, however, than an expression of kindly *noblesse oblige*: gratitude to a supposed social inferior, yes, but also a groping toward accurate self-awareness. The full heart of his gratitude speaks inadequately, Conrad says, for all it can do is to *save* from onrushing time the memory of kindness accorded him. These are two images that one sees flickering throughout the letters: the full heart whose ability to express itself decreases with the intensity of the sentiment and, linked with it, the effective opposition of a rescue made from time and chaos.

In these early letters to Kliszczewski (there are but six of them, all written between September 1885 and January 1886), the context Conrad describes is one of despair at the way contemporary events pass into oblivion. On October 13, 1885, he writes:

> Events are casting shadows, more or less distorted, shadows deep enough to suggest the lurid light of battlefields somewhere in the near future, but all these portents of great and decisive doings leave me in a state of despairing indifference: for, whatever may be the changes in the fortunes of living nations, for the dead there is no hope and no salvation. We have passed through the gates whose “lasciate ogni speranza” is written in letters of blood and fire, and nothing remains for us but the darkness of oblivion. (*LL*, I.80–81)

Two months later, on December 19, he clarifies this feeling by blaming the ascendancy of the “infernal doctrines” of socialism. “The destiny of this nation and of all nations,” he writes, “is to be accomplished in darkness amidst much weeping and gnashing of teeth, to pass through robbery, equality, anarchy and misery under the iron rule of a militarism

[*sic*] despotism!" (*LL*, I.84). The present hell—and it is delineated with fervor—is something about which Conrad is consistently disturbed, at least until the period of the First World War. Then in a letter to Galsworthy on November 15, 1914, he writes: "As to what you call 'this hell,' it is fiendish enough in all conscience: but it may be more in the nature of a Purgatory if only in this respect that it won't last forever" (*LL*, II.163).

It is because of this general shift in attitude—from an outright belief in hell to a willing faith in purgatory—that two great scenes, separated by a crucial interlude, can be distinguished in Conrad's dramatic comprehension of his role in existence: the years up to 1914, an interlude of four years from 1914 to 1918, and the years from 1918 until his death in 1924. For a man who at times claimed total ignorance of politics and literature (*LL*, I.264), who insisted that during his early years as a writer, "je ne savais rien de rien" (*Lettres*, 57), Conrad's especially anxious interest in the history and dynamics of political existence is remarkable. Yet he was never simply content with the psychological problems of his own existence. Always the restless seeker after normative vision, Conrad enlisted every sphere of experience in the task he had designated for himself.

Conrad's letters to Kliszczewski were written out of his troubled sense of the threats of chaos; after recognizing this fact, the critic can make a "standing jump" into the fiction. Gustav Morf's book, *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, is established upon one aspect of this observation, taking the fact of Conrad's spiritual and physical exile from Poland (which contributed to the tentativeness of his place in existence) as the essential *donnée* in his life and work. Yet one cannot help feeling that Morf has left a great deal untouched in the letters, for after a *donnée* there is a *tenu*. I am thinking, for instance, of the sophisticated monologue directed by Conrad to his aunt Marguerite Poradowska between 1890 and 1895, in which like Hamlet—and she herself noted the resemblance (*Poradowska*, 48)—he was attempting to bring himself to a meaningful point of action. (Indeed, Rheinhold Neibuhr's description of the self in conversation with itself applies perfectly to these letters.[10]) It had to be the point, in short, where the fullness of his heart could finally give coherence to the fragments of his experience that he had chosen (rescued) to defy the chaos around him. The tangled complexities of how to make his memory

(the actual experience) and his will (the value of the experience) properly serve disjunctive impressions are the background for the writing of *Almayer's Folly*, which was begun, he says in *A Personal Record*, in 1889 and finished in 1894. It is this background that continues over into his next book, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and it introduces both us and Conrad himself to the steadily examined commitment that was to be his writing career.

Taken all together, the struggles that occupied Conrad over six years as he wrote these two books comprise the first milestone in his spiritual history. The effort to create an imperishable monument against the flood of time brought Conrad to an intimate and problematic knowledge of himself. Facing existence with fidelity to the obscure events in eastern jungles he had rescued from his own experience, he was forced retrospectively to confront both the impulsiveness that had driven him to make the rescue effort as well as the results of that effort. Had he not so faced himself in his literary work, he might have become, like Charles Gould in *Nostromo*, the victim of depressingly repetitive actions, with mere consolation for a reward (IX.66). Introspective research of this sort left him, it seems, with what I have called problematic knowledge—the sense that there was something about himself that resisted "working out" or unraveling. Some of this is expressed in a letter written to his aunt on August 26, 1891: "There is nothing very exhilarating in doing disagreeable work. It is too much like penal servitude, with the difference that while rolling the stone of Sisyphus you lack the consolation of thinking of what pleasure you had in committing the crime. It is here that convicts have the advantage over your humble servant … One admires what one lacks" (*Poradowska*, 33–34).

But Conrad's heart had always been full of unspoken thoughts and emotions. He had written to Marguerite on February 16, 1890, of what it would be like to continue to speak the language of this full heart of his: "I write you in French because I think of you in French; and these thoughts, so badly expressed, spring from the heart, which knows neither the grammar nor the spelling of studied commiseration" (*Poradowska*, 6). A few weeks later, on March 23, we have the following, another effort to understand his confusions:

Life rolls on in bitter floods, like the grim and brutal ocean under a sky

covered with dark clouds, and there are days when the poor souls who have embarked on the disheartening voyage imagine that never has a ray of sun been able to break through that dreary veil; that never will the sun shine again; that it has never even existed! Eyes that the sharp wind of grief has filled with tears must be pardoned … if they refuse to utter words of hope. Especially must the unhappy souls be pardoned who have elected to make the pilgrimage on foot, who skirt the shore and gaze uncomprehendingly upon the horror of the struggle, the joy of victory, and the deep despair of the vanquished; those souls who receive the castaway with a smile of pity and a word of prudence or reproach on their lips. They especially must be pardoned, "for they know not what they do!" (*Poradowska*, 8)

He seems to have been unable to turn anywhere for ultimate meaning in what he saw as a sort of Nietzschean spectacular world. Certainly the realization on May 15, 1890, that "life is made up of concessions and compromises" (*Poradowska*, 11) did not greatly suit the urgent pressures of the moment. He hints in the same letter that there was *another* shadowy Conrad roaming over Europe—the most fascinating early adumbration of the passionate Europeanism he was to feel after the war.

It was during Conrad's grim sojourn in the Congo a month later that one of the earliest references to a great act of will turns up. Then, on June 10–12, he volunteers the notion, almost cavalier in its cynicism, that "if one could get rid of his heart and memory (and also brain), and then get a whole new set of these things, life would become ideally amusing" (*Poradowska*, 12). This is possible, he adds, only in creative, absorbing work. If he had had such work by him, he would have been able to hide himself in a new identity. His Congo experience had been so terrible (and any page of his posthumously published Congo diary corroborates this[11]) that his disgust with existence had made it very hard for him even to stand himself. Somewhat later, on February 8, 1891, in London, he was able to exult in the sufficiency of his strength for living (*Poradowska*, 21): he had stubbornly withstood a demoralizing experience, and like Nietzsche he could admit that what does not kill benefits. At this point, though, he asks Marguerite to note the monotony of existence. After a period of illness and discouragement, he then writes her on May 28, 1891, to "let yourself be guided (for once in your life) by the light of pure

reason, which resembles that of electricity in being cold" (*Poradowska*, 27). This is easy admonishment, one supposes, from a man writing in the comfort of a Swiss hydropathic institution, but it strikes a note that recurs so often in Conrad's later correspondence that it deserves further consideration here.

The obvious thing to say, of course, is that "reason" replaces "heart" for the first time. And we are to understand, I think, that Conrad was instructing his aunt in the calculating ways of the world. But what is far more interesting is the presage in this letter of Conrad's later obsessive fear that reason actually has no place in his work. He was to write A. H. Davray, for example, on August 22, 1903, that working on *Nostromo* stupefied his mind (*Lettres*, 50); this made him—he reminded Galsworthy on the same day—"a mental and moral outcast" (*LL*, I.317). In the 1891 statement, at a time before he officially began his writing career, we have to do with an isolated, newly awakened interest in a certain faculty. Generally it can be said that, in a world whose condition is chaotic, meaningless, and oppressive, for Conrad it was reason, or the intellect, that could illuminate and then master all the threats of chaos: the cold light of intellect guides one's progress through the world. But this is only the most salutary gift of the intellect, for its burdens, at the same time, are corrosive: there is intellectual skepticism and the capture of the entire self within its web of illusions. Because in the latter part of 1891 Conrad seems to have accepted and relied upon the services, both good and bad, of the intellect, his spiritual postures reflect the change. Nevertheless these postures did not allow him to enjoy the full cooperation of self-assertion and intellectual discernment acting together. He still could not go forward into a totally assured creative effort. He remained a speculator on the fortunes of human life, certain only that there was a rational way to reconcile the powers of his mind with the problems of his worldly existence.

He could not remain in this indecisive position for very long. Probably it was the catalytic effect of Conrad's determined scrutiny of the intellect that produced still another about-face in viewpoint. The first signs of his reawakened restlessness appear in these lines, written to Marguerite on September 15, 1891:

We are ordinary people who have just the happiness we deserve; no

more, nor *less* … You think me capable of accepting or even admitting the doctrine (or theory) of expiation through suffering. That doctrine, a product of superior but savage minds, is quite simply an infamous abomination when preached by civilized people. It is a doctrine which, on the one hand, leads straight to the Inquisition and, on the other, discloses the possibilities of bargaining with the Eternal. It would be quite as rational to wish to expiate a murder by a theft! … Each act of life is final and inevitably produces its consequences in spite of all the weeping and gnashing of teeth and the sorrow of weak souls who suffer as fright grips them when confronted with the results of their own actions. As for myself, I shall never need to be consoled for any act of my life, and this because I am strong enough to judge my own conscience rather than be its slave, as the orthodox would like to persuade us to be. (*Poradowska*, 35–36)

To perceive the consequences of any action is courage—so long as the intellect suffuses the heart with confidence in its own powers. Consolation is not necessary if one is still the intellectual master of his conscience. Yet a month later, on October 16, he writes: “I am vegetating. I don’t even think; therefore I don’t exist (according to Descartes). But another person (a learned man) has said: ‘No thought without phosphorous [*sic*].’ Whence it seems to be the phosphorous that is absent, while as for me, I am still here. But in that case I should be existing without thinking, which (according to Descartes) is impossible. Good heavens, could I be a Punch?” (*Poradowska*, 38). There is a profound similarity here to the later sonnets of Hopkins in which the jaded “poor Jack” poet, the victim of debilitating introspection, is exhausted in a losing struggle against himself. Whereas Hopkins literally finds God in the form and shape of his own agony, Conrad surrenders more of himself to the illusions woven by the intellect.

His courage and tenacity were rewarded a few days later.

Solitude loses its terrors when one knows it; it is a tribulation which, for the courageous who have lifted the cup to their lips without flinching, becomes a sweetness whose charm would not be exchanged for anything else in the whole world.

So, without flinching, drink; and courage will come with the forgetfulness, or rather the obliteration, of the past. It is not the lack of a

fire in the middle room that discourages you; you doubt unknowingly the divine spark that is in you. In this you are like everyone else. Will you be different from everyone and have that faith which fans the spark into a bright fire? (*Poradowska*, 39–40)

He had squarely faced his new predicament and this inspired him to courage: he realized that only by a great effort through action could the intellect be creative without, at the same time, consuming itself in pathological intensity. This is the origin of a later remark to E. V. Lucas that “a good book is a good action” (*LL*, II.89). Thus he could tell Marguerite on September 4, 1892—with earned conviction—that “a man is worth neither more nor less than the work he accomplishes … only then is one the master of his conscience, with the right to call himself a man” (*Poradowska*, 45–46).

During the first half of 1893, Conrad seemed to be accepting existence on the terms of his energetic contributions to it. Not that he could see the full meaning of the actual and projected work he did, but there was much to be discovered and learned if one admitted, as he did on February 3, that “one can’t remain always perched on the stilts of one’s principles” (*Poradowska*, 51). More than ever before he refused to grant what he considered to be the platitudes of traditional or religious morality, which, for him at least, remained irrelevant. The particular experiences of an extravagantly itinerant life, and his own intellectual energies in general, immediately exhausted whatever was ready-made. Within his working mind he continually needed a kind of generated electricity, mysterious “phosphorous” as he called it, that enabled him to reach out and rescue the “heart” of an experience whose temperamental importance to him demanded such a rescue. Surely this explains his notion of the critic whose job it was to have (in Anatole France’s phrase) adventures of the soul among masterpieces (VI.95–96). In a letter of May 17, 1893, the metaphoric relation between his seafaring and his intellectual experiences controls the thought of adventurously reaching out to others:

Moving in that perfect circle inscribed by the Creator’s hand, and of which I am always the centre, *I follow the undulant line of the swell*—the only motion I am sure of—and think of you who live *in the midst of spiritual unrest where the storms that rage spring from the surge of ideas*;

and from afar I share your joys—and am ready to share your disappointments, while praying that such may be spared you. (*Poradowska*, 52; italics mine)

The final throes of writing *Almayer's Folly*, full upon him between December 1893 and June 1894, saw also the birth of the notion (on December 20) that a man "must be established somewhere if [he is to have] any notion of living" (*Poradowska*, 57). It may be that he had come to blame the erratic wanderings of his early youth for his intellectual unrest. By this time, however, he had again decided that "life is wrongside out" (*Poradowska*, 56).

Now all the intellectual activity of these months is described, as Albert Guerard has remarked,[12] most peculiarly in *A Personal Record*, written almost fifteen years later. Here the long detailed account of Conrad's first literary effort is rendered solely in terms of the work's mysterious power to resist and to survive the continued perversity of bad luck. But it is almost impossible to reconcile the history of *Almayer's Folly* found in the letters with the arch set-piece offered in *A Personal Record*. In the latter, Conrad has contrived a reduced version that conceals or ignores his intense personal struggles. Although Conrad, in fact, did do a great deal of traveling between 1889 and 1894, the curious significance of traveling between 1889 and 1894, the curious significance of the descriptions in *A Personal Record* is that the actual writing of *Almayer's Folly*, considered as a deliberate and sustained act of will, is totally camouflaged by the bustling, hectic narrative of Conrad's physical movements. He simply never takes us to the inside of his spiritual experience. His formal memory of 1908 retains only the skeletal figure whose interpretation depends upon its enrichment by the full reality of the past. And so Conrad, in *A Personal Record*, sees himself engaged in a drawn-out effort to rescue his manuscript from accidents and bad luck. We shall see that this reductive mode of narration became a special convention for him, a literary shorthand. In a manner of speaking, this convention became the "circle" of his apprehension in the present, whose peripheries just touched the "surge of ideas" and "spiritual unrest" he had left behind him—peripheries, I mean, that cut him off from the center of spiritual unrest. He says, for instance, in *A Personal Record* that he was "a haunted man" (VI.8). It was the most accurate way of describing what he

later called “the creative darkness” (*Garnett*, 273).

That is not all. If the odyssey of the *Almayer* manuscript in *A Personal Record* is analogous to what Santayana has called the philosopher’s mask[13]—the fixing of something as a point of reference from which the active mind immediately departs—the narrative itself is a mixture of laconic honesty and evasion. So there are two aspects (or layers) of *A Personal Record*: (1), its contemporary context in 1908, the year it was written, and (2), its historical setting back in the years 1889–1894. It is the second aspect that concerns us here, the authentic *vécu* of the experience. We have noted the fierce struggles in those early years, raging between the extremes of sensed chaos on one side and rational self-conviction on the other. Yet the actual task of writing was, I think, one that Conrad could not adequately explain to himself for many years. For all the promises he imagined in “creative, absorbing work,” he could not make a whole character for himself, one ample enough to contain the distance between his intellectual and executive resolution and his immensely impressionable heart. Either one faculty or the other, mind or heart—perhaps his acquired English reason or his restive Polish sensibility—kept from him both a solid sense of identity and a fully satisfactory harmony struck between the experience and its realization in words. As his own critic in *A Personal Record*, he wrote elliptically of rational criticism accomplished without confidence in the heart’s adventure, and tragically pronounced on his own early reputation as a writer: he was only a clever performer, an agile craftsman.

An ideal of reserved manner, adhered to from a sense of proprieties, from shyness, perhaps, or caution, or simply from weariness, induces, I suspect, some writers of criticism to conceal the adventurous side of their calling, and then the criticism becomes a mere “notice,” as it were the relation of a journey where nothing but the distances and the geology of a new country should be set down; the glimpses of strange beasts, the dangers of flood and field, the hair’s-breadth escapes, and the sufferings (oh, the sufferings too! I have no doubt of the sufferings) of the traveller being carefully kept out; no shady spot, no fruitful plant being ever mentioned either; so that the whole performance looks like a mere feat of agility on the part of a trained pen running in a desert. (VI.96–97)

That he felt a great deal more than “a trained pen” could cope with, however, is testified to in an extraordinary letter of March 24, 1894:

I am in the midst of struggling with Chapter XI [of *Almayer’s Folly*]; a struggle to the death, you know! If I let up, I am lost! I am writing you just before going out. I must go out sometimes, alas! I begrudge each minute I spend away from paper … Then there are soaring flights; my thought goes wandering through vast spaces filled with shadowy forms. All is yet chaos, but, slowly, the apparitions change into living flesh, the shimmering mists take shape, and—who knows?—something may be born of the clash of nebulous ideas. (*Poradowska*, 64)

Two novels *were* “born of the clash of nebulous ideas,” *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. His writing was able to mediate the warring convictions of his mind (the belief that every act was final), and those of his deluged heart (the deeper shadows and nebulae). Somehow they were brought together by an overmastering desire to press forward out of a tormented stasis. To move—the impulse to work, to rescue, to expose, to sympathize, and to make known for intellectual use—is in a sense what Shelley had called “a going-out” of the self toward others. This, then, is the gallant nobility of Conrad’s creative effort at rescue as he saw it. At the same time, paradoxically, as things were made known by the creative act, an act that seemed to have suggested permanent rest or at least usable conviction, the investigative powers of the intellect, which in the process had been brought up to a powerful self-awareness, lighted up the situation and led to whole new areas of unrest. Conrad envisaged his role as a writer as if he were a chained convict laboring, like Sisyphus, with no apparent end in sight. On July 20, 1894, he wrote Marguerite:

Remember, though, that one is never entirely alone. Why are you afraid? And of what? Is it of solitude or of death? O strange fear! The only two things that make life bearable! But cast fear aside. Solitude never comes—and death must often be waited for during long years of bitterness and anger. Do you prefer that?

But you are afraid of yourself; of the inseparable being forever at your side—master and slave, victim and executioner—who suffers and causes suffering. That’s how it is! One must drag the ball and chain of one’s

selfhood to the end. It is the price one pays for the devilish and divine privilege of thought; so that in this life it is only the elect who are convicts —a glorious band which comprehends and groans but which treads the earth amidst a multitude of phantoms with maniacal gestures, with idiotic grimaces. Which would you be: idiot or convict? (*Poradowska*, 72)

A convict who knows what he has done but is chained to his knowledge, or an idiot who knows nothing, sees an absurd blankness everywhere, and is chained regardless—surely these are difficult extremes of existence. It was very possibly to guard against the ravages of absurdity that earlier on December 20, 1893, as we have seen, Conrad had decided to settle down. The very fact of establishment, which is one of the protective compromises exacted from the hapless individual by life, saved him from the physical wanderings that had exposed him to such a bewildering variety of experiences—hence the shameful remorse and guilt of his remembered cowardice, the sense of being a chained convict. And, just as it was to the wife of a Pole to whom he first spoke of establishing himself, it was in later letters to other Poles that he continued to profess his ambitions for success. He wrote to Charles Zagorski on March 10, 1896, that "only literature remains to me as a means of existence. You understand, my dear friend, that if I have undertaken this thing, it is with the firm resolution to make a name—and I have no doubt that I shall be successful in this connection" (*LL*, I.185). On March 24, 1908, he insisted to the Baroness von Brunow that at least he had made a name for himself: "Dans le monde littéraire j'ai une position marquée" (*Lettres*, 94). The shame he felt (not guilt) at having left Poland was gradually alleviated by a troubled sense of pride and moral achievement. This is not to say that after 1900 he was openly contemptuous of Poland. Rather he was tentatively implying that if Poland had followed his own expedient (self-rescue), it would not be "deprived of … independence, of … historical continuity … [and of] definite character" (III.118). The war, however, changed his attitude considerably. After 1914 Poland emerges in his letters in its most flattering historical aspects, as a country whose past—despite its tragic present and cloudy future—attested to a heroic defense of Western civilization. No wonder then that the war restored Conrad's patriotism. More, it affected Conrad in the manner of a startling religious experience. He had remarked prophetically to Marguerite on

September 8, 1894: “Don’t forget that with us [Poles] religion and patriotism are closely akin” (*Poradowska*, 78).

By the end of 1894, then, Conrad had decisively embarked on a serious career as a writer, disturbed only by intermittent and abortive efforts to return to sailing. He had finally managed to create a spiritual and intellectual realm whose worth depended on his mastery of it. He had to give his work meaning not only by the sustained exercise of his craft, but also by the equally sustained spiritual regard in which he held his work. Writing, he had come to see, was not just mastery of a craft, but something more primal and profound: it was *maîtrise de conscience*. And technique was *savoir faire*. Each attempt at writing was a descent from the “stilts of principles” onto the open field of life, what Ortega y Gasset calls the entry into a world of multiple hesitancy.[14] Conrad could write Edward Garnett, his new admirer and literary friend, in January 1895: “to me, attempt is much more fascinating than the achievement because of boundless possibilities; and in the world of ideas attempt or experiment is the dawn of evolution” (*Garnett*, 31). This of couse is ideally true in a world so ordered that evolution is possible, where mastery growing out of evolution is possible. Thus it is he believed that in short fiction—he had written to Marguerite some years earlier that it was “in brief narrative (the short story) that the master hand is revealed” (*Poradowska*, 50)—evolution, order, and mastery could be enacted. Interestingly, we shall see that for Conrad novel writing was characterized by undirected and disordered *growth*, instead of evolution. Yet in 1895, early in his career, the severe practicality and caution of his mind kept him absorbed in the actual mechanics of writing. On March 15 he wrote to Garnett that “theory is a cold and lying tombstone of departed truth” (*Garnett*, 34), as if to say that truth itself consisted entirely of the movement immediately connected to the person performing the action. This is the realization of responsibility toward all that his intellect had just appropriated for itself.

The motif in most of Conrad’s letters during 1895, then, was a self-conscious insistence upon the vital association between a writer’s work and his essential individuality. Three letters to Edward Noble, a young writer, on July 17, October 28, and November 2 are excellent examples of this insistence. The advice Conrad lavished on Noble was underpinned by a fear of the loss of “individuality,” that flame whose very essence is action and effort and not an easy assumption of universal value. But

Conrad's controlling viewpoint originated in his sense of an ordered yet dynamic existence in which an individual could achieve particular value for himself only if his own will and effort were intense enough. Hence the writer's job, he argued, was not to hide the flame of his individuality but rather to use it to govern the work. Above all, he advised Noble to write from "an inward point of view, I mean from the depth of your inwardness" (*LL*, I.184). This meant that one's point of view was turned inward upon oneself, of course, and not outward toward others. Also, on September 24 he had written to Garnett that every individual is "typical of mankind where every individual wishes to assert his power, woman by sentiment, man by achievement of some sort—mostly base" (*Garnett*, 42). If he recognized that order in both outlook and life was determined by individuality, he retained, with supreme honesty, a moral knowledge of the hazards that individuality, congenitally ambitious, would certainly provoke. When he finished his first two novels, Conrad's most urgent concern was the furthering of his ambition within the moral bounds he had established. It is this problem of control that we should now investigate.

II

Character and the Knitting Machine
1896–1912

We turn now to an artist, no longer a fledgling man of letters, who with two published novels behind him had entered in earnest upon the life of a practicing novelist. It was Conrad's good fortune to meet as appreciative a critic as Edward Garnett very early in his career, even though this experience did not allow him even to take critical approbation for granted. Garnett's confidence in him often reminded Conrad that he had been lured into a tangled jungle of difficulties from which no recourse to innocence was possible. Even so, it is one of the most remarkable things about Conrad that no man was less guilty than he of youthful self-indulgence. He passed fully matured from one profession into the next, with only a few intervening years of instruction to brace his passage.

Between the life of the seaman and the life of the novelist, he once wrote, "il y a trop de tirage" (*LL*, I.253), but the difference he referred to, I think, was simply in the medium of the work. Neither as sailor nor as novelist could Conrad question the fact of his job, lest he lose his hold on what, at any given moment, was firmest beneath his feet. Always serious and committed, Conrad varied his responses only to negotiate a series of related problems. In the period from 1896 to 1912 we see him actively involved in the laboratory of his mind, constantly probing the intellectual and spiritual designs of his lifework. Speculation was in a crucial sense the very heart of his experience.

The zeal of his speculation encouraged him to range in unfamiliar expanses. On September 29, 1898, he made this quasi-scientific outburst to Garnett:

> But, don't you see, there is nothing in the world to prevent the simultaneous existence of vertical waves, of waves at any angles; in fact there are mathematical reasons for believing that such waves do exist. Therefore it follows that two universes may exist in the same place and in

the same time—and not only two universes but an infinity of different universes—if by universe we mean a set of states of consciousness. And, note, *all* (the universes) composed of the same matter, matter, *all matter* being only that thing of inconceivable tenuity through which the various vibrations of waves (electricity, heat, sound, light, etc.) are propagated, thus giving birth to our sensations—then emotions—then thought. Is that so? (*Garnett*, 143)

The immediate occasion for this was Conrad's recent visit to Glasgow. There he had, he tells Garnett, a discussion about "the secret of the Universe" with a miscellaneous group of shipowners and scientists. Significantly, he seems to have been entertained and intrigued by the whole thing. Something about the possibility of different universes, whose reality was different states of consciousness, caught his attention, and he asked himself what it was about this supposition that so attracted him. Probably it was the "inconceivable tenuity" of matter, that "thing" so lacking in resistance as to permit sensations, emotions, and thought a fluid passage through it. It was, in fine, a hypothetical justification for Conrad's dissatisfaction (and he makes nearly this point in the same letter) with anything as vague and unsatisfactory as an "eternal something."

For how could a man so preoccupied with the present seriously give credence to anything so annoyingly eternal as a universal ground? During these years Conrad grew increasingly reliant upon himself, upon the evaluating rather than the perceiving consciousness, which faced a distracting sum of competing facts. Because each aspect of knowledge that came to his attention demanded recognition, he found it impossible to settle upon a unitary view of reality. To paraphrase a passage from one of Keats's letters, how could one speculate on eternalities or primal origins while women had cancers? Admittedly, however, Conrad directed most of his thought to his own pressing concerns—his success as a novelist, the direct path before him, and so on.

He continued to believe that humanity's real lot was neither pleasant nor easy. His perspicacity and honesty, however, rarely allowed him the satisfactions of an unthinking stoicism. His knowledge of actuality, or the knowledge of knowledge itself, afflicted him with hopelessness, and he wrote on January 31, 1898, to his idealistic friend Robert Cunninghame

Graham:

Yes. Egoism is good, and altruism is good, and fidelity to nature would be the best of all, and systems could be built and rules could be made,—if we could only get rid of consciousness. What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well,—but as soon as you know of your slavery, the pain, the anger, the strife,—the tragedy begins. We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming, in negation, in contempt,—each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope: there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that, whether seen in a convex or a concave mirror, is always but a vain and floating appearance. (*LL*, I.226)

Conrad's depiction of man has its point of origin in the moral problem of continuing action—whether it is possible to be *either* an egoist *or* an altruist. The point proceeds no further in Conrad's argument than the extent to which he allows life to have a set of rules that one can follow, and that extent, he believed, simply did not exist. Graham had proposed the alternatives as possible in the first place, as having some status mainly dependent upon informed choice—but Conrad wished immediately to dispose of ultimate, ontological limits. In this way he manipulated the question in order to address the real morality of an actual present rather than to speculate endlessly about the barely possible.

One quality humanizes the severity of Conrad's argument, however, and that is his willingness to allow man's need for refuge a special status in moral questions. He permitted it a role as the unthinking protective gesture that relieved immediate intolerable pressures. As for the circle of hopeless tragedy, that continues. Yet he did believe that refuge looked for and found in a particular anodyne has its own rewards: one can either face up to the fact of refuge taken—be it in thieving, murder, or art—or not. But the brave spectator concerns himself with appearances, with what he sees, and these uniformly resist optimism.

Graham pressed him further: can one at least entertain ideals? Conrad himself had once mentioned “the obscure sense of the fitness of things we all carry within us”—of what significance is such a sense? The reply, in February 1898, was stark in its prophetic gloom:

You and your ideals of sincerity and courage and truth are strangely out of place in this epoch of material preoccupations. What does it bring? What’s the profit? What do we get by it? These questions are the root of every moral, intellectual or political movement. Into the noblest causes, men manage to put something of their baseness: and sometimes when I think of you here, quietly, you seem to me tragic with your courage, with your beliefs and your hopes. Every cause is tainted: and you reject this one, espouse that other one as if one were evil and the other good, while the same evil you hate is in both, but disguised in different words. I am more in sympathy with you than words can express, yet if I had a grain of belief left in me I would believe you misguided. You are misguided by the desire of the Impossible,—and I envy you. Alas! what you want to reform are not institutions,—it is human nature. Your faith will never move that mountain. Not that I think mankind intrinsically bad. It is only silly and cowardly. Now you know that in cowardice is every evil,—especially, that cruelty so characteristic of our civilization. But, without it, mankind would vanish. No great matter truly. But will you persuade humanity to throw away sword and shield? Can you persuade even me,—who write these words in the fulness of an irresistible conviction? No, I belong to the wretched gang. We all belong to it. We are born initiated, and succeeding generations clutch the inheritance of fear and brutality without a thought, without a doubt, without compunction, in the name of God. (*LL*, I.229–230)

He could not envisage the possibility either of operative purity or of simply abstract, uninvolved goodness. In general, men have little more than hazy vision beyond what is immediate and most pressing; he took his own vision as a case in point. Women, he believed, are different from men in this. He wrote to Miss Watson on January 27, 1897: “women have a more penetrating vision, and a greater endurance of life’s perversities. But man longs for the actual,—because he is less able to look afar into days and years” (*LL*, I.199). Longing for the actual, the profoundly

restless and blind basis of all human activity, was the heritage of each man. And if a man of action like a sailor, he often said, could forget his afflictions, it was but a brief interval before new ones set going his need for new relief.

Still Graham, in fact, had good reason for asking about the place of idealism in Conrad's scheme. Some months earlier, on December 20, 1897, Conrad had characterized existence as a huge knitting machine that "has evolved itself out of a chaos of scraps of iron." The description itself is a weird mixture of grotesque humor and piteous self-commentary. Its particular urgency is conveyed by the lengths of fantasy to which Conrad went in order to make a point, the kind of murky background he drew on for a moment, then dismissed, and the horrifying repetitiveness he saw in the entire sequence. Part of it deserves quotation:

You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident,—and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is,—and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions,—and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing. (*LL*, I.216)

A few weeks later Conrad was captivated by the fable he had spun out. Another letter of "clarification" followed to poor Graham, this time containing more explicitly unhappy news. Sustained perversity of vision, once he had exposed himself to an imaginative shock, was a grim virtue of Conrad's, and this letter is no exception. But the most interesting quality of thought here is the total collapse of Conrad's attempts to analyze a whole situation. He seems to have been temperamentally incapable of grasping the entirety of any situation at once. Conrad was so beset by his depressing awareness of moral and intellectual difficulties that he exaggerated whatever aspect of a situation struck him first.

The path his mind took seems to have begun in instinctive melancholy, seeking approval next for the melancholy in the observation of pessimistic occurrences; these were invariably instances of human behavior in which a man or a group of men “clutched [their] inheritance of fear and brutality without a thought.” Then it moved to an imagined background (the knitting machine) and finally back to the original phenomenon, returning even more confirmed in its desperation. This is almost always one of the structural patterns of Conrad’s first-person short fiction. Consider *Heart of Darkness*, where a group of men are reflecting together in a scene of almost poetic melancholy. The river on which their boat is floating inspires one of them to muse on the stream that leads one into the heart of darkness. After this narrative all the men realize that they are completely surrounded by a brooding, immense darkness. For, Conrad wrote to Graham on August 27, 1898, “if this miserable planet had perception, a soul, a heart, it would burst with indignation or fly to pieces from sheer pity” (*LL*, I.246). The world at large, then, cannot be apprehended directly as a whole object of knowledge. The inquiring mind is thrust away from it, since nothing of immediate intellectual and spiritual use is available to the individual. Between a mind’s version of appearance and the so-called reality there can be no correspondence. And if “reality” is life, then the mind cannot be a part of it.

All of this is gathered into a terrifying revelation made in a letter to Graham on January 14, 1898:

> The machine is thinner than air and as evanescent as a flash of lightning. The attitude of cold unconcern is the only reasonable one. Of course reason is hateful,—but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life,—utterly out of it. 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. In a dispassionate view the ardour for reform, improvement, for virtue, for knowledge and even for beauty is only a vain sticking up for appearances, as though one were anxious about the cut of one’s clothes in a community of blind men.

Life knows us not and we do not know life,—we don't know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish: words, once pronounced, die: and the memory of yesterday is as shadowy as the hope of tomorrow,—only the string of my platitude seems to have no end. As our peasants say: "Pray brother, forgive me for the love of God." And we don't know what forgiveness is, nor what love, nor where God is. *Assez*! (*LL*, I.222–223)

"Life," in this formulation of it, is too close to us to be irrelevant; nor are we ever disinterested enough to ignore life. Human existence is a tragic partnership in which neither man nor the knitting machine benefits one another. Any palliative like Christianity, whose "Bethlehem legend" betrays its bathetic origin (*Garnett*, 185), is a manufactured delusion, too unsubtle to evade reality. Generally, it brings an additional series of woes to its adherents.

Conrad, however, was also conscious of such friends as Ted Sanderson, whose heroic efforts at living with adversity testified to what Conrad called on March 17, 1900, the other, "silent life within" (*LL*, I.294). What in all this bewildering confusion about assorted "lives" was *truth?* In the cultivation of individuality, which he had advocated so much earlier, Conrad did not now appreciate the uniformity of every-day personality, that easy habitude which most of us revere as "consistency" of character. Instead he trained his sights on the particle of difference in each individual, the quiddity that can be rescued from obscurity only by special effort. Most often, as he wrote to Garnett in November 1906, "the poignancy of things human lies in the alternative" (*Garnett*, 196). He meant, I think, the alternative for which each of us yearns while in the clutches of the monstrous knitting machine. Every man wishes he could be an Odysseus, adventurously carving his destiny according to the profound inner needs of his individuality. Few of us really try, and even fewer succeed. But if the alternative is at all possible, how then should one go about realizing it?

The answer to this is contained in the following lines, written to John Galsworthy on November 11, 1901: "Say what you like, man lives in his eccentricities (so called) alone. They give a vigour to his personality

which mere consistency can never do. One must explore deep and believe the incredible to find the few particles of truth floating in an ocean of insignificance. And before all one must divest oneself of every particle of respect for one's character" (*LL*, I.301).[1] The character he refers to here is not only the character or personage created by an author for his fiction, but also our private notion of ourselves to which we hold in tenacious desperation. Such tenacity is our pride and honor, even though the effort soon becomes mechanical. If for a moment we courageously relinquish our hold on this prideful creation of ours—and we must remember that he was addressing Galsworthy, the staunch defender of English "character"—there can be a relaxation of the mechanical fidelity and tension we exact from ourselves. Conrad's discovery of the rhythm of life in the movement from tension to relaxation brought him to the recognition of a pattern that Mann's Aschenbach, for example, could not perceive. "A nice observer once said of him [Aschenbach] in company—it was at the time when he fell ill in Vienna in his thirty-fifth year: 'You see, Aschenbach has always lived like this'—here the speaker closed the fingers of his left hand to a fist—'never like this'—and he let his open hand hang relaxed from the back of his chair. It was apt."[2]

If we do not consider our mechanically constructed character as the only basis for our place in the world, our *raison d'être*, our fundamental truth, we can free ourselves for disengaged speculation on matters that do not ordinarily occupy our attention. Conrad's own experience demonstrated this: the sailor deliberately forgetting his character and "insignificant" experience as a master mariner, and investigating the "incredible" and fantastic world of the novelist. Thus, in one important sense, Conrad had evolved a rationalization of his own especially tenuous and uncomfortable posture as a novelist: he has deliberately forgotten the mariner, his other character.

The tone of Conrad's reflection on these matters implies a great deal more than the intellectual scheme he describes. It is impossible to resist the feeling, for instance, that Conrad was under the disquieting influence of a desire to rationalize his seemingly ill-suited role as a novelist. Only by forgetting too well his other character as a sailor, he seems to be saying, has he been able to become a novelist. Years later he was sardonically to call the consequence of this double life the fate of *homo duplex* (*Lettres*, 60). Even more interesting is Conrad's curious insistence

upon the eccentricity—not the necessity—and the deviousness of the change from one character to the next. One is either unbending like Aschenbach or, like Felix Krull, a master of sly disguises and tricks. Perhaps this pair of almost fanatical alternatives gave Conrad a feeling that he had heroically faced and then perpetrated ferocious outrages on a thankless existence. At any rate, if he could do nothing else, he had to escape from the anonymity of common human destiny; that was the only way to confirm the reality of his individuality. There was for him no available movement of defiance, as there had been for his father, in which to play a part. He had to create the movement, his role in the movement, and the gesture of defiance all on his own. Such, as he understood it, was the cruel joke played on him by history when it offered him only a stunted, incomplete legacy of national identity, dissipated in an obscure and chaotic world.

The degradation he felt because of this incomplete identity, and the strategies he contrived for coping with it, made him write repeatedly of life as if it were a terrible dream begging for relief. He wrote Arthur Symons in February 1911: “life is a dream, or, as I should say, a succession of *songes doux ou terribles*. Well, and if it is so, then even in terror we may find inspiration once we regain courage enough to turn our eyes away from it. Don’t look back, for indeed the only way to overcome injustice whether of man or fate is to disregard it” (*LL*, II.126). The sort of inspiration he found was, as I have said, in the creation of another character for himself. Beyond the mere assertion of a new character, Conrad had to demonstrate it: not only could he say that he had become a novelist, but he had to *be* one. And, if the character of a novelist did not bring full relief, did not accurately correspond to the inner truth of his being, he was willing to admit that being a novelist was sometimes a mixture of truth and pretense. He wrote to Garnett once that “every truth requires some pretence to make it live” (*Garnett*, 177).

Conrad’s work as a writer derived from such an involved personal dialectic that he often worried how this work would be received and understood. He wrote the following to Galsworthy on November 1, 1910:

A public is not to be found in a class, caste, clique or type. The public is (or are?) individuals. *Le public introuvable* is only *introuvable* simply because it is all humanity. And no artist can give it what it wants because

humanity doesn't know what it wants. But it will swallow everything. It will swallow Hall Caine and John Galsworthy, Victor Hugo and Martin Tupper. It is an ostrich, a clown, a giant, a bottomless sack. It is sublime. It has apparently no eyes and no entrails, like a slug, and yet it can weep and suffer. It has swallowed Christianity, Buddhism, Mahomedanism and the Gospel of Mrs. Eddy. And it is perfectly capable, from the height of its secular stability, of looking down upon the artist as a mere windstraw. (*LL*, II.121)

Yet an indiscriminate reception like this was not to be a license for irresponsibility in the novelist. There remained, regardless, his conscientiousness as a practicing artist, whose private metaphysics helped him to make some sense of his existence so that he could continue his writing. The writing then carries conviction because it is its author's version of the mechanism of existence, and therefore something in which it is possible for him to believe.

One danger, however, was that efforts to make fiction convincing might turn the work into slavish, unimaginative documentation. Writing to its author on March 10, 1902, Conrad said about Arnold Bennett's *The Man From the North*: "You stop just short of being absolutely real because you are faithful to your dogmas of realism. Now realism in art will never approach reality. And your art, your gift, should be put to the service of a larger and freer faith" (*LL*, I.303). The canons of conventional literary realism were restrictive, serving the interests of both the perceptionless knitting machine and the public, the bottomless sack the machine had knitted. In a letter to his brave friend Graham—who was always looking for a distinctive idiom of his own—on February 10, 1905, Conrad elaborated the unhappy influences a vapid public could have on the individualist:

Vous—vous êtes né trop tard. The stodgy sun of the future—our early Victorian future—lingers on the horizon, but all the same it will rise—it will indeed—to throw its sanitary light upon a dull world of perfected municipalities and W.C.s *sans peur et sans reproche*. The grave of individual temperaments is being dug by G.B.S. and H.G.W. with hopeful industry. *Finita la commedia*! Well, they may do much, but for the saving of the universe I put my faith in the power of folly. (*LL*, II.12)

Characteristically, Conrad could not fully assuage his fears that individuality—despite his feverish programs to define it—might plague him. For if truth required pretense, if the novelist and the man lived deceptively in invented evasions, if the lack of respect for mechanical character became too much of a good thing, then the result was uncomfortable indeed. Permanent objective reality or truth becomes totally a function of individuality and not, as he might have hoped, vice versa. Two letters show us something of the troubling distance Conrad's mind traversed during the years I have been discussing. The first, to Garnett on March 23, 1896, sums up several strands of his problem:

If one looks at life in its true aspect then everything loses much of its unpleasant importance and the atmosphere becomes cleared of what are only unimportant mists that drift past in imposing shapes. When once the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown the attainment of serenity is not very far off. Then there remains nothing but the surrender to one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a nearer approach to truth than any other philosophy of life. And why not? If we are "ever becoming—never being" then I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that; for I know well that I will never be anything. I would rather grasp the solid satisfaction of my wrong-headedness and shake my fist at the idiotic mystery of Heaven. (*Garnett*, 46)

The second letter, to Wells, dated between November 30 and December 21, 1903, brings him to the obverse conclusion that "the future is of our own making—and (for me) the most striking characteristic of the century is just that development, that maturing of our consciousness which should open our eyes to that truth—or that illusion" (*LL*, I.323). Only a "maturing of consciousness"—seeing more deeply into the mechanisms of existence—will clear the issues. It was still a question of either/or: either one surrendered to the flux of "ever becoming—never being," or one's consciousness matured enough to realize that order and the future were the results of self-assertion. He believed that only one thing, an explosion, had the power to break open the trap of alternatives in which he remained a prisoner. For an explosion, he wrote Garnett on March 12,

1897, was “the most lasting thing in the universe … It leaves … room to move” (*Garnett*, 94). And the Great War was just such an explosion. During the years before 1914, however, Conrad could but “feel horribly the oppression of [his] individuality” (*Garnett*, 94).

III

The Claims of Fiction
1896–1912

HAUNTED by his pessimistic vision of a remorseless process, and in a state of almost continual uncertainty about himself, Conrad experienced difficulties with his fiction that were comparably dismaying. Yet between 1896 and 1912 he produced a considerable number of tales and novels, and although he never had an easy time he was never at a loss for material. On October 20, 1911, he wrote Garnett that “subjects lay about for anybody to pick up” (*Garnett*, 232). This was a novelist avowing nonchalance and studied carelessness in his choice of subject. It was the treatment to which he wished to call attention, and let us turn to that for the moment. For Conrad the treatment of a subject was essentially the problem of how to make a way through from the beginning to the end of a work. The process involved the greatest painstaking since he was utilizing what he called “the crafty tracery of words” (*Garnett*, 84). In a letter to Blackwood, his publisher, on February 20, 1900, he expresses the gist of his problem with uncommon calmness. He was at this moment at work on *Lord Jim*: “I shall not hurry myself since the end of a story is a very important and difficult part; the *most* difficult for me, to execute—that is. It is always *thought out* before the story is begun” (*Blackwood*, 86–87).

This was all probably some sort of ideal prescription, but it does give us some clues to follow. There was equal finality in his views about the forms of fiction. One letter to Ernest Dawson, dated December 12, 1902, shows a marked unwillingness to consider formal experiments in his fiction; or, if not quite that, at least an unwillingness to theorize about what he had called, some years earlier, “the question of art … so endless, so involved and so obscure” (*Blackwood*, 64).

In regard to what you say of greatness, I doubt if greatness can be attained now in imaginative prose work. When it comes, it will be in a new form; in a form for which we are not ripe as yet. Till the hour strikes and

the man appears, we must plod in the beaten track, we must externally "*rabacher*" the old formula of expression. There is no help and no hope; there is only the duty to try, to try everlastingly, with no regard for success. (*LL*, I.308)

Conrad's conservative statements about form were supported by his interest in reusing conventional forms inherited from earlier writers. His professed literary "heritage" was composed of writers of action and realism—writers like Cooper, Marryat, and Maupassant.[1] Although all of them may not have been his real masters, Conrad's explicit statement of his heritage is significant. He opposed "analysis," authorial interpretation, because he believed that reality could be formulated only in terms of action. One letter to Galsworthy (*LL*, II.76–80), for example, quarrels politely with Galsworthy's new novel *Fraternity*: Conrad's unfavorable response was based on the criticism that the action of *Fraternity* was overwhelmed by analysis. In one specific instance great damage was done, Conrad says, by the connection of the background with the action by the author's intervention. The happier solution would have been to make that connection by developing the action itself. It is interesting that many years later Conrad became intrigued by what Proust did, almost in the face of impossibility: Proust, he wrote Scott Moncrieff on December 17, 1922, could make analysis creative and lively (*LL*, II.291). At present, however, in a search for a governing norm in fiction, his mind took its stand, with Aristotle, by action since this was a way of depicting the behavior of men without burdening it with an explicit moral; it was this moral burden, altogether too heavy, that Conrad found Galsworthy heaping upon his material. The action itself may have insufficient strength to bear the load, or the novelist may not have sufficient transcendental vision to see the moral—these are the two equal alternatives in Conrad's argument. Apparently, it was unnecessary to settle on either one exclusively. But the action, despite its neutral moral content at one or another disconnected moment, should have a positive relation to every other action in the book. Action in its smallest unit was what he called, on another occasion, "illuminating episode" (*Garnett*, 64). So illuminating episode, guided by "a concentration of effort in one single direction," within a familiar formula of expression constituted the abstract scheme of a work of fiction.

It was while thinking of this abstraction that Conrad could say to E. V. Lucas on October 6, 1908, “a good book is a good action. It has more than the force of good example. And if the moralist will say that it has less merit—let him. Indeed we are not writing for the salvation of our own souls. ‘A man should not be tame’ says the Spanish proverb, and I would say: An author is not a monk. Yet a man who puts forth the secret of his imagination to the world accomplishes, as it were, a religious rite” (*LL*, II.89). The first problem here is to distinguish and clarify the so-called goodness of an action book. An action must be more than an example, must extend beyond that which is exemplary of something else, most often, I suppose, a moral. A specified moral is an absolute, and this, properly speaking, no action can really be. A good action should be audacious in what it withholds, rather than evangelical in what it is made to preach. To put forth the secret of one’s imagination is not to enact a religious event, but to perform a religious rite; that is, the rite implies but withholds the actual event. In this manner the imaginative life of the novelist in its totality is given an episodic structure which, while not revealing the whole of the writer’s life, is a discrete analogy of the mechanism of that life. For a reader this can be made intelligible through the action (or plot) of a fictional work.

The argument may be clarified at this point by a passage from Cardinal Newman’s essay, “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrines.” In propounding his notion of Economy, Newman addresses almost the same problem a novelist faces when he seeks to liberate a portion of a larger reality—his own—so that it may stand by itself. Newman’s argument in paraphrase runs like this: there is a place in human affairs for a special kind of inventive discourse, which can be called an economy. The necessity for this discourse arises in the ordinary diffusion of feeling, emotions, and thought in each man’s life, a diffusion whose complexities give it the appearance of undefinable chaos. For the purposes of argument and discovery, one can collect these bewildering strands into certain figures, images, or fables that economically resemble the complex whole from which they come. If they are extended figures, they are like the self-contained plot of a story. At no point do these new figures contain or exhaust the original whole—the mind, that is, of the individual creating them. Although in the following climactic passage Newman is speaking of the relation between infinite absolutes and their

finite representations (economies), his words shed a good deal of light on the relation existing between the mind of an author and a good book, between the whole of an imaginative process and its “ritual” presentation, and between a large existential awareness and a derivative but independent aspect of it:

They [economies] are all developments of one and the same range of ideas; they are all instruments of discovery as to those ideas. They stand for real things, and we can reason with them, though they be but symbols, as if they were the things themselves, for which they stand. Yet none of them carries out the lines of truth to their limits; first, one stops in the analysis, then another; like some calculating tables which answer for a thousand times, and miss in the thousand and first. While they answer, we can use them just as if they were the realities which they represent, and without thinking of those realities; but at length our instrument of discovery issues in some great impossibility or contradiction, or what we call in religion, a mystery. It has run its length; and by its failure shows that all along it has been but an expedient for practical purposes, not a true analysis or adequate image of those recondite laws which are investigated by means of it. It has never fathomed their depths, because it now fails to measure their course. At the same time, no one, because it cannot do everything, would refuse to use it within the range in which it will act; no one would say that it was a system of empty symbols, though it be but a shadow of the unseen. Though we use it with caution, still we use it, as being the nearest approximation to the truth which our condition admits.[2]

For a novelist this involves the technique of what James called “rendering.” Conrad knew exactly the dangers that the novelist faces in his public reception if his technique is too well perfected. Indeed, James’s own work was a case in point. A letter to Galsworthy, dated February 11, 1899, contains the following explanation:

To me even the R. T. [“The Real Thing”] seems to flow from the heart because and only because the work, approaching so near perfection, yet does not strike cold. Technical perfection, unless there is some real glow to illumine and warm it from within, must necessarily be cold. I argue that in H. J. [Henry James] there is such a glow and not a dim one either, but

to us used, absolutely accustomed, to unartistic expression of fine, headlong, honest (or dishonest) sentiments the art of H. J. does appear heartless. The outlines are so clear, the figures so finished, chiselled, carved and brought out that we exclaim,—we, used to the shades of the contemporary fiction, to the more or less malformed shades,—we exclaim,—stone! Not at all. I say flesh and blood,—very perfectly presented,—perhaps with too much perfection of *method*. (*LL*, I.270–271)

That was Henry James's predicament, and Conrad's own was closely related. It was Conrad's fear that he might be considered merely a writer of accurate details. On September 29, 1897, he wrote to Garnett: "It is evident that my fate is to be descriptive and descriptive only" (*Garnett*, 107). The greatest difficulty, however, he confided on August 5, 1897, to Graham: "life is long,—and art is so short that no one sees the miserable thing" (*LL*, I.208). The huge atomistic particularity of life so completely dwarfs the comparatively small economy which is art that, he feared, the validity of art might be lost sight of.

The one work of fiction during this period that occupied Conrad intermittently—and provided him with insuperable problems—epitomizes and concentrates so much of what I have been saying that there is a good case for calling it the central experience in this phase of his writing career. This work is "The Rescuer," whose stylistic and conceptual changes have been painstakingly studied by Thomas Moser in his *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*. Moser follows Conrad's own suggestion that the work, which was not completed until 1918–19 when it became *The Rescue*, provides suitable ground for the study of his literary evolution (*LL*, II.209). My aim is different from Moser's since I am only considering Conrad's stated intentions for the story. These appear in the following letter, dated September 6, 1897, to Blackwood:

The human interest of the tale is in the contact of Lingard the simple, masterful, imaginative adventurer with a type of civilized woman—a complex type. He is a man tenacious of purpose, enthusiastic in undertaking, faithful in friendship … Then when the rescue, for which he had sacrificed all the interests of his life, is accomplished, he has to face his reward—an inevitable separation. This episode of his life lifts him out of himself; I want to convey in the action of the story the stress and the

exaltation of the man under the influence of a sentiment which he hardly understands and yet which is real enough to make him as he goes on reckless of consequences. It is only at the very last that he is perfectly enlightened when the work of rescue and destruction is ended and nothing is left to him but to try to pick up as best as he may the broken thread of his life. (*Blackwood*, 9–10)

In Conrad's remarks one might discover a paradigm for the solution of Conrad's implicit personal problem. Lingard, the masterful, imaginative adventurer: Conrad himself in his role as a novelist. Mrs. Travers—complex, civilized: Conrad's existential awareness in all its richness. The rescue of Mrs. Travers for which all has been sacrificed: the experience of writing itself. The episode lifts Lingard out of his life: this can be a metaphor for the "full heart," the figure that Conrad usually employs when he is in the most difficult moments of composition. The reward is separation: once the work is completed, the rescued portion of the writer's awareness is no longer a part of him since the strictly personal connection has been destroyed. At the very last there is perfect enlightenment: according to Newman, one can use an economy only up to a point. For what is apprehended beyond it is, in religious terms, a mystery, which, as Hopkins put it, is an "incomprehensible certainty."[3] Nothing is left for Lingard but to pick up the threads of his life: achieving enlightenment through the revelation of something equivalent to a mystery, the writer can resume his life under the benefits of this new vision.

Now one important point about the projected action of "The Rescuer" is that Conrad conceived of it as a whole, a completed action. And wholeness implies a transcending of the economy. But it was some twenty years before Conrad could adequately describe this kind of complete action. In other words, the "end" which, he had insisted, he would always think out from the very beginning simply could not be thought out for "The Rescuer." There was something about "perfect enlightenment" and about "certainty" that put him off extraordinarily. This is why the tale and the short story, with their enigmatic and inconclusive atmosphere, suited him to such a degree. One letter to Garnett during work on "The Rescuer" is especially revealing:

In these circumstances you imagine I feel not much inclination to write letters. As a matter of fact I had a great difficulty in writing the most commonplace note. I seem to have lost all *sense* of style and yet I am haunted, mercilessly haunted by the *necessity* of style. And that story I can't write weaves itself into all I see, into all I speak, into all I think, into the lines of every book I try to read. I haven't read for days. You know how bad it is when one *feels* one's liver, or lungs. Well I feel my brain. I am distinctly conscious of the contents of my head. My story is there in a fluid—in an evading shape. I can't get hold of it. It is all there—to bursting, yet I can't get hold of it no more than you can grasp a handful of water. (*Garnett*, 135)

Although subjects for fiction may lie about for anyone to pick up, this particular one seemed to have been within Conrad all along. Again we see him gripped by a powerfully imaginative emotional and intellectual complex that he could not master because it too closely retraced the bewildering outlines of his own experience. Out of the fullness of one's heart, we remember, no grammar is possible, and style at its very simplest is grammar.

Style, order, and grammar are all aspects of mastery and, consistently enough, forms of intense activity that Conrad thought could best be dramatized and understood in purely physical terms. Consider, for instance, these passages in two letters to Wells, dated November 30, 1903, and October 20, 1905. First:

for me, writing—*the only possible writing*—is just simply the conversion of nervous force into phrases. With you too, I am sure, tho' in your case it is the disciplined intelligence which gives the signal—the impulse. For me it is a matter of chance, stupid chance. But the fact remains that when the nervous force is exhausted the phrases don't come—and no tension of will can help. (*LL*, I.321)

And second:

As to working regularly in a decent and orderly and industrious manner, I've given that up from sheer impossibility. The damned stuff comes out only by a kind of mental convulsion lasting two, three or more days—up to a fortnight—which leaves me perfectly limp and not very happy,

exhausted emotionally to all appearance, but secretly irritable to the point of savagery. (*LL*, II.25)

It is not surprising, then, that the kind of action best encompassed by this kind of effort and discipline is incomplete action—the action, most notably, of such tales as *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* On November 29, 1896, Conrad had written to Garnett:

Of course nothing can alter the course of the "Nigger." Let it be unpopularity it *must* be. But it seems to me that the thing—precious as it is to me—is trivial enough on the surface to have some charm for the man in the street. As to lack of incident well—it's life. The incomplete joy, the incomplete sorrow, the incomplete rascality of heroism—the incomplete suffering. Events crowd and push and nothing happens. You know what I mean. The opportunities do not last long enough. Unless in a boy's book of adventures. Mine were never finished. They fizzled out before I had a chance to do more than another man would. Tell me what you think of what you see. (*Garnett*, 80)

The keynote of Conrad's imaginative experience in its relation to his work during this period is struck in the insecurity and uncertainty of "Mine were never finished. They fizzled out before I had a chance." The surface of his own life, like a palm whose life line breaks out in a myriad of crazy directions, reminded him that nothing in his own experience could furnish him with a firm notion of what it meant to *complete* something. He had no respect for his complex character: not only in his two occupations, his two countries, his vacillating world views, but also in his gallery of "economical" fiction, nothing could bring him to a fully manageable definition of objectivity. That would have been a fitting reward for the "endless discontent" of the writing. His novels, which tended, one gathers from the letters, perversely to "grow and grow," liberated along with what they had genuinely "rescued" too much of what was dark and imponderable. Only his short fiction could *evolve* with a respectable measure of intellectual control. If the action was incomplete it was essentially so, and more often than not its very shortness corresponded to that acute brevity of art as it stood in relation to existence. Art was the concentration of life and experience into intelligible, economical form; whereas the work of fiction has its ending, life goes on and on. And at

least the disparity between art and life implied a conquest, genuinely *vécu* and achieved: what was liberated and rescued had been lifted out of a dark tomb of slavishly performed repetitive action. “La solitude me gagne: elle m’absorbe. Je ne vois rien, je ne lis rien. C’est comme une éspèce de tombe, qui serait en même temps un enfer, ou il faut écrire, écrire, écrire” (*Lettres*., 50). This is what it was like to write *Nostromo*. Yet the actual experience of writing was usually so hateful, the expense of creating art so great, the results so uncertain, that some years later he was willing to sacrifice some of *Nostromo’s* “anxiously meditated” pages (IX.viii) to the exigencies of a translation (*Lettres*, III); it had also become clear to him that such a lengthy novel far too closely approached the amorphous fluidity of life. Short fiction was like a short man subtly dodging and partially defeating a large man by darting in for occasional, tangential blows that weakened the opponent but also tired the attacker. If this were not enough for the moment, there was a far more cynical objective for such a strategy. He wrote to Graham on August 5, 1897: “Straight vision is bad form,—as you know. The proper thing is to look round the corner, because, if Truth is not there, there is at any rate a something that distributes shekels. And what better can you want than the noble metal?” (*LL*, I.208).

Certain of the letters Conrad wrote during 1898 and 1899 pinpoint the mood of lacerating self-doubt to which he was so often subject. Two letters to his good friends, the Sandersons, each contain a striking passage in which he describes himself enacting a doomed performance before an unfriendly and nameless audience. The first is dated August 31, 1898: “I am like a tightrope dancer who, in the midst of his performance, should suddenly discover that he knows nothing about tightrope dancing. He may appear ridiculous to the spectators, but a broken neck is the result of such untimely wisdom … indeed the matter is serious enough for me” (*LL*, I.247). Dated October 12, 1899, the second letter reads: “One expects to fall every instant and one would like to fall with a covered face, with a decorous arrangement of draperies, with no more words than the greatest men have used” (*LL*, I.282). These passages were dictated by the fear and embarrassment at having publicly offered something either not very good or too disgracefully self-revealing. In both passages Conrad has portrayed himself in a moment of

voluntary self-arrest, searching both the present and the past for an explanation of—or a preparation for—an imminent and disastrous future. At other times, he would turn on himself with a righteous indignation that refused to grant to him the common human propensity for failure: “No man has a right to go on as I am doing without producing manifest masterpieces. It seems I’ve no excuse under heaven or on earth” (*LL*, II.33). Or, when he succumbed to a pathetic sense of solitude, he blamed the generally mistaken turn his life had taken. One remedy was uninhibited confession of the kind he would have made (had he been able) to a recently dead friend, Charles Zagorski. On February 6, 1898, Conrad wrote to Angèle, Zagorski’s widow, that “not a single day passed but I found myself thinking of you both—and during the most painful moments *l’idée qu’il y aurait un jour où je pourrais lui confesser ma vie toute entière et être compris de lui: cette pensée était ma plus grande consolation. Et voilà que cet éspoir—le plus précieux de tous—s’est éteint pour toujours*” (*LL*, I.228).

Conrad’s inclination to look back with sorrow and shame at the course of his life—to judge by the frequency with which this occurs in his letters—was something more than a self-pitying pastime. One might compare it with Rousseau’s vaunted purpose in his *Confessions* not only to explain himself to others, but to discover for himself the real origins of his present misery. Recall, for example, Rousseau’s flamboyant promise at the outset, that the character he is about to investigate “ce sera moi”: it *will* be me, and not it *is* me. We are to expect the creation of such a firmly designed character that it alone will be capable of pressing order upon the shambles made out of Rousseau’s life by his enemies. At some point in his career Conrad apparently gave thought to Rousseau, although a terse footnote in Jean-Aubry’s edition of the *Lettres françaises* keeps us from forcing the analogy too far. Conrad, Jean-Aubry says, “détestait l’esprit de Rousseau” (*Lettres*, 144). But if Conrad’s hatred of Rousseau was at all like his well-known hatred of Dostoevsky, it may have been that Conrad perceived in the loquacious Swiss a temperament uncomfortably similar to his own. Further, assuming this parallel to Rousseau, one can better understand the continued search for a “starting point” that Conrad was obliged to sustain, a beginning or initiative (to borrow Coleridge’s word[4]) with enough connection to his own life to give method and consistency to what he wrote. The search became more intense the more

he saw that his selfhood was dissipating itself in a wide scattering of disparate impressions. Conrad felt the lack of a central purpose because at present his character seemed shamefully untrue to an ideal of himself, to a Self confident of its powers and firm in its progress toward real maturity. He had written to Garnett on June 19, 1896:

Other writers have some starting point. Something to catch hold of. They start from an anecdote—from a newspaper paragraph (a book may be suggested by a casual sentence in an old almanack). They lean on dialect—or on tradition—or on history—or on the prejudice or the fad of the hour; they trade upon some tie or some conviction of their time—or upon the absence of these things—which they can abuse or praise. But at any rate they know something to begin with—while I don't. I have had some impressions, some sensations—in my time:—impressions and sensations of common things. And it's all faded—my very being seems faded and thin like the ghost of a blonde and sentimental woman, haunting romantic ruins pervaded by rats. I am exceedingly miserable. My task appears to me as sensible as lifting the world without that fulcrum which even that conceited ass, Archimedes, admitted to be necessary. (*Garnett*, 59)

Despite the absence of a starting point, he persisted in his labors, writing many years later to de Smet, his French translator, that "je vais à ma tâche quotidienne comme le forçat à son labeur—parce qu'il faut" (*Lettres*, 107). He was compensated, it seems, by the knowledge that, even if he were doing what many others had done, he could nevertheless gain from the lonely valor of the enterprise. This is to say that he persevered in honest doubt with absolutely nothing to back him, not even a modicum of certainty about himself. He wrote on September 6, 1898, to the egregiously self-confident Wells: "I am no more valorous than the rest of us. We all like in our audacities to feel something solid at our backs. Such a feeling is unknown to me" (*LL*, I.248). To both writing and living he brought, he claimed, not only modest feelings of valor but also some of the impenitence of the uncompromising thief on the cross, "defiant and bitter … one of my early heroes" (*Garnett*, 99). He was not too defiant, however, to write reverently of his own "piety" to his fiery champion, Arthur Symons (on August 29, 1908):

One thing that I am certain of is that I have approached the object of my task, things human, in a spirit of piety. The earth is a temple where there is going on a mystery play, childish and poignant, ridiculous and awful enough, in all conscience. Once in I've tried to behave decently … I don't think that this has been noticed … But enough. You have, unexpected, like a burglar, forced the lock of the safe where I keep my stock of megalomania, so I don't apologise for these worthless outpourings … As I wrote to a friend lately, I have been quarrying my English out of a black night, working like a coal miner in his pit. For fourteen years now I have been living as if in a cave without echoes. (*LL*, II.83–84)

However lightly we treat the exaggerations of the first half of the passage, we cannot dismiss the image with which it closes. For it is this nightmarish feeling that usually produces Conrad's effusive and pious self-compliments. Yet Conrad inevitably returns to the dark image. It is in this same hopeless mood that he had written some eight years earlier to Garnett, on Good Friday, 1899, "in sorrow and tribulation":

The scales are falling off my eyes. It is tolerably awful. And I face it, I face it but the fright is growing on me. My fortitude is shaken by the view of the monster. It does not move; its eyes are baleful; it is as still as death itself—and it will devour me. Its state has eaten into my soul already deep, deep. I am alone with it in a chasm with perpendicular sides of black basalt. Never were sides so perpendicular and smooth, and high. Above, your anxious head against a bit of sky peers down—in vain—in vain. There's no rope long enough for that rescue. (*Garnett*, 153)

His own rescue is what Conrad longs for here, but it never seems to come. Yet words and "outpourings" brought him closer to the world his friends seemed to inhabit with such ease, and at least this was some reassurance of a reality painfully denied him. When one inhabits a dark cave, which is also a "quiet nightmare" (*LL*, II.51), the very sound of words—regardless of meaning—has the power to break the silence. His will was paralyzed: he reminded his friends that "from a full heart nothing comes" (*LL*, I.275).

Although these were terrible problems to face, he was able to let himself go in describing them to his closest friends, to the Galsworthys,

the Sandersons, Garnett, and Graham. For the people with whom his friendship, he thought, depended on the finished products of his literary creativity, he was forced to adopt other expedients as time passed. Whatever they may have been as human beings, publishers above all were businessmen to Conrad, men for whom time was measured not in agonies of doubt but in the mechanical efficiencies of production. Publishers, in fine, were human agents of the knitting machine. On a more practical level, however, it should be remembered that publishers had other things to worry about, and one was Conrad's slowness, his failure to turn out more new books. Thus in Conrad's dealings with publishers, with William Blackwood most of all, the particular, practical demands of the present came to be focused. To Conrad these dealings represented his road to the public's approbation, the very same public he so feared would catch him undraped, fumbling, and ineffectual. It was in August 1898, in a letter to David S. Meldrum, literary adviser to Blackwood (Conrad's principal publisher at the time), that Conrad's response to a *direct* demand from the world at large first becomes evident. He wrote on August 10:

I *never mean* to be slow. The stuff comes out at its own rate. I am always ready to put it down; nothing would induce me to lay down my pen if I *feel* a sentence—or even a word ready to hand. The trouble is that too often —alas!—I've to wait for the sentence—for the word.

What wonder then that during the long blank hours the doubt creeps into the mind and I ask myself whether I am fitted for that work. The worst is that while I am thus powerless to produce my imagination is extremely active: whole paragraphs, whole pages, whole chapters pass through my mind. Everything is there: descriptions, dialogue, reflection—everything—everything but the belief, the conviction, the only thing needed to make me put pen to paper. I've thought out a volume in a day till I felt sick in mind and heart and gone to bed, completely done up, without having written a line. The effort I put out should give birth to Masterpieces as big As Mountains—and it brings forth a ridiculous mouse now and then … It looks as if I were very mercenary but God knows, it is not so. I am impatient of material anxieties and they frighten me too because I feel how mysteriously independent of myself is my power of expression. It is there—I believe—and some thought, and a little insight. All this is there;

but I am not as the work men who can take up and lay down their tools. I am, so to speak, only the agent of an unreliable master. (*Blackwood*, 26–27)

Conrad knew that one thing a writer should try to do was to write masterpieces; he was not too proud to realize the truth of this demand. Nevertheless it was a kind of businesslike stocktaking that was now required of him, and he could not perform it as he might have for a good friend. Conrad had realized that "materials subjected to breaking strain lose all elasticity in the end" (*LL*, II, 47); now he was subjected to breaking strain by the "material anxieties" to which Blackwood had added his stern voice. And so strategies had to be devised to meet this emergency, since about money matters his elasticity of mind had been exhausted. Now, Conrad wanted Blackwood to understand—and this is the stratagem—that there were *two* Conrads: one a passive agent, the other an unreliable master. One was the waiting and willing polite transcriber who wished to please, the other an uncooperative demon. One wanted to evolve into a great writer, the other's progress was mysterious and dark. When, in 1902, he thought that Blackwood was again charging him to write faster and more, Conrad resolutely fired back a defiant letter. He spoke with the confidence of the maligned faithful agent, the character he would from now on find eminently successful for his dealings with publishers and with anyone else who had fixed expectations about him, people who would not allow him his larger problems. The letter, now famous, is dated May 31, 1902, and some parts of it are worth quoting:

I beg to assure you that I've never fostered any illusions as to my value … That—labouring against an anxious tomorrow, under the stress of an uncertain future, I have been at times consoled, reassured and uplifted by a finished page—I'll not deny. This however is not intoxication … For the rest I am conscious of having pursued with pain and labour a calm conception of a definite ideal in a perfect soberness of spirit … now I have no longer the buoyancy of youth to bear me up through the deep hours of depression … Now my character is formed; it has been tried by experience. I have looked upon the worst life can do—and I am sure of myself, even against the demoralising effect of straitened circumstances.

I know exactly what I am doing … It is not the haphazard business of a mere temperament. There is in it as much intelligent action guided by a deliberate view of the effect to be attained as in any business enterprise. Therefore I am emboldened to say that ultimate and irretrievable failure is *not* to be my lot. (*Blackwood*, 152–155)

Such carefully balanced phrases as *calm conception, definite ideal*, and *perfect soberness* are arranged with something not too far from rhetorical glibness, even though the underlying sentiment of the passage is extremely affecting.

After 1902 it was this kind of manufactured impression of himself as a composed individual that Conrad wished to give the public. He was led inevitably to the writing of *The Mirror of the Sea* and *A Personal Record*, evasive masterpieces of truly impersonal intimacy, written as he once said at "the [correct] psychological moment" (*LL*, 11.88). Moreover, in his newly assumed pose he exploited what he was often cynically to call his "foreignness." But, behind the facade, the hopeless and fatiguing struggle in the black cave mercilessly continued. When, years before, he had bitterly pronounced life to be a matter of "concessions and compromises" (*Poradoivska*, II), he might not have believed that he was capable of a compromise both profitable and functional. Now he knew that, if the continuous effort at writing brought nothing else, it must and would find him a small niche in contemporary letters: he would settle for that. He wrote to his agent J. B. Pinker on July 30, 1907, that "one may read everybody and yet in the end want to read me—for a change if for nothing else. For I don't resemble anybody … There is nothing in me but a turn of mind which, whether valuable or worthless, cannot be imitated" (*LL*, II.54). Or, in August 1908, there is the following to Symons: "The fact is that I am really a much simpler person … In the simplicity of my heart, I tried to realize these facts when they came in … I've never asked myself, or looked into myself or thought of myself" (*LL*, II.73).

Publishing demands alone, of course, could not force him to create this image of himself with such facility. In addition, the image may have been an effective way of meeting what he called on March 23, 1905, in a letter to Edmund Gosse, "those difficult moments which Baudelaire has defined happily as *Hes stérilités des écrivains nerveux*'" (*LL*, II.14). And if Baudelaire provided him with a name for his malady, he could also have

provided him with the title and the device for *The Mirror of the Sea*, the first avowedly autobiographical work he wrote. Possibly, then, this new, "honest," and even garrulous Conrad was a stratagem for hiding the endless incertitude he felt before the world at large: regardless of his lack of public recognition, he was still an author before the public, a tightrope dancer in the middle of a dangerous act. Instead of disappearing—which would have been impossible now—he would point to his shadow on the ground from the vantage of his high place and try to interest the audience in that. In so doing, his eminence was maintained but his performance remained his own, up there. Agreeing perhaps with Baudelaire that the sea was a "vaste miroir de mon désespoir," he realized that it was easier to reflect himself in the sea, using the sea as a mirror to throw misleading reflections of himself out to the public, rather than to do the immeasurably harder thing, letting the public have a true revelation of himself.

It is interesting to compare the motives and the methods of Conrad's literary self-disguise with what Leon Edel says of Henry James in his admirable *Literary Biography*. Conrad, as much as James, found it necessary to lead an "open ritualistic life that masked [the] private life."[5] After 1902 he deliberately spun a protective web over himself: *The Mirror* and *A Personal Record* were the two major efforts of that activity. There was something special to fear from the insatiable appetite of a vast and anonymous public. Then, too, as an author in a publisher's stable Conrad was always expected to win the race, and the public is the publisher writ large. It is appropriate here to recall some words from James's essay on George Sand. Edel sees in them the secret of James's public image, and I think there is much of relevance here to Conrad as well:

> The reporter and the reported have duly and equally to understand that they carry their life in their hands. There are secrets for privacy and silence; let them only be cultivated on the part of the hunted creature with even half the method with which the love for sport—or call it the historic sense—is cultivated on the part of the investigator. They have been left too much to the natural, the instinctive man; but they will be twice as effective after it begins to be observed that they may take their place among the triumphs of civilization. Then at last the game will be fair.[6]

James's injunction to the writer ("the reported") recommends the

cultivation of secrets and privacy, a cultivation based not only upon instinct but also upon the precepts of art: a secret should be deliberate, fine, and well-made. Only in the cultivation of such secrets will an artist be fairly matched with an insistent and clever investigator (“the reporter”). A somewhat similar notion was, I think, in Conrad’s mind when, in 1903, he exchanged six or seven letters with A. K. Waliszewski, a Parisian Pole who wanted to do an article on his illustrious compatriot. Conrad obliged him with several “biographical” details that were pale reflections of the real Conrad, hiding more than they revealed. Before 1895, Conrad reported of himself, his life had been “mouvementée mais obscur”; he was neither an adventurer nor a vagabond; *Almayer’s Folly* was written only to fill his mornings; it was easy for him to be extremely sincere (*Lettres*, 53, 56, 57, 61). To Methuen the publisher, Conrad might refuse —as he did on May 30, 1906—to “define” his writing, but he would speak, in order to transfer attention from the writing to his “image,” with obvious satisfaction of the infinite complexity of “temperamental writing” (*LL*, II.34). Or, on other occasions, he would not be restrained from producing as many “official” biographies of himself as the moment required, each version stressing the unusual exotic romanticism of his life and its origins. When his half-truths were resisted by intimates like F. M. Hueffer, Conrad was provoked to petulant insistence. When he spoke in this way to his close friends, he was trying to keep them from making him change his public story, not because he wanted to fool them but because he did not want them to disarrange the public pose he had adopted. No, he decreed to Hueffer on July 30, 1909, his *Personal Record* very accurately described the perfect parallel that existed between his writing and his sea experiences (*LL*, II.101). The book was even to become a few years later the official “heart and essence” of Conrad (*LL*, II.150); look there, he told other correspondents, for the secret of my life. Pressed further, he would argue that he was not a person for an “orderly” biography, “auto or otherwise” (*LL*, II.92–93). All of this was, he told A. H. Davray, his French translator, a concomitant of writing *for* rather than *about* the English (*Lettres*, 87).

The “official” Conrad had become an economy for himself, serving him both in public life and more subtly in the pressing needs of his inner life. For his writing and thought about existence, about his work and about his life, converged upon a fear that his rescue of himself would never come

about directly as the result of one sustained effort: that was one thing his past experiences quite harshly assured. His realization that one must look around the corner for truth (*LL*, I.208), that one is always becoming rather than being something (*Garnett*, 143), that his ever-changing outlook on life naturally resulted in a sense of psychic dislodgement and hypochondria—all of this conspired to produce the elaborate strategy for evasion and compromise of these prewar years.

Conrad's chosen country provided him, he knew, with some chance of matching its self-confident assurance, something the politically restless Continent could never have done. He wrote to Gosse from Capri on April 11, 1905: "I've done very badly here. It's all very well for Englishmen born to their inheritance to fling verse and prose from Italy back at their native shores. I, in my state of honourable adoption, find that I need the moral support, the sustaining influence of English atmosphere even from day to day" (*LL*, II.15). Then also, as he immersed himself in the daily activity of his work, he saw that English was a language whose mastery was a necessary preliminary; if he could see no further reward in that mastery than immediate gratification, *that* at least was some reward. This is to say that as a Pole in Poland he would be irremediably lost, whereas in England, writing for the English, Conrad the foreigner would be forced to surmount his laziness and incompetence and to produce something. As he wrote to Marguerite on January 5, 1907, "I have the laziness common to all Poles. I prefer to dream a novel rather than write it. For the dream of the work is always much more beautiful than the reality of the printed thing. And English is, too, still a foreign language to me, requiring an immense effort to handle" (*Poradoivska*, 108–109).

In the struggle to master, to win, to rescue himself he was not—as he had once said—"perched on the stilts of … principles" (*Poradoivska*, 51), but was entering instead an uncharted territory with no encumbering preconceptions. In October 1907 he proudly wrote of this to Garnett:

> You remember always that I am a Slav (it's your *idée fixe*) but you seem to forget that I am a Pole. You forget that we have been used to go to battle without illusions. It's you Britishers that "go in to win" only. We have been "going in" these last hundred years repeatedly, to be knocked on the head only—as was visible to any calm intellect. (*Garnett*, 209)

He felt that he had to demonstrate to everyone that life could never be rendered as “a sort of Cook’s Personally Conducted Tour—from the cradle to the grave” (*Garnett*, 214). Writing and life were, for him, like journeys without maps, struggles to win over and then claim unknown ground. His personal struggle Conrad saw reflected in the political and historical developments around him. As the physical and moral geography of Europe changed, he changed too. And the cataclysm was just ahead.

IV

Worlds at War
1912–1918

Up to this point Conrad had published twenty-four short stories and tales including *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *Heart of Darkness*, seven novels including *Lord Jim, Nostromo*, and *The Secret Agent*, as well as two books of personal recollection. Yet he had only won a *succés d'estime*. It must have been with mingled disbelief and satisfaction that in 1912, with the completion of *Chance*, Conrad found himself becoming firmly established as a public favorite. Even today, with the keen critical predisposition toward technical virtuosity for its own sake, no one can fail to notice the extraordinary fate that linked together what must be the most arid and technical of Conrad's works with his most dramatic success before the public. Henry James's uncanny talent to see at once in *Chance* the puzzling choice of "wantonly invoked difficulties," of "so deliberately a plunge into threatened frustration," *and* the inordinate but successful exhibition of method surely placed James in a discriminating minority of but two or three.[1] Conrad, however, was able to write confidently to Frederick Watson on May 24, 1912, "I am satisfied with my public, which understands sufficiently the general intention of my work. Why look for another?" (*LL*, II.139). A few months later, on November 25, he wrote Arnold Bennett that he was aware of "a certain tenacity of purpose" (*LL*, II.142) that had sustained him throughout his literary years. What now seems to have pushed its way to the center of Conrad's concern was the realization, partially true and only partially believed, that there was a line in his life which for all public purposes had better be adhered to as The Development of Joseph Conrad. He seemed able to see his life in terms of a clear and simple pattern, very much as if his personal history were the subject of the well-regulated narrative of a Maupassant story. There was, of course, the other no less central fact—what he called "the whole body of my work" (*LL*, II.139), the work more relevant to his interior life—but he discovered that this also needed to be

arranged in the orderly perspective he now discerned. *Nostromo*, for instance, as problematic a work as ever he conceived, could now be treated with fond bewilderment and distance. This attitude turns up in a letter of June 21, to André Gide: “C’était un four noir, vous savez. Moi j’ai une espèce de tendresse pour cette énorme machine. Mais elle ne marche pas; c’est vrai. Il y a quelque chose qui empêche. Je ne sais pas quoi. Du reste, avec toute ma tendresse, moi même je ne peux pas en supporter la lecture” (*Lettres*, 120). If *Nostromo* and some of his other works had not gratified the public’s appetite, there was no reason now to belabor the matter: he was simply glad of the recognition now granted, and he hoped to nourish it as long as he could.

Aside from construing his modest success as a gift of recognition from the public, Conrad saw in it additional evidence that his carefully carried-out plan for “artfulness in exploiting agents and publishers” (*Garnett*, 180) had matured. From the middle of 1912 until the last third of 1914, the focus of Conrad’s actions was to maintain his public success. For most of that time he was at work on *Victory*, and that of course had a close relation to the pose he was entertaining. In this story Heyst’s inscrutability reveals itself as a mask covering the incorrigible romanticism of the simple rescuer who cannot resist the attractions of a patently stock situation. So Conrad in a letter to the enterprising Alfred Knopf (then an employee at Doubleday) on July 30, 1913, “unmasked” himself with fervor and showed himself as different as possible from the superliterary virtuoso that people thought he was. He insisted that he was a writer whose style always tended to the colloquial and whose point of view, no less, was purely human and straightforward (*LL*, II.146–149). There are two types of relation, he continued, into which a writer could enter with publishers. In one the writer was a publisher’s unashamedly speculative, hit-or-miss gambling venture. In the other, he was taken on as a sound investment: it is this arrangement that would suit him should Knopf be able to manage a contract for Conrad with Doubleday. He was able, finally, to view the future with calm and equanimity, and to prove it Conrad put forward Richard Curie, who as his agent would now act as a helpful intermediary between the novelist and his readers. With this ostensible solicitude for his public, Conrad had come a long way toward understanding the ways of success. Still, this is not to say that at times he did not communicate with a more select group (for which Curle’s

services were unnecessary). Garnett, Bennett, and Galsworthy were given glimpses of a novelist far less certain of himself. Garnett saw, Conrad said in one letter, into Conrad's very soul, catching the foreigner in his innocent malpractices (*Garnett*, 244); Bennett, according to another letter, was one of the few people for whom Conrad really wrote (*LL*, II.151).

In July 1914 Conrad was able to start off on a long-delayed trip back to Poland. It was the trip his family had insisted on, the more so as their faithful friend Retinger had planned it and had rented them a country house near Cracow for six weeks. Conrad wrote to Galsworthy on July 25:

> As to this Polish journey, I depart on it with mixed feelings.
>
> In 1874 I got into a train in Cracow (Vienna Express) on my way to the sea, as a man might get into a dream. And here is the dream going on still. Only now it is peopled mainly by ghosts and the moment of awakening draws near. (*LL*, II.157)

He had managed till now to keep his dream-nightmare of a life in deceptive but convenient order. "Reality" was merely what one had made for oneself. What was about to happen now would totally disrupt even the imposed calm of this compromise. For, during the Conrads' visit, the First World War broke out in Europe: it was an event that would change Conrad's inner life extraordinarily and decisively. At first there was mainly the problem of coping with the overwhelming rush of people and events during the general mobilization. Then came the problem of leaving Poland for Vienna, Vienna for Italy, and Italy for England. He wrote Pinker from Galicia in August: "I am getting a mental stimulus out of this affair—I can tell you! And if it were not for the unavoidable anxiety I would derive much benefit from the experience" (*LL*, II.160). When he did return to England, not only his sudden upsetting experience in Eastern Europe but also the broader global repercussions of the war caught him up in their grip. It is to this phase that we now turn.

In "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," an article published early in 1915, Freud notes the paralyzed anxiety that seemed to enslave the minds of noncombatants in the war: the fear and guilt that were the

primary results of this enslavement persisted as the unprecedented holocaust worsened before their eyes.[2] True to this observation, Conrad's first few letters from England after his trying journey from the Continent reveal him to be gravely troubled by the seriousness of the war. He wrote Ralph Wedgewood on November 15, 1914: "however reasonably optimistic one can be the thoughts of war sit on one's chest like a nightmare. I am painfully aware of being crippled, of being idle, of being useless with a sort of absurd anxiety, as though it could matter to the greatness of the Empire" (*LL*, II.162). He uses his habitual vocabulary of extreme irreality—nightmares, ghosts—to describe thoughts that reflect the struggles he had faced with his own writing. Here, however, there is a strong sense that the war had revealed a new and troubling dimension of experience, whose intensity and force rivaled the others he has known. On the same date, nevertheless, Conrad wrote to his friend Galsworthy of his certainty that the war would be a temporary phenomenon. Yet Conrad could not help noticing its religious significance. "As to what you call 'this hell,' it is fiendish enough in all conscience: but it may be more in the nature of a Purgatory if only in this respect that it won't last forever. It's the price nations have to pay for many sins geographical and historical, of commission and omission,—but the door of Mercy is not closed: neither can it kill the hope of better things" (*LL*, II.163).

Because it follows directly the two fruitful years of Conrad's determined entrance into the marketplace of literature, this manner of speaking can be considered a convenient metaphor for the new setting in which he wanted his work to keep its important position. This notion cannot be denied some influence in Conrad's reflections. On the other hand, we should also remember that whatever pose he adopted had the nature of the Newman "economy": it was a fable of himself that, under existing conditions, he had to create and live. But fables have their uses only up to a point, and I suggest that the cataclysmic effect of the war on his mind acted as an explosion, the "most lasting thing in the universe" (*Garnett*, 94), and gave him new room in which to move about. During the four years of the war one can see a kind of continuing state of crisis in Conrad's mind, which served to awaken him from the besetting nightmare that previously had been his lot. For, as Newman says, the end of an economy is to arrive at a sense of religious mystery. Conrad accordingly seized upon the purgatorial character of the war and

translated it into a metaphysical rite of passage to which the world was submitting. In March 1916, in an editorial for the Sydney *Bulletin*, he spoke of “the Commonwealth passing through this fiery baptism into the rank of a world-power, not great yet, but bound to lead in its part of the world progress of worthy ideals” (*LL*, II.171). And on November 11, 1918, the day the armistice was signed, he wrote that “the great sacrifice is consummated” (*LL*, II.211).

With this religious and spiritual interpretation, the war thoroughly jolted him, and the response was an extended one. The impressive rush of events in Europe attracted all the powers of his mind, which had been sharpened by many years of contention in the comparable drama of his inner life. He saw now that nations were enacting the roles previously played by individuals. As Freud remarks, the war seemed to tear aside the immobile masks of national character and ethics to reveal a seething struggle for ascendancy. Nations then became almost like human beings in their resort to the characteristic habits of man. The various European nations appeared to Conrad at first to be jockeying for positions of “moral domination.” He wrote to Jean Schlumberger on February 10, 1915, about France’s proper “domination morale” of Germany (*Lettres*, 132). Later he must have examined the reasons for this domination more fully as he tried to explain the instinctive sympathy he had held for France over the years. On April 21, 1917, in a letter to Sydney Colvin, he spoke admiringly of England and France as the two great nations of the West, adding, “Only the French, perhaps, were more searchingly tried by the lesser political stability of their political life” (*LL*, II.190).

France, in other words, had earned its political and moral domination because it had been tried by instability. This was a *vécu* worthy of admiration, for the nation came out with a spiritual greatness that was the result of a prolonged effort at self-rescue. Nations had never been mere abstractions for Conrad, since he had always felt himself the product of cross-bred nationalities, but now his attention was being drawn with a new intensity. In the past, an anguished solitary, he had urgently felt the importance of mastering the world, of giving it personal and transcendent meaning. Now the process of signification was taking place before his eyes in the world at large. The whole of Europe had finally roused itself, independently, and was about to engage in a dynamic struggle similar to the one he had fought. Established order in Europe, before only a

negative and senseless value, had now been cleared of what he thought were petty nationalisms, and a total change was about to take place. On August 30, 1915, he wrote to Hueffer: “Yes! *mon cher*! our world of 15 years ago is gone to pieces: what will come in its place, God knows, but I imagine doesn’t care” (*LL*, II.169).

With anxious thoughts of the war often making him ill, he found himself in 1916 still uncertain of the exact course subsequent history would take. On May 19, however, he wrote Gide: “Ce qui suivit en moi dans toute sa vigueur [after an attack of gout] c’est la confiance inébranlable dans l’avenir, la conviction profonde que l’ombre du germanisme va passer de dessus cette terre sur laquelle j’ai beaucoup erré” (*Lettres*, 135). For the first time in Conrad’s letters, we find a statement that the future—which he had previously viewed with either equanimity or indifference—is something autonomous, even solid, in which it is possible to believe. In judging things with the objective detachment of a spectator, he was now capable of seeing a pattern in events that did not depend on him. As an individual he could believe in the future with conviction so long as Prussia’s oppressive bulk were removed. (By way of contrast, in 1905 he had called Russia “le néant” [III.94].) When at this time he returned to the unfinished “Rescuer,” he had additional resources to bring to the task undertaken some twenty years back. He wrote of this to Pinker on June 8:

It will be an immensely long book. It can’t be helped … It will be a considerable piece of work … I only wish I could absorb myself utterly, forget myself in it—but this is impossible. I have neither the power of detachment nor yet that intensity of belief in my work which perhaps would have made it possible. (*LL*, II.172)

Insufficient detachment and belief alone prevented him from rendering the “perfect enlightenment” he had hoped earlier to give Lingard in “The Rescuer.”

During the next few months, Conrad’s mind regularly returned to the tactical problem of the total demoralization of Germany, a problem that required both foresight and acuity. He felt that dramatic naval victories over Germany were inconclusive in themselves unless they were buttressed by land victories (*LL*, II.176); and the mere cataloguing of

individual “moral uplifts” on the Allies’ side was no substitute for land victories. Rather it was necessary to launch an active attack upon the central stronghold of German strength, so that not only would something substantial be added to the Allies’ cause but Germany itself would be physically reduced. The reduction had to be so direct and definitively forceful that it would allow no one to doubt that Germany’s stature had been sizeably diminished. Not merely a matter of concession and compromise, or evasion and subterfuge, the conquest of Germany, the more he thought about it, became an ontologically final activity which, in Western Europe’s dedication to it, would build a real foundation for a hopeful future. After Germany’s defeat, the danger would be, as he wrote J. M. Dent on December 4, that “the psychology of mankind would [not] be much changed by this war” (*LL*, II.180). The gravest danger lay in man’s forgetfulness. Memory had to maintain an action whose aim it was to narrate what had so beneficently occurred. Simply to relate a happening would be quite enough, since events marshaled by an enlightened memory would have *a priori* significance and order.

It was probably as a result of this rationale that during 1915 and 1916 Conrad’s main imaginative efforts were in the realm of what he called “exact autobiography” (*LL*, II.181). He had written to Colvin on February 27, 1916, about *The Shadow Line*, of what it meant to write as he took the world on its own vital terms, of what it meant to write unquestioningly under existing conditions: “on our return from Austria, when I had to write something, I discovered that this was what I could write in my then moral and intellectual condition; tho’ even *that* cost me an effort which I remember with a shudder. To sit down and invent fairy tales was impossible then” (*LL*, II.182). He was writing confessions now in which each gesture and act revealed “ideal value” (*LL*, II.185). This was altogether different from creating the evasive and enigmatic fables of his earlier years. What one needs to realize is that his literary production began to emanate directly from some “pure” and unchanging memory, in whose fixed whole he could discern independent value. This was a form of permanence he had not been able to see previously.

It is interesting that in this frame of mind he again bewailed his loss of elasticity (*LL*, II.197), although this time he blamed something else. When Blackwood had acted to increase Conrad’s “material anxieties,” that had been especially unpleasant proof of the malignant knitting machine. His

experience of the war, on the other hand, seems to have suggested to Conrad that his premise of a mechanistic existence had been a cosmological projection of his own rigid pattern of frustration. Personal failure and incompleteness, infinitely multiplied in his earlier life, had required and established a setting of heedless mechanism. But, as Whitehead has put it, the only way to mitigate mechanism is by discovering that it is not mechanism. And this is what Conrad had just discovered. Because the war proposed itself to his *heart* with explosive, cataclysmic force, with a recognizable individuality of its own, with a beginning and a foreseeable end to it, Conrad now felt that universal existence was lively and dramatic. There was no need to construct a dialectic of compromise and indirection by which existence might be defied or denied; such had been the function of his work during the prewar years. At that time he had told his intimates that events could only be described superficially and relatively, for beneath the surface one would have to collide with a machine. Good fiction placed a premium on arrangements and groupings (*Curle*, letter 117), on maximum human ingenuity and effort. Ingenuity extended even to the management of one's own life because publishers and public were avid machines. But at present the reality of the war was so complete, was so much of a climax, that all history previous to it could be apprehended as a movement toward that climax. Conrad now saw his life restrospectively as a strand of that same history, something lived and shared. How could his life be said to have taken a wrong turn if, like war-torn Europe, it had been undergoing a painful evolution through hell to purgatory? If his life had been a trial, that was the common human tragedy, and as such he could recognize its "ideal value."

It follows that the two substantial works (*The Shadow Line* and *The Arrow of Gold*) completed during the war years were what Conrad called "plain narratives of fact." His job in them had been to discipline himself to writing according to a fixed and acceptable sense of his own distant past. By analogy, it was the kind of sense that modern sailors might develop if they could undergo training aboard a sailing vessel. This kind of naval training, he wrote Mrs. Sanderson in 1917, should be advocated because only on a sailing ship could a young sailor develop a methodical approach to "a body of systemized facts which cannot be questioned as to their value, which cannot be discussed apart from their [present]

reality” (*LL*, II.195). The two pseudo-fictional works he had written in a spirit of “exact autobiography” were similarly an attempt to negotiate a new and firm understanding of a fixed body of facts in his past. Even so, there was always the more immediate past, which felt to him like something unreal, removed from the newly perceived mainstream of life. He wrote on March 18, 1918, to Allan Wade: “I feel extremely shadowy to myself—I mean the Conrad of the London days” (*LL*, II.202). If the shadows of his self, like the shadow of Germanism, were to be removed, they too had to be removed actively. And this task would lead him finally to a comprehension of the entire experience of the war, something he did not yet have. On March 27, 1918, he wrote to Garnett: “To throw a rope around the whole thing [the war] is rather a good idea, but even as to this I can’t make a suggestion. I can’t think consecutively” (*Garnett*, 256–257).

One fear persisted: it was that critics—in adducing “order” and “progression” in his previous works, treating those works as a firm set of facts—would thereby restrict his freedom. Thus on May 4, 1917, he wrote a dignified manifesto to Barrett Clark, in which he interpreted his earlier fiction as a testimonial to his self-liberating individuality.

> in truth I don’t consider myself an Ancient. My writing life extends but only over twenty-three years, and I need not point out to an intelligence as alert as yours that all that time has been a time of evolution … Some critics have found fault with me for not being constantly myself … I am no slave to prejudices and formulas, and I shall never be. My attitude to subjects and expressions, the angles of vision, my methods of composition will, within limits, be always changing—not because I am unstable or unprincipled but because I am free. Or perhaps it may be more exact to say, because I am always trying for freedom—within my limits. (*LL*, II.204)

If his life, like the War, now needed a rope to encircle it (note that it is no longer a question of being pulled out of a pit by a rope long enough for a rescue), to define and evaluate it, it had to be done according to a purpose broad and deep enough to carry him and his work within it.

The war dragged on for its last few months, and during this time the massed fear, terror, and disillusion of catastrophe pressed him into

further, more urgent reconsiderations. In Freud's words, the psychological atmosphere was one of coming to terms with death, the most fixed and irremediable of all ends. To Garnett, on May 16, Conrad wrote that "bitterness is the very condition of human existence" and that, with the specter of death hovering over the individual, "questions of right and wrong have … no connection whatever with the fundamental realities of life … Feelings *are*, to submit to them we can avoid neither death nor suffering which are our common lot, but we can bear them in peace" (*Garnett*, 258). What in fact was happening to Conrad closely parallels what he had originally intended for Lingard: a species of perfect enlightenment, a mastering of conscience. And certainly for this reason he was able to write Pinker on September 23 that he was within sight of the successful completion of *The Rescue*, the novel "The Rescuer" had become.

There is great significance in Conrad's choice of title for the last chapter of *The Rescue*: "Claim of Life and Toll of Death." Something of what he wrote about Lingard now took hold of him: "He was seduced away by the tense feeling of existence far superior to the mere consciousness of life, and which in its immensity of contradictions, delight, dread, exultation and despair could not be faced and yet was not to be evaded. There was no peace in it. But who wanted peace?" (XII.342)." For Conrad also would have to confront the claims on him of nonmechanistic existence, would have to see in individuals a certain ideal permanence that death could only partially tax. It was, therefore, in his new idea of Europe as the luminous end of the civilizing process that he could see the persistence of this belief: Europe's struggle, like his own, had been to earn a place for its full individuality. The struggle for moral domination among individual countries was the realization, now clear to Conrad, of Goethe's idea of the concert of Europe. (Interestingly, Conrad had treated the idea pessimistically in his essay "Autocracy and War." Written in 1905, the essay's rather sarcastic original title had been "The Concord of Europe.") For these reasons he repeatedly affirmed that the strong faculty of sight—which negated the moral blindness he feared and hated—would enable man to see Europe not simply as a continent, but as a large life-giving ideal. This was the great message, he wrote to Christopher Sandeman on October 17, which "we" should proclaim, "we, old Europeans, with a long and bitter experience behind us of realities

and illusions” (*LL*, II.210).

V

The New Order
1918–1924

CONRAD'S outlook after the war is interestingly reflected in a letter written on Armistice Day, 1918, to the novelist Hugh Walpole:

> The great sacrifice is consummated,—and what will come of it to the nations of the earth the future will show.
>
> I cannot confess to an easy mind. Great and very blind forces are set free catastrophically all over the world. This only I know, that if we are called upon to restore order in Europe (as it may well be) then we shall be safe, at home too. To me the call is already manifest, but it may be declined on idealistic or political grounds. It is a question of courage in the leaders, who are never as good as the people. (*LL*, II.211)

His faith in leaders had never been very great, and with the end of the war it declined further. It is possible to imagine that leaders for him were opportune masks of the people, *economies* if you will, who in times of greatest emergency were not equipped to handle the human consequences of historical problems. Or, in another context, a leader was as cut off from human truth as a theory was, that "cold and lying tombstone of departed truth" (*Garnett*, 34); a leader was the result of a past in which he had not fully participated. Since they had no personal or ordinary experience of it, the new national leaders had no right to pontificate about the aftermath of the war. Nor could they have courage of the kind now required. As for "the people," that too was an inoperative abstraction: the sum of miseries could never be greater than a single, privately felt woe. That left, then, the lone individual who knows the call already, whether it be declined nationally or not. The urgency of the times directly involved the individual—Conrad himself—in the sacrifice that had set blind forces loose.

He wrote on January 19, 1919, to Hugh Clifford of the sacrifice he had

in mind: “The old order had got to die—and they died nobly—and at any rate the dead are at rest” (*LL*, II.217). The proper moment in time had come, went this reasoning, and the old order had to pass. It was the psychological moment for an important transition, a new departure, if one uses the imagery of *The Mirror of the Sea*. Only now the imagery significantly focuses on death. What had already fulfilled itself in history had died and consummated itself. (There are Wagnerian overtones here, as there must have been for any thinker immersed in the spiritual history of his own time.) Accordingly, the passing of an old order is the theme of Conrad’s last completed novel, *The Rover*. But what immediately concerned him was the problem of the survivors. The same letter to Clifford continues: “It is those who are left who may have yet to bargain with the most materialistic and unscrupulous of forces that have ever moved mankind. A humiliating fate.” Conrad identified the forces of the new Russia as the heirs of destroyed Germanism. One can see Conrad’s mind seeking out particular and historical justification for an ancient national prejudice: revolutionary Russia was the latest of the great antagonistic forces with which to bargain. The distance his mind had moved can be measured by recalling that many years earlier he had refused to bargain for his soul (*Poradowska*, 36); now there was no other alternative.

The passing of the old polity was not only the result of a social and political dynamic—it was also an analogy of that dynamic in Conrad’s mind. An entire dimension of his inner life had also passed. There remained, thrust up against his very self, the entire European world of the present. Whereas in the past he had tried to master the bewildering complexities of his inner existence, it now appeared that in Europe that private disorder of his had been laid open. It was as if the vast potentiality for trouble within his own soul had suddenly taken Europe for its stage. In this the individual now looked *out* upon problems, seeing them not within but outside himself. In the open and visible historical arena, such idealistic compromises as the League of Nations, he wrote in the same letter to Clifford, were like sketching out a tennis court while the ground was moving underfoot. Moreover, he wrote to the Galsworthys on December 24, 1918, words like “peace” and “felicity” now had “an air of the ‘packed valise,’ “which suited them perfectly for “the frozen silence of the North Pole” (LL, II.216).

The dynamic process that Conrad now saw before his eyes was perhaps a realization of something already present in the European ethos—something, however, that had required a single extended action (an explosion) like the war to bring it to his full attention. And this is still another aspect of a notion Conrad had begun to formulate during the war itself, the state of his freedom. As Karl Jaspers writes, "the content of freedom is revealed by two basic manifestations in Europe. First, life in polarity. Second, life at the extreme."[1] The truth and value of "dialectical life" in Europe now became all-important for Conrad. He was able to see that his own past, crystallized and translated into the mock-biography *A Personal Record*, was—as he wrote to Dent on March 29, 1919—"an elaborately planned whole … the product of a special mood and of a day that will never come again to me" (*LL*, II.219). Yet he refused to allow the early memoir to be taken as mere "material" for a study of its now celebrated author. It was, he insisted, no more material than his heart was (*LL*, II.219). The consistency of this figure of speech throughout Conrad's idiom—recall the variations on "the heart" in his earlier letters—is powerfully striking. What he seems to be saying is that the extreme, personal problem of the mastery of his heart, for which one resolution was *A Personal Record*, is something to which he remains faithful, even though it is an aspect of the old order. Therefore *The Arrow of Gold*, even *The Rescue*, were works that were devoted to what he called elsewhere "la vie invincible du souvenir" (*Lettres*, 149): the former was a record of his own life; the latter, as he wrote to Wise on October 2, 1918, was a history of the change in his style, taste, and judgment (*LL*, II.209). He had, in short, a new sensitivity to the clarity of historical evolution, something not previously within reach of his beleaguered mind. One need only compare the bristlingly complex manipulations of time in the earlier works with the far simpler ones in the later books. Because that early portion of his life had passed, it was possible now to write a "complete … emotional adventure" (*LL*, II.224) in *The Arrow*, and he had to finish *The Rescue*—to prove that he had not "bitten off more than [he] could chew" (*Garnett*, 263).

He became increasingly impatient with critics who, as he noted to Pinker on August 14, 1919, were remarking on his decay (*LL*, II.227). There was some reason to it, he added in ironic self-defense, for he could not write *Lord Jim* all his life. His friends now became additional

testimony to the continuity and evolution of his life, as he wrote Garnett on November 16, 1919 (*Garnett*, 266). To them he could say that it was best to "switch off the critical current of your mind [one thinks here of the cold light of reason] and work in darkness—the creative darkness which no ghost of responsibility will haunt" (*Garnett*, 273). This salutary darkness—inviolate, intimate, profound—removed one from the actualities of the mundane present. In his mind Conrad had effected a separation between the creative work of his intellect and the responsibilities he felt toward the world. This he had not been able to do openly before. So for this reason *A Personal Record*, with its disguise of experience through artifice, was very definitely of the past. On January 17, 1921, he wrote to Sandeman that his "*age des folies* [was] over." (*LL*, II.253). To Curle, his chosen critic, went an irritated reminder on April 24, 1922: "I knew what I was doing in leaving the facts of my life and even of my tales in the background" (*Curie*, letter 89).

The central facts about his existence, as Conrad saw them, were as follows: first there was the fact of his literary life, publicly begun in 1895, privately in 1889. There was also the larger European context with which he had to reckon immediately. His literary life extended over the years from 1889 to 1914—this had its own evolution, its own historical development. Then there was the more important relation between this life and the destiny of Europe. And he saw an explanation for the vital connection between the two in the Polish origins of his *pre-literary* heritage. During the last two years of his life, Conrad's frequent biographical and nationalistic apologies invariably represent Poland as the outpost of Western civilization, himself as a good old European, Poland's history as one of dedicated opposition to Panslavism and of kinship with France and England (*LL*, II.336). The spiritual and intellectual efforts of these years testify to his efforts to reconcile the two crucial strands in his awareness. To this end *The Rover* (as he wrote to Garnett on November 21, 1923) was to be considered his revolutionary work (*Garnett*, 296), in the double sense of burying the dead and paving a way for the new order. *Suspense* was to be his big novel, he reminded Pinker on February 3, 1924 (*LL*. II.337); *The Rover* was but an interlude, the only purposely short work he ever wrote (*LL*, II.339), in which a complete event—a man's return—was set forth in a new spirit. Peyrol in *The Rover* dies at peace with himself and with the world; he has done what he set

out to do, and it is fitting that the last word this strong old Frenchman hears is “steady,” called out by an English sailor. This prepared for the introduction of a great new theme in his next work, and hence *Suspense* was designed with a historical setting that would delineate Europe’s awakening from the confused night of the Napoleonic adventure. But the penetrating sadness of Conrad’s life refused him this fulfillment as well. The more of *Suspense* he wrote, the more it became what he called “a runaway novel” (*LL*, II.339). Even at the end of his life, what he wished would evolve slowly simply grew and grew. He kept before his mind’s eye, nevertheless, one scene that might have rendered the great subject in the proper way. Richard Curle, close by Conrad in his last days, describes it:

Above all, he was obsessed by the opening scene of an unwritten novel that was to have its setting in some Eastern European state. So vividly used he to describe this scene to me that at last it was as though I had been a witness to it myself. In the court-yard of a Royal palace, brilliantly lit up as for a festival, soldiers are bivouacked in the snow. And inside the palace a fateful council is taking place and the destiny of the country is being decided. I never learned anything more of this novel.[2]

This may have been what *Suspense* would not become. Conrad’s failure to write it was undoubtedly the fault of his essential Europeanism, the Hamlet-like puzzlement that finally betrayed him. Valéry’s words on the archetypal European apply, I think, to Conrad:

The European Hamlet looks at millions of ghosts.

But he is an intellectual Hamlet. He meditates on the life and death of truths. For phantoms he has all the subjects of our controversies; for remorse, all our titles to glory; he is crushed by the weight of discoveries, of knowledge, and is incapable of resuming his unlimited activity. He thinks of the boredom of repeating the past, of the folly of wanting always to innovate. He totters between two abysses, for two dangers never cease to menace the world: order and disorder.[3]

The achievement of Conrad’s life was that he had actively borne a full burden of felt order and disorder. When Conrad’s life ended on August 3, 1924, his individual energies had by then been effectively directed into

passionate Europeanism; if his art, on the other hand, had failed in its search for a comparable goal, then perhaps that failure had been Conrad's sacrifice to the new Europe. Still, there *had* been a rescue.

Part Two

Conrad’s Shorter Fiction

Life as a reality is absolute presence: we cannot say that *there is* anything unless it be present, of this moment. If, then, *there is a* past, it must be as something present, something active in us now.

Ortega y Gasset

VI

The Past and the Present

"Men," Conrad wrote to Mrs. Sanderson on March 17, 1900, "often act first and reflect afterwards" (*LL*, I.294). The implications of this simple remark take us directly into the rich and confusing world of Conrad's short fiction. There, action of any sort is either performed or witnessed without accompanying reflection or interpretation, as if the overriding and immediate sensation of action done to, by, or in front of one crowds out the informing work of the reason. The exotic settings that Conrad chose underline this: the action becomes even more foreign and inscrutable to the harried mind. But there is a place for retrospection after the fact. One thinks, for example, of the beleaguered Marlow, in command of his shabby Congo steamer, who watches his helmsman inexplicably and suddenly lie down; a few minutes later he is horrified to see a spear protruding from the man's body. Only then does he understand the direct malignancy that has caused what he saw (XVI.111–112). Further on he notes in a distracted moment the stakes surrounding Kurtz's compound, standing there with ball-like ends. In time he will realize that they are dried human heads, put there as a horrifying example to others (XVI.130). Indeed, the whole progress of Marlow's trip until he reaches Kurtz seems incredible as it happens. As he tells his experience to his audience, Marlow wishes it understood that the experience changed his life (XVI.51). But during the experience he is like Rilke's Malte, realizing that "nothing in the world can one imagine beforehand, not the least thing. Everything is made up of so many unique particulars that cannot be foreseen … But the realities are slow and indescribably detailed."[1] The details of reality, given only mute acknowledgment in action, are realized by the recollecting mind, which retraces—as Malte writes—the designs of experience.[2] And perhaps we can sense in the style itself the partial overtaking of action by thought. In a letter to F. N. Doubleday, T. E. Lawrence once wrote of Conrad's style as a manner of writing that "hungered" for a total capture of its subject, and that constantly applied

itself to actions that appeared to refuse it.[3]

The retrospective mode of so many of Conrad's shorter works can be understood as the effort to interpret what, at the time of occurrence, would not permit reflection. And, most of the time, the action that has already occurred not only troubles the present, but also calls itself to immediate attention. Conrad's very first tale, "The Idiots," explicitly accounts for itself in this manner. The narrator is a traveler in Brittany who abruptly sees before him four idiot children. He then inquires after them, and slowly the story of their birth pieces itself together in its pathetic sadness and terror. But the content of the tale, for all its sensational operatics, still seems somewhat "obscure" to the traveler. Between the recollecting narrator and the actual tale there is a barrier that is eternally closed. For a novelist, however, a barrier is not something merely to be ignored, and this hedge of mystery, as Conrad develops it in later tales, becomes an important fact in the story.

In "The Lagoon," written a few months after "The Idiots," the visiting white man listens to Arsat's tale of betrayal as the two stand in front of the unfinished house in which Arsat's woman (for whom Arsat's brother sacrified himself) has just died. As Arsat closes his story, he asks the white man for advice and explanation. But staring out on the quiet lagoon, the man answers with frightening passivity: "There is nothing" (VIII.203). Arsat returns to his obscure quest for self-rectitude in an existence the white man cannot possibly understand: the placid lagoon across which the visitor travels to and from Arsat represents an eternity of uncomprehending distance between the two men. Thus there is impulsive action on the one hand and ineffectual reflection on the other.

In "Karain" and "Youth," two of the stories that follow "The Lagoon" and precede *Heart of Darkness*, the reflecting men dip into the past, as it were, to illuminate or correct what has been so uncomfortably mysterious. Karain the native chieftain is, like Arsat, haunted by the ghost of a friend whom he has betrayed for a woman. The listening English seaman, recognizing his superstitious naiveté, gives him a sixpence as a magic talisman to protect him. In "Youth," telling an odd story of his past, Marlow rhapsodizes the obscure tenacity and idealism of youth; only the evocatory magic of "romance" and "glamour" makes the incredible impulses of youth intelligible. Nevertheless, the reader (upon whose discernment Conrad relies) is made to understand that a semi-comic

compensation in the present cannot really change the past. Jackson, one of the men who is present when Karain is given the sixpence, meets the narrator some years later in London. We learn that the magnificent unthinking passion of Karain's life, so cynically restructured by the white men, has captured Jackson himself. Now he does not know what is real; Jackson, like Karain, has become the perplexed victim of the consequences of impulsive action. As for Marlow's listeners, regardless of their long conversation with Marlow on the performances of youth, they are left with "weary eyes looking still, looking always, looking anxiously for something out of life, that while it is expected is already gone—has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash—together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions" (XVI.42). It is significant that still another of these early tales, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,*" draws to a close with a question whose answer is unfathomable, as conveyed by the uncertainty in the recollecting narrative voice that asks it: "Haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives?" (XXII.173).

The price of experience is not only exacted from the individual who undergoes it in fear and mystery, but also from the person whose task it is to collect it into intelligibility. In that task there seems to be no assurance even for the most determined that a "meaning" will reveal itself. Certainly Conrad felt this crippling doubt about his own ability to communicate what *he* had so profoundly lived. He wrote, for instance, to Henry James on November 30, 1897, about the recently completed *Nigger*:

> Il a la qualité d'être court. Il a eté vécu. Il est, sans doute, mauvais. Rien de si facile comme de raconter un rêve, mais il est impossible de pénétrer l'âme de ceux qui écoutent par la force de son amertume et de sa douceur. On ne communique pas la realité poignante des illusions! Le rêve finit, les mots s'envolent, le livre est oublié. C'est la grace misèricordieuse du destin. (*Lettres*, 34)

Marlow's hesitant voice turns the same sentiment into phrases that suit the inconclusive experience he is telling:

> Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of

a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. (XVI.82)

Marlow's own captivity by the incredible is mitigated by his capacity in the present narrative recollection: as one tells a story of incredible happenings, one is forced to put the story in credible and familiar terms. That Marlow speaks in terms of the credible is a compromise both comforting and frustrating: because he has detached himself from the incredible, he cannot now totally command or convey the intensity of the past. AU the same, he still possesses a dark, inexpressible memory of that intensity.

As he wrote "Youth," Conrad believed he was retaining and reactivating all of the intensity he had once experienced. He wrote H. G. Wells on September 6, 1898, that "as to the flaws of 'Youth' their existence is indisputable. I felt what you say myself—in a way. The feeling however which induced me to write that story was genuine (for once) and so strong that it poked its way through the narrative (which it certainly defaces) in a good many places. I tell you this in the way of explanation simply. Otherwise the thing is unjustifiable" (*LL*, I.248–249). The feeling behind "Youth"—and it is interesting that, to Conrad's sensibility here, *feeling* was almost a discrete unit—had the power to ruin the narrative. But at least "Youth" and even *Heart of Darkness* were written *and completed* despite the persevering intrusion of this problem. On the other hand, his work on the unseemly "Rescuer," suffering from precisely the same conditions, resisted all his efforts at intellectual mastery and detachment. For Conrad's conception of the story as a whole had a physical grip on him that no amount of energy could loosen. He wrote Garnett of his miserable captivity on March 29, 1898: "And that story I can't write weaves itself into all I see, into all I speak, into all I think, into the lines of every book I try to read" (*Garnett*, 135). This was the danger he risked in each story, since no problem was more urgent to the impressionable Conrad than that the orderly powers of his mind, seeking expression in narrative logic, might succumb to the sentient pressures of his overflowing heart.

Most of Conrad's short fiction, therefore, dramatizes the problematic

relation between the past and the present, between then and now. It may be Conrad's own sense of the past conflicting with his sense of the present, or it may be a character's sense of the past disturbing his (the character's) sense of the present—the distinction is impossible to make. Of course there are some virtuosic variations on this simple motif, but the ground bass remains constant. Always the tale opens upon a scene of unnatural, ominous quiet. There is a story that needs to be told—and the inevitable analogy is the Ancient Mariner accosting the Wedding Guest, forcing the story upon him. In some cases the story does not involve the narrator himself: in 'Falk" and *Heart of Darkness*, for example, the "I" of the story simply listens to a story told by someone else. In other instances—*The Nigger of the "Narcissus*" and "The Secret Sharer" are two—there is no specific audience and no specific occasion for the narrative, even though the tale is told in the first person. In still other works, Conrad dispenses with the first-person narrative as such, although he adheres to a "center-of-consciousness" technique similar to James's. But in each story Conrad's purpose is to consider not only the so-called plot (which has usually taken place in the past), but also the varying degrees of obscurity, difficulty, and loneliness that inevitably linger on into the present. For the past cannot, will not, be contained or circumscribed. We think we have passed out of it, but the mere thought of that reconfirms its powers over us. It is as if, to borrow an image from *The Waste Land*, each man in a prison thinks of the key that will free him and "Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison." The effect of the stories is to make solitude a universal.

According to one work on the generic characteristics of short fiction, this is exactly what should be true of stories. Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* describes short fiction as essentially the narrative of the eternal outcast, the lonely individual whose remoteness from society is made a center of intense awareness.[4] Beyond this, O'Connor discusses short fiction as a series of individual voices (whether of Maupassant, Turgenev, or Chekhov) whose texture creates distinctive effects and delights for the reader. The conceptual scheme of Conrad's short fiction, however, is far more dramatic and subtle than a matter of delightful, if unique, effects. There is first of all the quality of attempted *intrusion*: the intrusion of the past into the present, and the intrusion of the present into the past. The real aim of the tale becomes that long, extended moment

wherein past and present are brought together and allowed to interact. The past, requiring the illumination of slow reflection on former thoughtless impulses, is exposed to the present; the present, demanding that "desired unrest" without which it must remain mute and paralyzed, is exposed to the past.

Conrad's artistic solicitude for this aim made him write Galsworthy on January 16, 1898, that the writer's business is not "to invent depths,—to invent depths is no art either. Most things and most natures have nothing but a surface." He was sure that "the force of a book is in the fidelity to the surface of life, to the surface of events,—to the surface of things and ideas. Now this is not being shallow" (*LL*, I.224). A recollected experience of disaster disturbs the unhealthy surface calm of the present, just as a sensation of anxiety or fear bursts into consciousness and excites the atrophied mind, forcing its present situation to drop away from it. Conrad's experience as a sailor, as a man of action, had taught him the invigorating potency of danger: the threat of disaster created a "spring," as he called it, which allowed him to grapple with trouble. As a despairingly sedentary man of thought, he wrote Wells that "formerly in my sea life, a difficulty nerved me to the effort; now I perceive it is not so" (*LL*, I.321). At its very worst, the nightmare of his present life as a writer would permit no intrusion from the past. On September 16, 1899, he wrote Garnett: "even writing to a friend—to a person one has heard, touched, drank with, quarrelled with—does not give me a sense of reality. All is illusion—the words written, the minds at which they are aimed, the truth they are intended to express, the hands that will hold the paper, the eyes that will glance at the lines. Every image floats vaguely in a sea of doubt—and the doubt itself is lost in an unexplored universe of incertitudes" (*Garnett*, 155). Truly, as he reminded Blackwood on April 12, 1900, it was "a dog's life! this writing out, this endlessness of effort" (*Blackwood*, 90).

It is no accident then that the *present* of almost all the stories, their "objective theatre" as E. K. Brown has called it,[5] is inevitably one of calm, of critical delay, of time circumstantially at a standstill. The reader looks in upon an atmosphere that exudes the feeling of something wrong, which has to be examined or recollected or relived or worked out. Kayerts and Carlier in "An Outpost of Progress" have been removed from a normal European life and set down to wait for business in the depths of an

eastern jungle; the *Narcissus* is voyaging across the oceans but is made to purge itself of delay, of the appropriately named Negro, Wait; Alvin Hervey in “The Return” is leading his stagnant life in London at the time that his wife is disturbing their “skimming” across the surface of life; in both “Youth” and *Heart of Darkness* there is a long pause during which the vaguely unsettled group of former sailors listens to Marlow’s meditative ramblings; in “Falk” the diners have had a bad meal and must compensate for it in some way—and for their benefit an absurd episode is offered; Captain Whalley is close to the end of his tether and in order to do something attempts to start his old seafaring life all over again; the protagonist of “Tomorrow,” Captain Hagberd, is existing only for the moment when his son will return, and the loitering hopefulness of his life becomes the only condition of his existence; the young captain in “The Secret Sharer” is becalmed at the moment that the runaway Leggatt boards his ship; Jasper Allen and Freya Nelson in “Freya of the Seven Isles” are awaiting to be married—the list can be extended.

Furthermore, in the technical handling of the dominant plot, Conrad attempts to achieve a causal relation between the past and the present. When he wrote once that the truth of the story consisted in its presentation (*LL*, I.280), he referred, I think, to the deliberate artistic manipulation that sought to bring the past into a causal relation with the present. We are thereby invited to consider how in *Heart of Darkness* the story of Marlow’s “hankering after dark places” is not merely the result of an enforced wait on the Thames, but also a cause of it.[6] The characteristic, idiomatic twist in every Conrad story is that the attempt to see a direct relation between the past and the present, to see past and present as a continuous surface of interrelated events, is frustrated. Marlow, who wants his friends to see the outside and not the inner kernel of events (and Conrad in the famous 1897 preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus*” and in a letter of September 6, 1897, to Blackwood openly avowed this to be the aim of the prose writer), becomes quite invisible to his audience while, at the same time, the story he tells becomes increasingly obscure. Both story and teller seem to recede into an almost transcendent heart of darkness. This is the central and gripping paradox of Conrad’s method: every attempt to establish a discipline of direct relation between events leads one further *into* the events themselves. And they yield up no single method or order by which they can be

explained. Marlow quickly reminds the director of the Eldorado expedition that it is not a question of Kurtz's wrong method for getting ivory so expeditiously out of the jungle: rather, "no method at all" (XVI.138). Nevertheless, the deep philosophical honesty of Conrad's artistic disposition preserves in each story the agonizing sense of being "a beginner in [its] own circumstances."[7] It is almost impossible not to remark that acting first and reflecting afterwards is always the problem, with reflection hopelessly far behind, hopelessly leading one further away from an inscrutable surface of action into a confusing "beyond." There is one passage in *Lord Jim* that beautifully describes the predicament:

After his first feeling of revolt he had come round to the view that only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things. The facts those men were so eager to know had been visible, tangible, open to the senses, occupying their place in space and time … He was anxious to make this clear. This had not been a common affair, everything in it had been of the utmost importance, and fortunately he remembered everything. He wanted to go on talking for truth's sake, perhaps for his own sake also; and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind: it was like a creature that, finding itself imprisoned within an enclosure of high stakes, dashes round and round, distracted in the night, trying to find a weak spot, a crevice, a place to scale, some opening through which it may squeeze itself and escape. This awful activity of mind made him hesitate at times in his speech. (XXI.30–31)

The quandary in which, for some two hundred pages, Jim continues to find himself is singularly apposite to Conrad's own spiritual experience as a writer. Conrad's truculent and remarkably simple belief in the direct referential function of words, summed up in a letter to Hugh Clifford on October 9, 1899, corresponds to Jim's confidence in the truth of facts. "Words," Conrad wrote Clifford, "groups of words, words standing alone, are symbols of life, have the power in their sound or their aspect to present the very thing you wish to hold up before the mental vision of your readers. The things 'as they are' exist in words; therefore words should be handled with care lest the picture, the image of truth abiding in

facts, should become distorted—or blurred" (*LL*, I.280). Conrad also knew the falsifying powers of what he once called "the crafty tracery of words." Nevertheless, like Jim, he had no choice but to employ words, risking deceit on the one hand and "awful activity" of mind on the other. He wrote Garnett on February 22, 1896, of "the cast iron impudence of [his] soul" which "can be deaf and blind but can't be mute." For "what is life worth," he continues, "if one cannot jabber to one heart's content?" (*Garnett*, 44). Certain things about an action or experience must be made known, in the same way that Jim feels that a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the truth. The inner knowledge Conrad had of the experience, the "cravings of [his] soul" of which he wrote Garnett on June 10, 1896 (*Garnett*, 58), required satisfaction in a special syntax, which had to be put together with absolute fidelity and care. Sometimes, he added, he would dream for hours and hours, and then worry that he was undergoing a severe mental illness. He wrote Unwin in 1896 that the stories were "fragments of [his] innermost being,"[8] despite their wordiness and jabbering. If the words lacked what he once called "singleminded expression" (*Garnett*, 86), it was because he had simply failed to make them represent the action—but then reflective description could never adequately grasp impulsive, and hence obscure, action. Still, he needed to talk in order to ward off a growing feeling of illusion and unreality; and surely this is the experience he so often referred to as the nightmarish silence of "the black cave." He wrote passionate and exuberant letters to his close friends, hoping that in return their voices would assure him of reality. Thus on March 26, 1897, he wrote Ted Sanderson that "one is apt to think overmuch about oneself. A barren occupation. But a friend's voice turns the current of thought into a more fruitful valley" (*LL*, I.203). He was always fearful of total self-absorption, and only a friend's "very life"—as he reminded Garnett on March 24, 1897 (*Garnett*, 95)—would satisfy him.

When a story was autobiographical, as most often it was, its mutually dependent temporal dimensions (past and present), receding further and further into the shadows of Conrad's own sense of self-absorption, tended to reveal too many things about himself. And those, almost invariably, filled him with a deep feeling of shame. A few lines from "The Black Mate" describe Conrad's sentiments.

As to his remorse in regard to a certain secret action of his life, well, I understand that a man of Bunter's fine character would suffer not a little. Still, between ourselves, and without the slightest wish to be cynical, it cannot be denied that with the noblest of us the fear of being found out enters for some considerable part into the composition of remorse. I didn't say this in so many words to Bunter, but, as the poor fellow harped a bit on it, I told him that there were skeletons in a good many honest cupboards. (XXVI.95–96)

Although a great deal has been written on Conrad's highly developed sense of personal guilt, not enough has been said of his extraordinarily powerful sense of shame. It was shame at the responsibility he felt in common with all men for allowing personal ideals to be corrupted, shame at the will to live at all costs, at the inability to deny life in any conclusive manner, and at the difficulty of somehow remaining in life. Above all, he was ashamed of fear, and fear, as he wrote in "An Outpost of Progress," was a feeling that no amount of reflection could spirit away (VIII.107). His own personal history was a disgraceful paradigm of shameful things, from the desertion of the ideals of his Polish heritage to the seemingly capricious abandonment of his sea life. He had become, like Kayerts and Carlier, a creature of civilization, living in reliance upon the safety of his surroundings. Each of his stories caught him in a moment of recollection and harassed idleness. When the story progressed he found, like the two unfortunate disciples of progress, that in thinking better of himself because he was now an artist (and he wrote to Garnett that there was a special significance in the fact that Kayerts and Carlier were addicted to novels—(*Garnett*, 62), he had laid himself open to a terrifying invasion by the unknown. What made the unknown so "irresistible, familiar and disgusting" (VIII.108) was the fact that it tended, the more one entered it, to sound and look like something one had known and felt before but had rashly denied. The monstrous natives who emerge from the surrounding jungle to steal away the station men speak a language that sounds like one Kayerts and Carlier had heard in their dreams (VIII.97). When the two Europeans kill each other for a lump of sugar, their degradation is complete. The fraudulent machinery of social camouflage in which they had placed their unexamined faith has destroyed them. One need only think of Conrad's notion of the knitting machine to judge the extent to

which human infection by the machine has spread.

Earlier I said that the tales attempt to create an extended moment in which past and present are exposed. By succeeding in this attempt, Conrad hoped to open the present to the therapy of the past. But now we see that the present, maddeningly quarantined from the solutions of the future, resurrects a shamefully familiar past. The more probing a study of the past, the more certain that there can be no justification in it for the present state of affairs. Because the present continues in its depressing inaction and because the past has nothing to show but an embarrassing "secret action," each tale actually intensifies its own atmosphere of horrified shame. Since Conrad in the tales keeps his authorial stance as a rescuer, the relation between past and present can be understood as an outcome of Conrad's wish to rescue meaning for the present out of the obscure past. In the earliest group of short works, which begins in 1896 with "The Idiots" and ends in 1902 with "The End of the Tether," Conrad repeatedly manipulates the tale with philosophic ingenuity in order to discover what can finally be rescued. As ever, the answer is quite simply nothing. In the second group, which includes the stories up to and including "The Secret Sharer" (1910), the conclusion is more hopeful, if contrived. Finally, with the works that end with "The Planter of Malata" (1914), there is again a falling off into despair. Yet in each of these groups the relation between past and present is treated in profoundly dramatic terms, terms that are not simply a fictional technique but an important aspect of an analytic psychology of recollection under the pressures of shame and fear.

Perhaps an analogy with one phase of Sartre's phenomenological theory of emotions will point up Conrad's admirably unerring command of *conscious* human psychology. The value of this analogy rests solely on my conviction that Conrad's choice of a narrative method depended on his habitual insight into the "mechanisms of existence" discussed in Part One. If his choice was sincere (and my argument is that it was sincere), the method is a direct reflection and confirmation of what he himself *knew*. But more of this later. I begin with what Sartre calls an objective reality—this is whatever one feels should be grasped as an object or entity; the equivalent is Conrad's initial scrutiny of the present. Generally speaking, says Sartre, we find it too difficult or impossible to grasp this

objective reality *as it is*. So that if we see a bunch of grapes that presents itself as “having to be picked” and that is beyond our reach, we drop our hands and mumble, “they’re too green.” By analogy, Conrad wishes first to grasp a situation in the present in such a way as to render it in direct causal relation with the past. When this cannot be done, the urgent feeling of wanting to do something “very soon becomes unbearable because the potentiality cannot be realized. This unbearable tension becomes, in turn, a motive for foisting [on the entity] a new quality … which will resolve the conflict and eliminate the tension … [One] magically confers upon [the entity] the quality [one] desires.” But there are limits to one’s “magical” alteration of a situation that is unbearably difficult: the limits are set by consciousness itself, which does not allow the object simply to disappear. If this were to happen, it would mean that consciousness must also disappear. Therefore, as Sartre says, we rely upon “magical behavior which consists of denying the dangerous object with our whole body by subverting the vectorial structure of the space we live in by abruptly creating a potential direction on the *other side.*” We deny the object by turning to another. And so Conrad’s return to the past —a potential direction on the other side—follows. Now if it should happen that the segment in the past to which one returns is an episode of disaster (as it usually is in Conrad’s case), one is made gloomy and sad. The result is that “sadness aims at eliminating the obligation to seek new ways”—and the emotional structure is once more complete. One has only to think of the beginning and end of *Heart of Darkness*, for example, to see how a movement from the present into the past causes the gloom of the past to engulf the whole of the present. A portion of the last sentence reads: “the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (XVI.162). But in bringing the past and present together in such a way, “it is a question,” as Sartre says,

of making the world an affective neutral reality, a system in total affective equilibrium, of discharging the strong affective charge from objects, of reducing them all to affective zero, and, by the same token, of apprehending them as perfectly equivalent and interchangeable. In other words, lacking the power and will to accomplish the acts which we had been planning, we behave in such a way that the universe no longer

requires anything of us. To bring that about we can only act upon our self, only 'dim the light,' and the noematical correlative of this attitude is what we call *Gloom*; the universe is gloomy, that is, undifferentiated structure. At the same time, however, we naturally take the cowering position, we 'withdraw into ourselves.'[9]

It can be objected, I suppose, that Conrad's narrative methods (which Sartre's theory relates to) are only some of his tools as a writer and as such should be considered either as plain technique or as manifestations of his unconscious. But narrative method, when it is intensely moving and effective, derives mainly from the fully aware author himself, not exclusively from a technical fussiness, which one would expect the merest apprentice to have outgrown, or from an unconscious over which he has no control. Conrad's letters—as we have seen—reveal him in a series of "unbearable" and "potential" situations with regard to his existential awareness. His talk of nightmares and caves shows him in need of relief, and in that need there is little of the "mythic" or the "unconscious." There would seem to be some value in the "psychographic" or philosophic method of criticism, because it can distinguish certain configurations in the author's consciousness, configurations that persist into and enliven the fictional creation. To see the manner in which the author treats these characteristic attitudes enables the critic to examine the changing course of sophistication and speculation that every major writer must go through. And this is even truer if the writer's own temperament is one that is pre-eminently philosophic and consciously serious.

Moreover, it does Conrad an injustice to regard him simply as a "moral" writer (and even the fine Marxist critic Georg Lukacs has reduced him to this level[10]) or as indifferent to philosophical currents. R. W. B. Lewis has said of him: "no more than other novelists writing on English soil did Conrad possess that occasional French and German talent for making the war of thought itself exciting."[11] Yet Conrad's disposition and outlook suited him for exactly that war of thought, and his reading and heritage only sharpened his innate gifts. His close friend Galsworthy said that Conrad was deeply impressed by Schopenhauer,[12] and one can see the relevance here of Schopenhauer's philosophy of "humanistic pessimism,"[13] with its suggestive talk of subjective correlatives, the will to

live, and art as a play within the play of life.[14] We can see, that is, how Conrad was able courageously to articulate, after the example of Schopenhauer (whom Conrad probably first knew by way of Brunetière[15]), the artistic cosmology of narrative fiction and its dependence upon the recollecting subjective consciousness, in this way seeking salvation from the terrible will to live that enslaves every human being. Conrad was at home with these ideas and terms.

The temper of British intellectual and philosophical life (at least in its more sympathetic, less insular forms) must have also left its mark on Conrad, just as it must have influenced the thought of any serious-minded alien. Is it not possible to say that F. H. Bradley's esoteric, idealist ethics, so well known to intellectuals of the time, are movements of thought that many of Conrad's heroes take for granted? The conflict of self-realization and responsibility in "Falk" and "Typhoon," for instance, is remarkably similar to Bradley's notion of "my station and its duties."[16] Kurtz's fall from civilized "ethics," furthermore, is continually expressed in terms of fidelity to station policy—an obviously barbed reference to idealist ethics. Finally, there is the matter of Conrad's repeatedly affirmed affinity with Baudelaire, the poet of "stérilités nerveux," the mirror of the sea, and temperamental writing.[17] Surely a label like "moral" or "unconscious" underestimates the sophistication of Conrad's mind. It was a mind of so natural a cultivation that not only did it endure its own fanatical self-consciousness, but it also made art of its emotional struggles; in the best *European* tradition Conrad combined fictional representation and philosophic thought into an indivisible whole. Keeping such points in mind, we can better understand the complexities of Conrad. One can then begin to see and judge his fiction in proper critical perspective.

One of the ways in which this can be done is to compare the process of structural evolution within each of the three groups of stories named earlier. Since each group has a sort of structural idiom of its own, it is feasible to show how Conrad's changing sense of himself (which I described in my discussion of the letters) influences the various advances his fiction makes. Now the one endemic characteristic of this idiom is the strong sense of kinship that is revealed between past and present. (I had better say first that "past and present" refer not only to the present setting and the past narrative-plot, but also to the past action—

always impulsive—and the present reflection—always slower and more deliberate. When the story is not surrounded by a frame that is distant from the main action—as in *Heart of Darkness*—and when the story takes place totally in the unfolding present, then the tale itself is a working out of what has already happened before its formal beginning. Thus, James Wait is already a dying man when the story begins, and Captain Whalley is already a man out of a job.) When the kinship is discerned, even if the discernment is only implied, the character whose situation is the central one begins himself to *make a drama* out of what he is contending with. This is equivalent, in Sartre's terms, to the magical alteration of potentially difficult objects. A dramatic role is forced upon what is past, or difficult, or ungraspable, in order to coerce it into a more amenable relation with the person who does the forcing. All of this becomes clear enough in studying the course of Conrad's short fiction before World War I.

The most painful, and in some ways the most interesting, story of Conrad's first period is "The Return." Moser and Guerard both dismiss the work as badly written and as a failure, because Conrad could not treat sex with any skill.[18] The real interest of the story has little to do with the plot as such. Rather, it lies in Conrad's atomistic chronicling of a man's treatment of a disaster in his immediate past (his wife's tentative unfaithfulness, her desertion of him, and her curious return to him). The ostensible subject held only a kind of manufactured interest for Conrad himself: he wrote to Garnett on October n, 1897, that in the story he was trying to expose "the gospel of the beastly bourgeois" (*Garnett*, 111). It is obvious that Conrad was concerned with a topical, even fashionable, subject for its tangential market value, not because of any inherently worth-while quality. Alan Hervey, respectable, moderately well-off, incapable of real intimacy, returns to his house in a London suburb from a normal day in the city. His wife, a kind of English Nora Helmer, is like an overgrown angel, who together with him skims over the surface of life, "ignoring the hidden stream … of life, profound and unfrozen" (VIII.123). He finds a letter from her at home, in which she tells him that she has left him for a fat poetaster (one of their erstwhile friends), and this is a blow that stirs up in Hervey all the feelings that God had kept hidden. For the first time, he now "looks upon the mysterious universe of moral suffering" (VIII.133).

Everything here follows the essential pattern already pointed out. The fact of his wife's imprisonment in the past has now leaped out before Hervey in the present sterility of his heedless life, and begins its work by stirring up passions within him (and passion, Conrad says editorially, is the only thing that cannot be explained away because it is life's secret infamy—VIII.133). Within a few moments after receiving the news of her shameful betrayal of him, he is required by his unbearable situation to make something of it. The powerful influence of shame is what, I think, makes this story an epitome of Conrad's earliest group of short works. For within a comparatively narrow form, whose focus is an essentially simple crisis of shameful exposure, Conrad allows full scope to all his emotional responses to shame. Hervey is immediately plunged into a realm in which "inexcusable truth" and "valid pretence" are confused (VIII.131). In other words, he cannot distinguish at first between the fact of her betrayal and his scandalized persuasion that she should not have betrayed him. As a category, truth can have no interest for him. It is this attitude to truth that admits him into a new realm of moral suffering. In Sartre's terms, he begins his magical alteration of the objective reality; and, Conrad says of him, he now needs a fresh crop of lies (beliefs) to cultivate (VIII.134).

One way of finding such beliefs is to review the past in an orderly manner. By a mode of egoistic retrospection, Hervey attempts to bring his past into causal relation with the present crisis in order to determine why his wife betrayed him. He looks into the mirror; and this is a gesture that rather awkwardly communicates Hervey's own consuming sense of himself. The intensity of his feeling for himself consequently elevates his wife into an obscure symbol standing before him—for now she has returned to him (even before her actual quick return) from her unsuccessful adventure. Unshielded and alone, he sees for the first time the indestructible character of her being. "She was the incarnation of all the short moments which every man spares out of his life for dreams, for precious dreams that concrete the most cherished, the most profitable of his illusions … She was mysterious, significant, full of obscure meaning" (VIII.139). The "meaning" (so adjectival, as F. R. Leavis would say, in its description[19]) Hervey begins to perceive sets off a train of rather self-congratulatory thoughts. It corresponds, of course, to the desire for bringing matters into simple causal connection: his wife, Hervey now

explains to himself, *has been* like the dreams every man nourishes in his life. The explanation places her in an understandable category that accounts not only for what she is *now* but also for what she has done to him. There is a similarity here between Hervey's apprehension of his wife and Marlow's boyhood dream about entering the dark places of the world (XVI.52). Even though he had never seen Kurtz as he really is (and Hervey has never seen his wife as she is), Marlow finds that he is attracted to him because Kurtz is a *point d'appui* of Marlow's own making, a kind of secret dream, a companion of his enforced idleness. To the young and inexperienced Marlow, whose character, like Hervey's, seems formed of orderly routines until, under the influence of disaster, he is thrust into a new realm of experience, Kurtz is what Marlow would like most to find. For Kurtz is a power of ultimate efficiency that reverberates through the fantastic horrors of an unexplored universe of darkness; and, in much the same way, Hervey begins to transform his wife from a neglected doll into the central figure of a realm of crisis. Though she is his own creation, constructed out of his own distress, her "being" elusively remains hers, and Hervey feels that somehow she "tampers with him" (VIII.141).

Conrad proceeds to develop the kind of half-blind half-lucid existential consciousness that Hervey has of himself and his wife. The wife is herself, and her being disturbs him; Hervey admits this to himself only on the level of brute sensation that admits of no intellectual sophistry. But his reflecting intellect, *feeling* what it must have to satisfy itself, continues to treat her as a symbol of what he cannot understand: he harasses her for her meaning, like a dog worrying a bone. The reason Hervey cannot accept his wife as herself is that she refuses to discuss anything more than the simple fact of her betrayal and return: her letter to him, she says, is the beginning and the end. He, on the other hand, replies that "the end—this thing has no end" (VIII.146). Out of touch with the material universe of real sensations, he is "whirled interminably through a kind of empty universe made up of nothing but fury and anguish" (VIII.145). The more he remains in that gray world—which in *Heart of Darkness* is identified as the realm of neutrality just between life and death, and which is Schopenhauer's world of pure will—the more his feeling demands definite, symbolic expression. All of this recalls the striking letter written about the composition of "Youth," in which Conrad's description of the

feeling that had induced the story is almost a separate entity struggling to express itself through the words: here too Hervey's feeling for his wife as a "mute symbol" pushes its way through this empty universe of his. For all of his vaunted "symbolic" writing, the special, local *use* and relevance of the symbol for Conrad was pre-eminently a sense of a mute, resisting, completely inscrutable object. The object is created in spite of its own independent reality (in this case, the wife's own being) in order to restructure an unbearable situation. Hervey had formerly lived as if he were a machine, as Kayerts and Carlier had, and the orderly world has disappeared from his sight; his wife alone is before him and can therefore replace the previous medium of existence. As in the past he had wanted "to grasp [the world] solidly" (VIII.153), to be an important man, and she, with her valuable social connections, was to have been his instrument, now she alone needs to be understood.

The psychology of this is vitally interesting. For, Conrad seems to be saying, there is a period of attrition in one's emotional attitude toward life that causes one to remain reliant upon habit. During the time of youth (and "Youth" itself is amply convincing on this point) one sees the world, and puts it into parentheses as it were, with the special tool of youth—the vision of glamour and romance. Youth itself is a grappling hook with which the world can be held. It is also interesting here to note the parallel between this belief and Bradley's system of ethics. Bradley's point, as I understand it, is that all action is self-realization;[20] action can be understood not in *a priori* terms but rather as a continually reaffirmed habit of "having" the world. And society provides the individual with a place that continually forces him to have the world in the same way at all times. Hence the concept of "my station and its duties," or the ethical, active role we perforce must play. Another parallel is Schopenhauer's distinction of the intelligible, the empirical, and the acquired character.[21] We have a sense of ourselves within us (intelligible); when put into practice (empirical) this sense is modified; and when put within the framework of the society in which we live, it becomes further modified (acquired). As a result of the interplay between the individual and the world, we endow ourselves with a sense of ethical and psychological self-location (comparable to Bradley's "station"), which in most cases stays with us all our lives. But, according to Conrad, there may be a shocking unsettlement that disrupts the continuity of our hold upon life. Then we

willingly fly into the new order we discern and try somehow to relocate ourselves in it. There is still one more parallel, of course, to Sartre's psychology of escape discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus Hervey is "absorbed by the tragedy of his life" (VIII.153) and is seeking in his wife a new means of finding himself.

Nevertheless, Hervey discovers a residue of conventional emotion within himself. He berates his wife with talk of "the moral foundations of society" and the necessity of fidelity to them (VIII.158). Unexpectedly, she submissively assents to this without argument, and he becomes "exiled in the realm of ungovernable folly." Her submission to conventional sentiment is a radical disappointment to Hervey: as a possible "tool" with which to understand the world, his wife has offered him no assistance. She has removed herself as a symbol, has refused to provide meaning. From the world of emptiness, fury, and anguish he moves into one of total absurdity. In this new emotional universe, the "dishonouring episode seemed to disengage itself from everything actual" (VIII.160), remaining to irritate his sensibility even more aggressively. The tension between things as they are and things as he senses them grows more painful; he consciously and fearfully clings to appeasing truths as his wife stands before him, her face ugly with the truth that comes of having abandoned all safeguards (VIII.167). Hervey's double awareness is described by Conrad as a look into a black hole on the one hand and into ugliness on the other (VIII.168). Thus the path Hervey has followed has led him from a world of conventionality to one of undifferentiated grayness, where his wife *could* have aided him by becoming a "symbolic" solidity, and finally to a world where emptiness and deeply unsatisfactory ugliness confront him. He has but one resort, which is to search for a purely simple beginning: an act that can be interpreted only as beginning their relationship afresh and keeping it totally free of implicit meaning (VIII.169).

The predicament in which Hervey finds himself is one that Conrad knew well from his own experience. It was that pressing need to find an unimpeachable starting point from which to continue life anew, an objective fact untainted by any of the excesses of reflective interpretation. As the Herveys begin their dinner (the act that perversely stands for a ritual communion and also is to be the vital objective act), Hervey himself is absolutely debased. Having in the first place retreated from the trouble

that broke into his life (the dishonoring episode), and having sought to apprehend it in a way calculated to save him, he now believes that he can walk directly toward the placating answer and the peace he has always desired. Of course, this is finally impossible. When he had first denied the coexistence of objective truth and his own subjective awareness of it, and when he had found his provisional causal attempts totally frustrated (the failure of such thoughts as “if my wife remains a new ordering symbol, then I will see the world properly”), Hervey had lost himself in a world of violently excessive speculation. He is now caught in a net of disorderly meanings that neither he nor his wife can begin to unravel. In sheer physical terms, the weight of experience has made *of him a* new world of totally isolated “symbolic” density. Living previously as a hollow man of conventionality in a complex world, Hervey has possessed the world in a successive series of noetic acts that obliterate the distinctions between truth and illusion, time and space, himself and the darkness. To his hyperenlarged vision, the world itself is mere representation, a sham: he himself is far richer in meaning—and he has an apprehension of the immense darkness to which he has finally penetrated. Past and present thus both become actual, and equally impossible, in his own mind. He sees the great night of the world breaking through the discreet reserve of walls, of closed doors, of curtained windows (VIII.181). Significantly, only the statue of a woman in the Hervey house sheds any light in the darkness. Hervey walks out of his house, never to return—though not before his wife feels that she had “confronted something more subtle than herself” (VIII.179).

To discover a definable structure in a past that is both self-contained and disastrously unexpected is the impossible problem set by Conrad’s stories of this period. Alvan Hervey, Amy Foster, Captain Hagberd, the crew of the *Narcissus*, Marlow, the young captain in “Falk,” all receive into their lives the mysterious and debilitating force of detached, almost gratuitious action. Its embodiments are necessarily human—Kurtz, James Wait, Falk, Mrs. Hervey—and, to all purposes, corrupting. Each of these embodiments requires comprehension, at least in the minds of the characters, in a way that draws the comprehending mind into an agonizing battle with the unknown. The categorizing sensibility, insufficiently prepared and uneasy in its sterile calm, rejects and modifies what it cannot manifestly accept. Like Conrad, whose immensely

distracting impressions flooded his heart in full force, each of the actors in the present makes of the past a drama that he hopes will elucidate the present. Hervey's experience remains, I think, the most sustained and well-articulated exercise in self-debasement that Conrad achieved in his written work. It is a process carried on under the influence of Conrad's understanding of how the mind goes into shameful retreat. The gradual withering of the intellectual capacity for disinterested perception begins in outraged shame, moves to frenetic speculation, and ends in the darkness of almost inhuman solitude. And, most terrifying of all, Conrad courageously depicts the slaughter of action as in some way caused by the activity of the mind. Thus what Marlow, Hervey, and the crew of the *Narcissus* desire (an enlightened, orderly, and formal explanation for peculiar disaster) threatens them with darkness, disorder, and formlessness. We are left with the question: does the mind seek order *or* truth? This, we remember from Conrad's letters, is the question that runs throughout his own speculations.

In general dramatic and philosophic terms, the situation is one in which the categorizing mind, by imposing itself on the world that insolently confronts it, succeeds so well that outside itself only hollowness seems to be left. Wait's last dream, in which he sees himself as an empty husk, is an implicit commentary on the consciousness of the crew. We must then ask why it is that he troubles the crew with his presence, why Mrs. Hervey returns, why Kurtz seems to have called Marlow in, and why Falk must anger the young captain. These questions bring one to what is most profound and human in Conrad: the realization that every act of life, no matter how direct, natural, and self-sufficient, demands intellectual recognition in the consciousness of every person who is involved in it. Just as Conrad himself required the voices of his friends as evidence of their interest in him, so too does Wait require the egoistic assurance of a common human interest in him. With terrible clarity he says, "I must live till I die" (XXIII.44).

At its most bearable, life is the egoistic assertion of one's existence so that others will feel it. If the world is a conflict of willful egoisms, as Schopenhauer saw it, then the need for recognition is the original egoism, the root from which everything else springs. In seeking the kinship of reflective understanding, however, the performer of an action inevitably is forced to reduce himself to a level below the normal limits of

active human life. There is a draining of strength as the past action is sapped of all content by the reflecting present. Only the surrounding darkness remains substantially palpable. In the present, the corroding power of thought and interpretation completely absorbs the actualized situation and leads to an anarchic enlargement of the self. The mute, or nearly mute, agent who wishes himself fully understood grows more simple and direct, becomes less and less accessible to the complex, reflecting mind. And the reflecting, enervated mind, desiring relief in action, becomes even more complex, less and less able to grasp things *as they are*.

The only possible meeting between thought and action is in death, the annihilation of both. For the mind to accept death as a solution of the difficulty would be to accept the devastating irony that permits the destruction of the consciousness, the only faculty capable of enjoying the solution.[22] Therefore Conrad's earliest tales posit a compromise in which the agent usually dies (Wait, Kurtz, Yanko) and the reflecting mind continues still uncertain, still in darkness. The breathtaking richness of *Heart of Darkness* comes from the fact that Kurtz is an arch-European ("All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz") who undertakes the immensely egoistic, heroic, and rudimentary task of joining his action to his thought ("everything belonged to him"), succeeds ("exterminate all the brutes"), and then dies, courageously professing his success ("the horror" [XVI.117, 116, 118, 149]). Marlow, a more insular European, perceives all of this but, like Hervey, is overwhelmed by the enduring darkness. First, though, he tells a lie that simplifies the dark truth but safeguards the power of Kurtz's heroic eloquence. And that eloquence—what is it really? It is quite impossible to say. There can be no more accurate representation in fiction of the historic predicament of mind-tortured modern Europe, except perhaps Mann's *Doctor Faustus*.

If, in this group of stories, Alvan Hervey's is the most chronicled version of the interpreting quest, Marlow's the most poetic, and the *Narcissus* crew's the closest to success, then Dr. Kennedy's in "Amy Foster" is the most ironic because the past he investigates is not only the most distant from him but also the most humanly appealing. The story of Yanko Goorall, a shipwrecked young Pole who lands in England, is at first taken for a madman, and is then loved, married, and deserted (through incomprehension) by Amy Foster, is mulled over by Kennedy,

who is a former adventurer. The significance of this is clear. Only Kennedy is capable of entering where others fear to tread, his detached mind allowing him the objective clarity with which to grasp the terrible unhappiness of the story. That Conrad is at once Yanko and Kennedy cannot be doubted: pathetic action and the dramatic, interpreting imagination are merged incongruously, and eternally separated by circumstance and time. Amy is the tragically ineffectual substitute for the fully understanding support that a shipwrecked man needs. A rather large degree of misfortune in the supposedly natural relation between man and woman (Hervey and his wife are excellent examples of this) depends on the fact that a woman must always be sought and is always found wanting, even debasing.

Conrad's interest in the quest I have been discussing comes to quasi-fruitful maturity in two of the last six stories he wrote before *The Mirror of the Sea*, "Typhoon" and "The End of the Tether." Both are stories of old men in periods of inordinate trial. Captain MacWhirr in "Typhoon" is an uneducated man of no distinction; even his crew holds him in some disdain. But one great virtue is his ability to face what is before him with his whole being, totally incapable of scrutinizing either tradition or the past. When a typhoon is about to descend upon the ship, his literal mind can see no alternative but to go through it. His attempted study of books on typhoons is ludicrously inept, for he cannot bring himself to understand the details. Only the fact of the low reading on the barometer and his presumption of the ship's danger trouble him. Jukes, his mate, is the interpreting man, bothered by questions of alternatives, of safety, of conflicting passions. The sustained climax of the story intensely conveys MacWhirr's steady occupancy of his position in space (always on deck) and in time (moving steadily through a stormy period). Conrad's awareness of the sacrifice MacWhirr must have made and continues to make for this choice of unreflecting fidelity to duty accounts for the seemingly irrelevant presence in the tale of MacWhirr's wife and children. Always away from them, always a silly, mindless individual to them, MacWhirr's unthinking modesty knows only that he has been through some kind of experience. His letters to them (and their reading of his incredibly prosaic storm letter ends the tale) are received with petulant patience. Yet MacWhirr has no past to live up to; everything is in the

present for him. And this is what the tale advances and rejects almost at the same time. To occupy the present with a singleminded attention to immediate duty is the achievement of a man for whom thought—and broader awareness—is impossible.

Judged by itself, “Typhoon” seems to suggest that MacWhirr’s way is the best after all. Set against the more interesting and credible figures in Conrad’s other short fiction of this period, MacWhirr is a nonidealistically rendered individual of comparatively shallow gifts, a man temperamentally alien to Conrad himself. The dissatisfaction the reader feels at the callous treatment accorded MacWhirr by his family, especially after his unacknowledged heroism, is intensified to the point of impatient annoyance with MacWhirr and not, as might be hoped, with his family. So that while we admire MacWhirr for what he does *now*, we reject him for what he can never do *then*. To sum up: MacWhirr is in the present, on a ship in a catastrophic storm. This can be compared with Hervey’s immediate awareness of his wife’s betrayal. But whereas Hervey instantly leaves the immediate for the past, MacWhirr remains absolutely steady on course. There are a finite number of things to be done and he does them: to Jukes and the other sailors go the tasks of executing his orders with agony and difficulty. The importance of the story is that Conrad’s conception of MacWhirr’s successful coping with present disaster can be rendered only in terms of a central action that bears nothing but passivity. Offering the storm merely the resistance necessary for bare survival, MacWhirr ignores the storm’s “personal” corrupting attack on him, refusing to endow it with the notion of universality that he might have created for the exigency. It is, for him, simply *a* storm, not *the* storm, not *the* darkness (as Marlow would say). The genius of the tale is that MacWhirr is both attractively human and inhuman, active and passive.

When Jukes, down in the engine room, talks with his captain over the ship’s telephone, he is struck how, in a moment of titanic flooding and darkness, MacWhirr’s voice and presence seem to push back the floods (XX.72). But this image of defiant resistance to disaster is the only example of its kind in early Conrad—unless one counts the taciturn Singleton, who undermines his resistance by accepting Bulwer-Lytton as a private dream. A dreamless man, without illusions and interpretive capacities, practically a cipher: this is MacWhirr. His opposite counterpart is Captain Whalley, the hero of “The End of the Tether.” In this touching

story an old man, spiritually related to Marlow and Falk, is almost literally crowded out of life both by circumstances and by his own attempts to create a kind of self-consistency. With the continuity of his life broken by both poverty and responsibility for his daughter, he becomes a co-owner with Massy, an unscrupulous and whining engineer, of the ancient freighter *Sofala*. The central tension of the story is the connection of Whalley's increasing blindness to his increasing sense of honor and fidelity; the blinder he becomes, the more he clings to an outmoded code of action. Just as Hervey cannot distinguish between truth and pretense, Whalley, the forlorn traveler, is isolated in the present as he tries to justify and extend his own adventurous MacWhirr-like past of glorious seafaring. His daughter, whose name (with heavy-handed significance) is Ivy, has twined herself around him. Like Yanko and Hervey, his whole view of existence depends on this unhappily incompetent woman. Throughout the first part of the story we are made aware of Whalley's noble physical bearing, which somehow does not fit his demeaning circumstances. Carrying a burden of responsibility that he has formulated in terms of a noble past record, Whalley continues to believe that his life is necessary: he prolongs his agreement with Massy only because he has to protect his investment in the ship for his daughter.

Massy and Sterne (the ship's mate) harass the old man by reminding him not of his infirmity, but of his responsibility. It is only Van Wyk, another of those retired adventurers like Dr. Kennedy, who feels an active sympathy for the old man. But this sympathy is viable only as a kind of helpless understanding. It is capable only of noting what it can neither fathom nor assist.

> And Mr. Van Wyk, whose feeling of outraged love had been translated into a form of struggle with nature, understood very well that, for that man whose whole life had been conditioned by action, there could exist no other expression for all the emotions; that, voluntarily to cease venturing, doing, enduring, for his child's sake, would have been exactly like plucking his warm love for her out of his living heart. Something too monstrous, too impossible, even to conceive. (XVI.302)

When, in his last crisis, Whalley falls into the abyss of total solitude, where nothing is his own except his sense of duty, he has at least

“carried his point” (XVI.333). He dies willingly then, refusing to leave the ship with whose compass Massy has tampered: now he sees the whole of life “as he had never seen [it] before” (XVI.324).

Whalley’s enlarged spiritual vision, in which everything becomes overt and manifest, pushes him out of life. He dies possessing only this; although he wants to see his daughter, he never does. From Conrad’s point of view, Whalley’s death closes a phase of emotional, artistic, and intellectual speculation on the supposedly liberating quest for understanding. There is a sense of decorum in Whalley’s end, a decorum that shows in the difference between the ending of this tale and the ending of *Heart of Darkness* how far Conrad has come. Whereas night seems to be descending upon an already dark world at the end of *Heart of Darkness*, “The End of the Tether” closes with these sentences: “The light had finished ebbing out of the world; not a glimmer. It was a dark waste; but it was unseemly that a Whalley who had gone so far to carry a point should continue to live. He must pay the price” (XVI.333). For the self-exploratory mission of the individual confronted with disaster, there is now only one outcome: death. Previously, men like Hervey and Marlow had the luxury of accepting the circumambient darkness even as they were overwhelmed by the difficulties of their subjective awareness. At least they can live on. Now the engulfing of the objective by the subjective—the fact of Whalley’s blindness drowned in the moral severity of his private mission—leads to a pitiful death, because death is the great neutralizer in which objective and subjective do not pertain. Not only is death necessary and inevitable; it is also correct.

The further pertinence of this tale to Conrad’s own life is of course that it was written in late 1902, at a time when he had broken off his relations with Blackwood and had begun the dedicated creation of a new “economical” character for himself. Like Whalley, at the end of his spiritual tether in the society that seemed to have no room for his problems, Conrad begins a new phase, having buried the Hervey-Marlow-Whalley period of his life. He undertook, within a few months of “The End of the Tether,” the writing of *Nostromo* and, significantly, a series of sea sketches. He was now following the advice he had once given Galsworthy, that man lives in his eccentricities alone. The pose he would now maintain before the heedless public was that of an eccentric rather than that of a difficult novelist. And in this task, begun in *The Mirror of the*

Sea and finished in the marvelous *A Personal Record*, his writing efforts play a considerable role of elucidation and support. The actual making of eccentric masks is Conrad's objective, and to this we should turn next.

VII

The Craft of the Present

It is difficult to find a key to Conrad's deliberate manipulation of motives and poses in his autobiographical works. But there are two almost parallel passages, one each from *The Mirror* and *A Personal Record*, that provide some clues. Both have to do with the beginnings of Conrad's two careers, the sea and his writing, and both, of course, amiably mull over the past's bearing on the present. The episode from *The Mirror* occurs in the chapter entitled "Initiation" and is set in the "immensity" of the sea, where a Danish brig is foundering. As Conrad's ship comes to the rescue, the captain orders Conrad to command the operation. Here we have the initial situation seen in the fiction, the typical rescue in the present of someone or something that has already been wrecked. Silence is an important factor:

It had been a weirdly silent rescue—a rescue without a hail, without a single uttered word, without a gesture or a sign, without a conscious exchange of glances. Up to the very last moment those on board stuck to their pumps, which spouted two clear streams of water upon their bare feet. Their brown skin showed through the rents of their shirts; and the two small bunches of half-naked, tattered men went on bowing from the waist to each other in their back-breaking labour, up and down, absorbed, with no time for a glance over the shoulder at the help that was coming to them. As we dashed, unregarded, alongside a voice let out one, only one hoarse howl of command, and then, just as they stood, without caps, with the salt drying grey in the wrinkles and folds of their hairy, haggard faces, blinking stupidly at us their red eyelids, they made a bolt away from the handles, tottering and jostling against each other, and positively flung themselves over upon our very heads. The clatter they made tumbling into the boats had an extraordinarily destructive effect upon the illusion of tragic dignity our self-esteem had thrown over the contests of mankind with the sea. On that exquisite day of gentle

breathing peace and veiled sunshine perished my romantic love to what men's imagination had proclaimed the most august aspect of Nature. The cynical indifference of the sea to the merits of human suffering and courage, laid bare in this ridiculous, panic-tainted performance extorted from the dire extremity of nine good and honourable seamen, revolted me. I saw the duplicity of the sea's most tender mood. It was so because it could not help itself, but the awed respect of the early days was gone. I felt ready to smile bitterly at its enchanting charm and glare viciously at its furies. In a moment, before we shoved off, I had looked coolly at the life of my choice. Its illusions were gone, but its fascination remained. I had become a seaman at last. (IV.141–142)

Even though Conrad is involved, he is able to survey the situation with cool detachment, something not possible for any of his fictional characters. When the rescued Danish captain speaks a valedictory for his ship, Conrad notes that it was "orderly," wanting neither "piety nor faith, nor the tribute of praise due to the worthy dead, with the edifying recital of their achievement" (IV.146). So the rescuer stands by as the rescued pronounces a perfectly adequate recital of what has passed. The equivalent in Conrad's earlier work is, of course, Kurtz's expression of horror while Marlow stands by in confused speculation. Then the rescued captain smiles at Conrad, and Conrad's initiation is completed.

Already I looked with other eyes upon the sea. I knew it capable of betraying the generous ardour of youth as implacably as, indifferent to evil and good, it would have betrayed the basest greed or the noblest heroism. My conception of its magnanimous greatness was gone. And I looked upon the true sea—the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death. Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its soul. Open to all and faithful to none, it exercises its fascination for the undoing of the best. To love it is not well. It knows no bond of plighted troth, no fidelity to misfortune, to long companionship, to long devotion. The promise it holds out perpetually is very great; but the only secret of its possession is strength, strength—the jealous, sleepless strength of a man guarding a coveted treasure within his gates. (IV.148)

Although this is apparently frank autobiography, Conrad did remark to Blackwood on January 7, 1902, that the sketches were "'fiction' in the

same sense that *Youth* is fiction" (*Blackwood*, 138). As fiction the episode describes what, in *Heart of Darkness*, it had not been possible to describe. In *The Mirror* Conrad delineates initiation; in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow warns his listeners that "there's no initiation either into such mysteries" (XVI.50). The mysteries in *Heart of Darkness* are unfathomable, hence unknowable intellectually. This is not the case in *The Mirror*.

Conrad's character, we can be supposed to understand, was able to withstand the shock of catastrophe because the Danish captain, the actor in the catastrophe, could speak for himself. In other words, by presenting a less obscure, less dense, and shortened version of an experience, leaving only its most dramatic aspects to express themselves, Conrad has foreshortened or *economized himself* into a figure who can say with confidence, "I became a sailor." Notice that what is necessary here is a scene of sculptured reality, almost conventional in its appeal, both artfully described and simple. If the uncertainty of his own search for causes and motives used had been reflected in his fiction, Conrad has realized now that amorphousness and darkness could satisfy neither the public nor himself. Thus enters the fully initiated sailor, who is made to take his place in the world. If he was not absolutely real, that mattered only to Conrad. At least the author had decided, in Simone de Beauvoir's formulation, that "each man makes decisions from the place he occupies in existence; but he must occupy a place, for he can never withdraw from it."[1]

When we pass to *A Personal Record*, to the point where Conrad the writer is initiated into the mysteries of his craft, we find a strikingly parallel account. Beginning his vague scribblings out of idleness in Rouen (the opening scene of ominous quiet), Conrad sees Almayer coming to *his* rescue. All of Almayer's family comes with an appeal "not to vanity but to [Conrad's] moral character," because their "obscure, sun-bathed existence" stirs within him a sense of "mysterious fellowship." He notes that "piety," habitual reverence, makes him "render in words assembled with conscientious care the memory of things far distant and of men who had lived" (VI.9–10). The continuum between the sailor and the writer is now made clear. To see and participate in a rescue that inspires piety in the rescuer and a sense of thankful consummation in the rescued removes the illusions of youth and initiates one into sailorhood;

consequently, when Conrad is rescued by a memory (in which Conrad occupies the position of the Danish captain), he is able in turn to render the event with piety. A connection is established between writer and sailor that is economically expressed in the common pattern of rescue. The sailor rescues, the writer is rescued: the writer renders properly the fidelity and piety that the sailor has observed. One has only to remember the letter of August 29, 1908, to Arthur Symons (quoted on page 55) to be struck by Conrad's repeatedly affirmed interest in and use of piety. There he had said, "One thing I am certain of is that I have approached the object of my task, things human, in a spirit of piety." It is a curious thing that all the struggles and turmoils of his writing and of his personal experience are voluntarily concealed and subsumed under "piety," a word that Conrad never really defines or explains.

Not surprisingly, a few pages later in *A Personal Record*, Conrad writes: "What is it that Novalis says? 'It is certain my conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul believes in it.' And what is a novel if not a conviction of our fellow-men's existence strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history?" (VI.15). Although this passage describes the relation between an author and his work, it also can describe the relation between an author and his own being, especially for a man who was so continually in a state of spiritual crisis. If in *A Personal Record* Conrad was intent, as he says, on depicting the man behind works as far apart as *Almayer's Folly* and *The Secret Agent* (VI.xxiii), then it is also true that he himself had a great deal to gain by believing whatever he wrote about himself. He can render himself as a sailor and as a writer, a man of action and a man of reflection, and as a clearly defined *homo duplex*, for he is now able to believe in all of these roles. It is the case of an economy both privately and publicly beneficial.

One other point requires comment. This is the extraordinary, quite sudden appearance of a Baudelairean strain in Conrad's writing and thinking during this period (1905–1912). *The Mirror of the Sea*, we have seen, is a phrase borrowed from Baudelaire's poem "La Musique." Then there is the portrait of himself as a double man, sailor and writer, strikingly similar to and probably inspired by the well-known passage in Baudelaire's "De L'Essence du Rire": "l'artiste n'est artiste qu'à la

condition d'être double et de n'ignorer aucun phénomène de sa double nature."[2] Baudelaire's notion of the artist's permanent dualism, the power of being oneself and someone else at the same time, is well suited to Conrad's interests at this time. Warmed, even pressed, by necessity, Conrad had to believe in the reality of his created character, itself a work of art. (Here I am thinking of that remarkable sentence in Baudelaire's *Salon* of 1859: "le poète, le comédien et l'artiste, au moment où ils exécutent l'ouvrage en question, croient à la réalité de ce qu'ils représentent, échauffés qu'ils sont par la nécessité."[3] It is this conception of himself that probably motivated Conrad's famous declaration to Methuen, that his writing was completely "temperamental" (*LL*, II.34). For temperament (as Baudelaire wrote in the *Salon* of 1846) is individuality, the great gift of the true artist.[4]

Because Conrad was so absorbed in the management of himself as a public figure, most of the stories of this time, beginning in 1905 with "Gasper Ruiz" and ending in 1910 with "The Partner," are concerned with problems of identity, disguise, and revelation. Gasper Ruiz, for instance, that enormous giant of a man who does no thinking, needs a woman to complete his nature, for his humble and obscure past has made him a spiritually stunted victim of the revolution. Only the strange woman whose power feeds his soul, and who then becomes his intellectual and emotional motivation, can lead him to power and success. Together the two become one—she is his shadow. Santierra, the narrator of the tale, interprets their union in a way that enforces Conrad's heightened sense of the complementation, the reinforcement, of identity. The other stories collected by Conrad into *A Set of Six* also study the often incongruous marriage between opposing individualities. Feraud and D'Hubert in "The Duel," the Count and the young man in "Il Conde," X and the informer in "The Informer"—each of these pairs is the focus of an outcome, "military," "pathetic," or "ironic," of a strange unity. The social and political history of civilized nations is the background of these stories. In its well-known indifference to the individual, history exactly parallels the sea's colossal indifference that Conrad noted in *The Mirror*. The transition in background from wide expanses of water to wide expanses of time was easily made. Against this new, urbane background of unconcerned history, Conrad's art dispatches its habitual interests: bringing together disparate individualities in moments of uneasy calm.

The much-discussed “The Secret Sharer” (completed in 1909) most skillfully dramatizes Conrad’s concerns at this time. It is important to say at once that I am not considering the story as a Jungian fable. “The Secret Sharer” seems more interesting to me as a study in the actualized structure of doubleness—thus I treat it as an intellectual story of qualified emotional force. The story’s opening is quite similar to the openings of its precursors, differing from them only in the young narrator’s intuition of his ship’s power, her strong part in his existence.

In this breathless pause at the threshold of a long passage we seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise, the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and for judges. (XIX.92)

In *The Mirror of the Sea* Conrad had told his readers that a ship is like a man’s character,—made and tested by experience and hence a work of art (IV.29). The young captain, whose “ideal conception” of himself is to be tested with his ship, is like Conrad, the writer who is about to test his character in a projected course of his own making. The background of this endeavor is the sea:

And suddenly I rejoiced in the great security of the sea as compared with the unrest of the land, in my choice of that untempted life presenting no disquieting problems, invested with an elementary moral beauty by the absolute straightforwardness of its appeal and by the singleness of its purpose. (XIX.96)

When Leggatt comes aboard and begins to tell his story, the narrator realizes that what he is hearing “was no mere formula of desperate speech, but a real alternative in the view of a strong soul” (XIX.99). Leggatt’s youth apparently guarantees him the ability to confront clear issues, and the narrator’s immediate understanding of this is in marked contrast to the circuitous way, in Conrad’s earlier stories, by which the deeply problematic aspects of the past had been evoked to trouble the present. Reality and unmistakable clarity are important new additions to the erupting past; consequently, the narrator has powers of sympathetic intuition and “mysterious communication.” Leggatt, in other words, must

be rescued in no uncertain way and for no uncertain reason. There is a bond of simple, uncomplicated sympathy, one man for another.

This seems to be the point that grants the Jungians license to interpret the story as the progress toward the integration of the unconscious self. But surely “integration” in some manner is a feature of all fiction anyway; moreover, this story possesses a number of deliberate details whose interest extends beyond their use as prescriptions for psychic good health. The bond of sympathy between the narrator and Leggatt, for instance, is sudden, just as an action is impulsive, and the explanation for that bond is given afterwards. Thus Conrad’s psychological bias is preserved, with thought following action. The amorphous sea, upon whose surface nothing can remain reflected for long, yields to Leggatt, whose function as a mirror, it appears, is secure in the narrator’s consciousness. Conrad is no longer hopelessly trying to establish causal relations between past and present. Instead, he summons a person out of the past whose restless flight embodies an old “secret action” that seeks sympathetic recognition in the present. While Leggatt is a real person, he is also an image according to which the young narrator can see himself in an extreme intellectual and moral perspective. Discrete rather than indeterminate recollection, courageous self-identification rather than shameful retreat—these are the benefits that Leggatt brings to the becalmed young captain. In “Youth” Conrad had worried about the feeling that might disrupt the narrative. In “The Secret Sharer” Leggatt is like a feeling of rebelliousness that has become both intrinsic to and alive in the narrative. In still different terms, Leggatt is an economy for the benefit of the narrator’s understanding of himself, just as the sailor-become-writer is an economy for Conrad’s benefit.

But why, then, is Leggatt introduced as a fugitive outcast? Why was Conrad anxious to make Leggatt and the narrator aware of crime’s enormity as well as its supposed justification? It would be too easy to say that Conrad’s sympathy with Leggatt provoked a temporizing moral attitude. There is a trace of slightly embarrassed zeal in Leggatt’s narrative, which may convey a poignancy that Conrad himself felt. Like Leggatt, Conrad had covered the artistic failures he felt as an author with a pose of aggressive self-assertion. The conventional opprobrium attached to murder haunts Leggatt’s crime. Yet Leggatt’s attitude toward what he has done lies somewhere between shame and pride, between

guilt and righteous vindictiveness. And so does Conrad's. Consequently, the morality of "The Secret Sharer" moves within a self-consciously aesthetic framework of values that is not sustained by universal imperatives like "my station and its duties." Whatever imperatives pertain now are eminently personal and temperamental: Leggatt is like the *poète maudit* who supplants conventional morality with the power of his personality. All in all, some of Leggatt's traits are motifs in a dramatic paraphrase of the peculiar mismatch between Conrad's scrupulous self-commentary and his public pretenses.

The reason for the narrator's sympathy is explained a few moments later: "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror" (XIX.101). There are two important points to make about this sentence. One is that the intruder from the past, for the first time in Conrad's short fiction, is not sought out as an instrument for magically reordering things, as a symbol for the use of the narrative consciousness (as Mrs. Hervey is for Hervey). On the contrary, Leggatt is a direct reflection of the narrator; he is a person in whom the young narrator can see himself, clearly and directly. In the second place, we must remember that the large mirror of the sea, heedless and immense, had already established itself in Conrad's mental cosmology; so we see that Leggatt, in spite of his extenuating crime, first defies and then replaces the larger sea mirror with himself.

Evidence of mismatch continues to appear in the tale as the two young men gradually adjust to each other's trials. Leggatt's interpretation of his escape appeals to the young narrator because of its familiarity. The relaxed entreaty of "the 'brand of Cain' business" (XIX.107) is not at all like the disquieting strangeness of Kurtz's moral exile. The results of Kurtz's outrages upon convention had required endless, inconclusive elucidation. In Leggatt's narrative, however, "there was something that made comment impossible … a sort of feeling, a quality, which I can't find a name for" (XIX.109). Nevertheless, all is not well. It is significant that at an important point in his narrative Leggatt says that he had been swimming in what seemed to be a thousand-foot cistern, from which there was no escape (XIX.109). Is this not a deliberate recollection of Conrad's own struggle in the black cave? A short time later the young narrator, having accepted Leggatt as his secret sharer, says:

and all the time the dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity. I was constantly watching myself, my secret self, as dependent on my actions as my own personality, sleeping in that bed, behind that door which faced me as I sat at the head of the table. It was very much like being mad, only it was worse because one was aware of it. (XIX.113–114)

The young narrator's consciousness has absorbed the full import of the masquerade, and from now on we can assume that *his* mind, displacing Leggatt's, is really at the center of the tale. He too, like Conrad, feels the effects of the imposture.

In the second half of the tale, it is the captain of the *Sephora*, Leggatt's ship, who represents the general fear of being taken to task for the game of disguise and concealment. Perhaps it is too bold a speculation, but I like to think that in some ways the captain's "spiritless tenacity" is distinctly reminiscent of Conrad's publishers, and even of his public, always curious, always demanding to have and know more. The narrator says:

My lack of excitement, of curiosity, of surprise, of any sort of pronounced interest, began to arouse his distrust. But except for the felicitous pretence of deafness I had not tried to pretend anything. I had felt utterly incapable of playing the part of ignorance properly, and therefore was afraid to try. It is also certain that he had brought some ready-made suspicions with him, and that he viewed my politeness as a strange and unnatural phenomenon. And yet how else could I have received him? Not heartily! That was impossible for psychological reasons, which I need not state here. My only object was to keep off his inquiries. Surlily? Yes, but surliness might have provoked a point-blank question. From its novelty to him and from its nature, punctilious courtesy was the manner best calculated to restrain the man. But there was the danger of his breaking through my defence bluntly. I could not, I think, have met him by a direct lie, also for psychological (not moral) reasons. If he had only known how afraid I was of his putting my feeling of identity with the other to the test! But strangely enough—(I thought of it only afterwards)—I believe that he was not a little disconcerted by the reverse side of that weird situation, by something in me that reminded him of the

man he was seeking—suggested a mysterious similitude to the young fellow he had distrusted and disliked from the first. (XIX.119–120)

This is an excellent example of what Sartre would call refuge from an unbearable situation; the evasion of the narrator is mercifully helped along by the captain's stupidity. Nevertheless, the captain's effect on the course of the tale is considerable, since through his questions Leggatt and the narrator learn that the supposedly dead fugitive from conventional punishment must remain "dead." Leggatt must remain secret and obscure. This is again a transformation of the "obscurity" and "mystery" so prevalent in Conrad's earlier work. Whereas previously the desire to illuminate obscurity led one only into more obscurity, here the elucidation of obscurity is accomplished, even though it is only the narrator who finally possesses the secret he shares with Leggatt. Surely this is an illustration of Baudelaire's dictum that all the phenomena of the artist's double nature are possessed by the artist. When Leggatt reminds the narrator that "we are not living in a boy's adventure tale" (XIX.131), he is prohibiting implications that would make of the whole episode a simple question of sensation or adventure, or even one with a conventional explanation.

The narrator ironically affirms Leggatt's reminder by admitting to himself that he would be very glad if the fugitive left the ship. Having created in his life a dual image of himself, like Conrad, the young captain must launch it with a daring navigational exploit; this is the exercise of art, as James would have said, flying in the face of expectations. Conrad's remark to Garnett that "every truth requires some pretence to make it live" is also pertinent. Truth resides in the young captain's determination to free himself by mastery of his métier, to prove himself a good sailor. The analogy is close at hand: Conrad desires the exultant freedom of the acclaimed novelist. The ship is suddenly put about (Conrad defiantly altering the course of his work) and Leggatt whispers, "'Be careful' … I realized suddenly that all my future, the only future for which I was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to my first command" (XIX.135). There is now a period of "intolerable stillness" (XIX.136), a return to the opening mood of pervasive calm. But now the narrator is armed with objective knowledge of the past and can use it to *create* a convincing show of craft and self-mastery. Leggatt leaves the

ship; the captain is left “alone with his command” (XIX.143). Swimming off, Leggatt, is “a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny.”

“The Secret Sharer” contains, then, the double working out and rescue that Conrad now saw as the momentary salvation for his embattled self. Leggatt rescues the captain and the captain rescues Leggatt—an apparently straightforward interchange administered with “piety.” Moreover, the acceptance of a fact of past experience is taken in and used to alleviate an unrelieved tension in the present. Lastly, a convincing image of human kinship, modally altered to one expressed in terms of action and sympathy as opposed to action and thought, sends the figure from the past back into the unknown, free from constricting troubles, and sends the present consciousness into the future, armed with reassured mastery.

Conrad’s mood of triumph did not last for very long, however. Six months later in “Prince Roman,” one of his most subtle and touching stories, there are definite signs of renewed disquiet. The story is set in the present, and a group of Poles, sufferers of the world’s passive indignation at their country’s tragic enslavement by Russia, is listening to an elderly man tell a story of his youth. The present is again described in terms of stifling enclosure and calm, but never in any of Conrad’s earlier stories is the present forced to encompass such a degree of spiritual suffocation—Poles now alive are only just surviving, in a grave (XXVI.29). It is remarkable that here Conrad has specifically depicted his usually muted opening scene with a sense of utter desolation. The speaker tells of his experience as a young boy when, dreaming of fairy tales, he meets the aged Prince Roman, a Polish nobleman, who does not at all fulfill the storybook description of a prince. The man’s personal history reflects the cruel nightmare in which Poland, seventy years before, had been caught. One catastrophe after another befalls the prince who, like the unfortunate Captain Whalley, has wife, possessions, position, and physical well-being drop away from him. He too is gradually pushed out of life, also for the sake of a conviction. We expect, given the mood of the immediately preceding “The Secret Sharer,” that the meeting between the speaker (as a young boy) and the prince will bring some sort of rapprochement. There is none. The prince has come to ask a favour of the boy’s uncle—and the boy can only feel sorry for this unprincelike old man. Although we expect

a bond of sympathy between two Poles, between an idealist and a man who suffers the consequences of idealism, none is forthcoming. There is only a dim recognition of the past in the present, as if the yoking of the two into some mutual benefit could not be accomplished.

Understandably, partnership *manqué* is the theme of the next story, “The Partner.” The tale itself is a trivial one, but it led Conrad, I think, gradually out of the middle period of hopeful arrangements (typified by “The Secret Sharer”) into his last creative phase, just before the First World War. In a few months, in mid-1912, *Chance* was to win Conrad the long-awaited moment of public and financial recognition. Yet, conversely, it was his short fiction of this period, marvelously true to his innermost impulses and thoughts, that grows more and more febrile and despairing, until with “The Partner of Malata” we come to an almost frenzied depiction of “The Secret Sharer” gone sour. The parallelisms between the two tales are astounding, and, when they are taken into account, the resulting clarifications in tone and meaning considerably strengthen the case for a psychographic and philosophic approach to Conrad. Renouard, like the young captain, is an obscure individual leading his life in a limited domain, in this case an island. He is slightly older than the young hero of “The Secret Sharer,” and more confident in his métier. Already the two differences (a ship that has become an island, and youth that has grown into maturity) suggest the inescapable rigidity brought on by advancing time. Renouard is sought out by a group of English city people, a professor and his family, looking for the young girl’s fiancé, who has disappeared and was last heard from in the East. Professor Moorsom and his daughter are, of course, similar to the questioning captain of the *Sephora*. Yet they are not stupid: the professor is an exponent of a strange philosophy of skepticism and talks continually of shame, pretenses, and the “froth of existence.” He is an artful scientist of the postures of the human spirit. The girl is a deluded, beautiful idealist.

Renouard falls in love with the girl and cannot bring himself to tell her that her fiancé was an employee of his who had died. The *ghost* of the man becomes Renouard’s secret sharer, and when the searchers are finally led to the island, Renouard keeps them there for a few days, unwilling and unable to tell them the truth. When, all together, they first reach his island, Renouard swims ashore to alert his workers to keep up the imposture. Here is the passage describing his swim:

Renouard set his direction by a big star that, dipping on the horizon, seemed to look curiously into his face. On this swim back he felt the mournful fatigue of all that length of the traversed road, which brought him no nearer to his desire. It was as if his love had sapped the invisible supports of his strength. There came a moment when it seemed to him that he must have swum beyond the confines of life. He had a sensation of eternity close at hand, demanding no effort—offering its peace. It was easy to swim like this beyond the confines of life looking at a star. But the thought: “They will think I dared not face them and committed suicide,” caused a revolt of his mind which carried him on. He returned on board, as he had left, unheard and unseen. He lay in his hammock utterly exhausted and with a confused feeling that he had been beyond the confines of life, somewhere near a star, and that it was very quiet there. (X.62)

When Renouard finally summons up the courage to tell the girl, he tries, uselessly, to tell her of his love, to make her feel “the truth that is in [him]” (X.75). Exactly like the Herveys, Renouard feels himself succumbing to the frozen river that covers life. He pours out his hopes and dreams to the girl, but she listens as if in a dream:

He had succeeded so well in his effort to drive back the flood of his passion that his life itself seemed to run with it out of his body. At that moment he felt as one dead speaking. But the headlong wave returning with tenfold force flung him on her suddenly, with open arms and blazing eyes. She found herself like a feather in his grasp, helpless, unable to struggle, with her feet off the ground. But this contact with her, maddening like too much felicity, destroyed its own end. Fire ran through his veins, turned his passion to ashes, burnt him out and left him empty, without force—almost without desire. He let her go before she could cry out. And she was so used to the forms of repression enveloping, softening the crude impulses of old humanity that she no longer believed in their existence as if it were an exploded legend. She did not recognise what had happened to her. She came safe out of his arms, without a struggle, not even having felt afraid. (X.77)

Renouard’s effort to bring to his soul a sense of kinship with the girl is doomed, and he feels enveloped in darkness. He can cope neither with

the objective fact of the past (and so creates a ghost) nor with the present. When he walks up the hill back to his house, he is strangely reminiscent of Marlow entering the realm of darkness:

This walk up the hill and down again was like the supreme effort of an explorer trying to penetrate the interior of an unknown country, the secret of which is too well defended by its cruel and barren nature. Decoyed by a mirage, he had gone too far—so far that there was no going back. His strength was at an end. For the first time in his life he had to give up, and with a sort of despairing self-possession he tried to understand the cause of the defeat. He did not ascribe it to that absurd dead man. (X.79)

The entire purpose of his past and present, even of his future, issues in total failure. His heart is broken, and, after the Moorsoms leave, he too disappears. This is how his death is described:

Nothing was ever found—and Renouard's disappearance remained in the main inexplicable. For to whom could it have occurred that a man would set out calmly to swim beyond the confines of life—with a steady stroke—his eyes fixed on a star? (X.85)

Compared with "The Secret Sharer," "The Planter of Malata" represents a fall into grievous despair. What makes it all the more despondent is Conrad's conscious recollection of details from previous stories, such as "The Return" and *Heart of Darkness*. It will be argued, I suppose, that the story therefore illustrates the Moser-Guerard thesis that there was a drying up of Conrad's creative reserves at just about this time. But the story is a tale of so profoundly understood a failure that, when applied to it, meliorist prejudices only talk past it; one can admit the almost abstract unpleasantness of the tale without condemning it on moral grounds. One cannot with justice witness Conrad's emotional and intellectual efforts in his life and in his letters just before the war, and in the same breath say that his creativity had fallen off in quality and force. It seems more accurate to say that he had arrived at an impasse, the more terrible when he became convinced that, for all the self-searching of his "autobiographies" and "The Secret Sharer," he could maintain his public image only by destroying his real being. That his quest had been a spiritual one is undoubtedly true: the point is that he could not find a

ready answer. With almost uncanny prescience his ability to harmonize past and present, action and thought, objective and subjective, failed him at just the moment that Europe's failed her. But because of the war, as we shall see from *The Shadow Line*, he was to recapture a great deal.

VIII

Truth, Idea, and Image

NEAR the beginning of his narrative in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow muses briefly on the origins of imperialistic conquest.

> The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can … offer a sacrifice to. (XVI.50–51)

Although little more is said directly about the matter, Conrad himself was evidently involved in it. In one of his most impressive letters (see page 201 below for the full text), written to Cunninghame Graham on February 8, 1899, he devotes a good deal of agonized reasoning to it. The letter is mostly in French and, as Conrad himself lamely adds at the end of it, often seems incoherent. But when we put the passage from *Heart of Darkness* next to it, a certain degree of coherence does emerge. Since the language and theme in both are strangely similar, the letter and the tale were most probably written in emphatic support of one of Conrad's more compelling beliefs.

When one does not think, Conrad writes in the letter, everything disappears and one is left only with the truth, which is a dark, sinister and fugitive shadow with no image. Shelley's Demogorgon also says, "The deep truth is imageless." Accordingly, truth for Conrad was, I believe, the negation of intellectual differentiation. So sufficient is this all-enveloping shadow that one can rest entirely within it, away from any of the common rational forms of human hope or regret. Lodged within the obliterating shadow of truth, a man feels indifferent to everything outside. After a time, the self begins to exercise a kind of brutish vindication of itself, probably out of a surfeit of rational inactivity and emotional pride. When

one boasts of being safely alone in the embrace of truth, it becomes impossible to avoid the inception of thought: the thoughtless repetition of a subrational sentiment inspires, no matter how empty the sentiment, some *idea* of *himself* in the mind of the person who has the sentiment. Now thought, under the sway of the ego, systematizes “truth” simply into an image of the self in possession of truth. As soon as this egoistic image is formed, then the individual begins to think that the world must be organized according to the image. To Conrad “thought” apparently designated the process whereby a human self-image is elevated into an idea of truth that inevitably seeks perpetuation. Beneath its rational articulation, however, the idea is only a man’s desire for protection from the impinging confusions of the world. Immediately after the intellectual organization of the world according to an idea, there comes the expedient of devotion to the idea, which in turn breeds conquest according to the idea. But the moment a man begins to examine the idea itself, he slowly begins to negate the distinctions he had organized for viewing the world: encircled by its own work, the intellect has no positive, objective criterion for evaluation. All the structures of its differentiated organization of the world disappear, and the cycle begins again.

At the back of his mind, behind his analysis of this all-too-human cycle, was Conrad’s vision of the merciless knitting machine, troubling him as Yeats’s dream of Shaw in the guise of a smiling sewing machine troubled the poet. If Conrad accused man’s egoism for its designs upon anything that stood in its way, his description of the machine served as a partial apology for egoism. The machine, he had written Graham, knits us in and out—thought, perception, everything. In accordance with its devilish activity, men become the machine’s efficient servants, existing under its strictures, colonizing whatever is dark and different from them. The machine is responsible not only for the creation of assertive individualities, but also for the false “light” with which these individualities illuminate, reform, and reorder everything. Remarkably enough, though, the knitting machine itself was Conrad’s version of what Schopenhauer had uncompromisingly distinguished as the *principium individuationis*, the principle of differentiation that is man’s—and not the universe’s—power.[1] Without thought, Schopenhauer had said, man is in almost mystic and passive community with shadowy truth. In that state man is at one with the unextended, unimagined, and formless will to live. Yet as soon as

man begins to use his intellect, he asserts his ego and becomes objectified will. The highest form of objectified will is civilized man; the most typical faculty of his mind is the power of intellectual differentiation (the *principium*); and the highest level of differentiation is the ability to say "the world is my idea." There, in Schopenhauer, we essentially have Conrad's reasoning, with the single difference, as I said, of the knitting machine—an outer rather than a native human cause of the whole process. For the purposes of Conrad's further arguments, nevertheless, the machine becomes almost indistinguishable from the men who serve it. When Marlow says he had always hankered after dark or blank places (XVI.52), we are probably to understand that he wanted to escape his machinelike existence in civilization in order to return to dark, primal "truth." And Stein's famous advice to Jim—"to the destructive element submit" (XXI.214)—is motivated by reasons similar to Mar-low's: to destroy an egoistic self-image is to return to imageless truth.

The trouble with unrestrained and militant egoism as Conrad saw it was that it becomes an imperialism of ideas, which easily converts itself into the imperialism of nations. In spite of the obvious injustice done to those upon whom one's idea can be imposed, it is important to understand that the reason an individual imposes his idea is that he believes he is serving the truth. The stronger the sense of one's own individuality, the stronger the consequent impulse to dedicate oneself "unselfishly" to an idea of the truth. A writer of strong individuality must therefore search within himself for an apt and correct image that best expresses his own idea of the truth: for, despite the perils of imperialism, the process was a necessity for coping with the internal darkness and the external world. On October 28, 1895, Conrad wrote to Edward Noble:

you must cultivate your poetic faculty,—you must give yourself up to emotions (no easy task). You must squeeze out of yourself every sensation, every thought, every image,—mercilessly, without reserve and without remorse: you must search the darkest corners of your heart, the most remote recesses of your brain,—you must search them for the image, for the glamour, for the right expression. And you must do it sincerely, at any cost: you must do it so that at the end of your day's work you should not feel exhausted, emptied of every sensation and every thought, with a blank mind and an aching heart, with the notion that there

is nothing,—nothing left in you. To me it seems that it is the only way to achieve true distinction—even to go some way towards it. (*LL*, I.183)

In its search for an image, the creative mind asserts its own identity against the obstructing darkness of truth. Schopenhauer also had described the artist's accomplishment as one of "pure knowing," wherein the dark and formless power of the will was challenged and denied by an artistic creation.[2]

Sometimes, however, Conrad found that the search within himself for images was entirely too successful; in cases of that sort, the abstract wholeness of the work he was then composing would become blurred. He wrote, for instance, to Marguerite Poradowska on February 2, 1894, that he could not see the work in its entirety, lost as he was "in the contemplation of lovely images" (*Poradowska*, 62). But he knew, as he wrote Mrs. E. L. Sanderson four years later, that, although nothing was more difficult than expression, it was ultimately what upheld one's individuality, and this alone was what determined the final coherence of the image (*LL*, I.238). The difficult morality of art, which Conrad felt with extreme intensity, derived from the tension between the accuracy of expression (conveyed by images) and the general flatulence of abstract expression (conveying truth). Of its nature, art demands a crystal-clear rectitude of phrase, whose aim is the rendering of observed truth in alliance with felt truth. Verlaine called the realization of this aim, "la chanson grise / Ou l'Indécis au Précis se joint."[3] But this, as Conrad had written Graham, is making compromises with and through words, acting as if one could light the way in a forest without paths (*LL*, I.269). Although Conrad had instructed Noble to "walk in the light of [your] own heart's gospel," he also asked that it not be forgotten that "no man's light is good to any of his fellows" (*LL*, 1.184). Sadly, nevertheless, a novelist's ability to inspire conviction in his reader depended entirely on the strength of the writer's light, his central idea, regardless of how egoistic that light was. In other words, the writer's skill was his devotion to an idea that cannot bear much looking into. On the other hand, abstractions with no central image or idea to them, except the sense of truth (formless, sinister, fugitive), run counter to all the routes of imagery. It is a terrible realization, but egoism is the compromising savior of both the art of existence and the existence of art.

One of Conrad's earliest efforts in short fiction, "An Outpost of Progress," has a conceptual framework of images and abstractions that underlines much of what I have been saying. Kayerts and Carlier are removed from European civilization and are deposited upon the banks of a river deep in an Eastern jungle. Their subsequent difficulties and deaths stem directly from the conditions of their former lives. The security of the two men had depended upon a faith in the safety of their surroundings and their continued existence as efficient machines (VIII.91). In the jungle they persist in believing that they have successfully brought progress along with them; but their notion of progress is simply the transfer of efficiency to a locale that has no room for it. In short, their wish to gather ivory according to the mercantile laws of European civilization—laws whose motivation they have never examined—reveals to them the startling fact that in primitive society trade can be based only upon the buying and selling of human beings. Their trusted Negro helper (who is given the cruelly appropriate name of Price) sells some of the station men in return for ivory. When Kayerts and Carlier at last admit to themselves that they are accomplices in the crime, their accepted scheme of values begins to dissolve. In time, Kayerts kills Carlier over a triviality; as he muses over his present misery, he comes to see that life and death are equally difficult for him (VIII.112). This impasse is the state of truth in which, Conrad has said, everything disappears. Contemplating his future within a shadow of unrelieved darkness, Kayerts takes his own life. In the most trenchant comment of all upon the machinery of civilization, Conrad makes Kayerts hang himself on the cross over the ivory storehouse. This is man, even in the moment of death, seeking an image of truth that will atone for an egoistic crime by lending sacrificial dignity to his death. Human kind cannot bear very much reality, or truth.

To a Marxist critic, the story is an astonishingly true indictment of bourgeois society. In the tale the storehouse of ivory is called a fetish, and Georg Lukacs in his *Existentialism or Marxism?* labels the post-1870 era, a period of fetishism.[4] This is to say that the unexamined acceptance of the bourgeois idea of trade and imperialism is based on the belief that men are commodities. Moreover, the idea destroys the proper individuality of a human being, turning him into a machine. Yet Conrad's positing of the human situation in modern European society is still more subtle. Between acceptance of the fetishistic idea and its destruction, the

individual has very little to choose from. After Carlier's accidental murder, Kayerts' confusion is given concrete embodiment in a thick fog that descends, perhaps intended to represent the sinister shadow of truth he cannot tolerate. His refuge—suicide on the cross—has at least the virtue of mocking the visiting director of the company (an example of the masterful egoist whose personality overwhelms everyone). For Kayerts' pose on the cross is awkwardly, defiantly obscene: his tongue is sticking out, purple and swollen.

Kayerts and Carlier had surrendered themselves to a commercial enterprise confirming the victory of the idea of imperialism and conquest. But in his next story, "The Lagoon," Conrad examines faith in an idea of love. Arsat has given away his heart to a woman; as she dies, an eagle is seen in the distance, flying out of sight. The coincidence of the eagle's disappearance and the girl's death is not simply a touch of poetry. It represents the dissolution taking place in Arsat's world—his selfish image of love's bliss is passing out of reality. There is a small patch of light in front of Arsat after the bird disappears; peering into it he asks the white man, who has projected his own suspicions onto the world, what can now be discovered of truth. The white man's answer is "nothing," illustrating, I think, his passively sophisticated knowledge of intolerable, unwelcome darkness. Because he is a comparative child in his impossible devotion to abstract honor, Arsat returns to his former life resolving to rectify the errors of his past. The white man also returns to his arid life. What is most disheartening in the story is the implication that, even though Arsat and the white man will go on to lives of untruth, the truth they might have espoused is repellent and uncomfortable because it offers them nothing. At least the brief successes of experience prod man into self-seeking and gain.

In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus*" the tale that immediately follows "The Lagoon," the ship is described as if it were a vitiated though shining ideal of beauty. The solidity and elegance of the *Narcissus* defy the immense, undifferentiated wastes of the ocean, providing the crew with a protective social edifice; but we are reminded that, in the sordid commercial aspiration of her "pilgrimage, "the *Narcissus* confirms the implications of her name. She stands in relation to the sea as civilized, egoistic man stands in relation to truth. Before her departure from an Eastern port and after her arrival in England, the *Narcissus* is merely an extension of the

machinery of civilization and society. Once on the sea, she *is* society engaged in a struggle to achieve purity and to rid herself of the pain she carries on her decks without, at the same time, allowing herself to be destroyed. James Wait, of course, seems to be the great threat, but the wonderful complexity of the tale hinges on the crew's wish for his death and the general wish to avert it. He is black, and therefore an emissary of dark truth; but he is also an immensely egoistic man, coercing everyone into his difficult service. Just as the *Narcissus* stands between the men and the sea, Wait stands between them and the truth; in the grip of his disease, he is to them an image representing a threat to their organized endeavor to perpetuate life. So too is the *Narcissus* such an image. The crew's conflict between service to the ship and service to Wait dramatizes the human vacillation between social well-being and personal individuality. Since the stormy sea threatens the extinction of the *Narcissus* and Wait, both social well-being and individuality, the crew must heroically save them both. The horrid Donkin knows this, and he maintains both his friendship with Wait and his position as a crew member, using the wiles of an opportunist who understands "the latent egoism of tenderness to suffering" (XXIII.138). After Wait is saved, his pose of good health signals the end of his individuality—he, like the crew, wishes a return to the systematic life of a sailor. Significantly, only Captain Allistoun, the master of the system, and Singleton know his imposture for what it is. Wait is secluded and dies because, like Kurtz, he cannot face the dark truth and then afterwards remain in thralldom to an *idea* of order; the price of individuality is death. So the *Narcissus* has won over Wait. The moment she comes to shore, she too dies, giving her brief power back to society. The men become the hapless victims of land ideas, of life as it is conventionally lived in society.

Within the idiosyncratic structure of Conrad's philosophy, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* relies for its effects on the racial characteristics of its protagonists. If the color of Wait's skin seems to have earned him a certain place in the consciousness of the crew, it is equally true that the ethos of the crew, in its generality, is English. And the central fact of the Englishman's life (at least as Conrad was always to see it) was that the sea "interpenetrated" his existence (XVI.3). Certainly the relations between the *Narcissus* and her crew, and between the *Narcissus* and the sea, affirm Conrad's view of the matter. "Youth," Conrad's next story, is

again the tale of some English sailors. Here the voyage of the *Judea*, another pilgrim, is explicitly made “the symbol of existence” (XVI.4)—English existence, that is. Because it is the ship’s actual task and motto to “Do or Die,” devoted action is the simple meaning of the *Judea’s* voyage. It is the special English relation to the sea, and not merely youth, that enables the continuance of a voyage so beset with innumerable, even absurd, obstacles. What makes the *Judea’s* crew so faithful to Captain Beard’s single-minded energy is the fact of the sea, whose immensity is a foil prodding them to do for their ship what the men of the *Narcissus* do for theirs.

Marlow stands apart from the rest of the men. To his retrospective vision it seems as if a ghost had been hailing the *Judea*, drawing it toward the darkness of truth in which all things disappear (XVI.26). Whereas the crew is efficient, Marlow is an excited visionary. For him it is youth that supplies images with which experience can be made intelligible; unlike the men in the performance of their duty, Mar-low’s youth guarantees him the power to assert his emerging individuality. He *will* be the commander of a vessel (even though the *Judea* goes down) because he has always imagined himself as a ship’s master. Upon awakening in Bangkok to find the dark, inscrutable East facing him, he must decide whether he is to accept this immensely strange world to which his brash youth has finally allowed him to penetrate, or return to the West, to conventional society, retaining only an image of his encounter. There is no real alternative, and he chooses the latter.

When we compare the youthful Marlow with the “bepatched” son of a Russian archpriest in *Heart of Darkness*, we are at a curious juncture. Both are adventurous young men, impassioned, eager, and innocent. Marlow, however, becomes a stolid Englishman, welcoming, at the end of “Youth,” a crew of his compatriots, leaving the East and returning to the ways of the West. Kurtz’s most loyal admirer, on the other hand, leaves Marlow and begins to look for other adventures. The one has closed his soul to darkness; the other leaves it open. If truth is the negation of rational differentiation, then the young Russian is certainly in search of it. But why was Conrad so unwilling to grant his adopted countrymen the sustained capacity for truth? Why grant that his greatest enemies, the Russians, possess it? Consistently enough, Russia, as he was to write in “Autocracy and War,” was *le néant*, and “nothingness,” precisely, had

been his definition of truth. Is Russia, then, truth? By the same token, is the sea truth?

The answer, of course, to both questions is yes and no. The cycle of truth and idea in man's being (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) is a necessary but despairing fact of human existence. Man must have ideas by which to live, and ideas can be provoked in the mind only by a resistance to undifferentiated darkness. Hence follow individuality, egoism, and so on. As a Pole, Conrad felt he had suffered, almost inconceivably, at the hand of Russia. To resist Russia's attempted submersion of his Polish identity became the guiding force in his early life. He discovered that England had the tradition and the honest-minded courage to aid him in his project. For one, the language was not as "crystallized" as French, but neither was it amorphous. Furthermore, the English placed a great deal of stock in "character," and character—as we saw in the discussion of Conrad's letters—was the result of exposure to darkness and resistance to it. Marlow is therefore Conrad's own version of the *homme moyen Anglais*, albeit more subtle and perceptive, altogether more European. The Russian youth, on the other hand, has a totally limpid soul and is forever at one with encircling darkness. If Mann's Aschenbach cannot open his fist, then Russia is too much of an open fist. Surely Razumov's agony in *Under Western Eyes* is based on a polemic application of this fact.

His next three stories continue Conrad's examination of the encounter between truth and image, abstraction and concreteness, darkness and illumination. The kinship between Marlow and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* is sustained on a metaphysical level as a kinship between darkness and light, between the impulse toward darkness sustained by Marlow until he sees Kurtz and the impulse toward light sustained by Kurtz in the deepest darkness. Not the least of the tale's reverberations is its repositing of the ethical, and even epistemological, crux of Conrad's thought. To defy darkness is to assert the self by invading the heart of all truth, which must, but cannot, be left untroubled and virginal. Kurtz's spirit of adventure and colonialism has taken him to the center of things, and this is where Marlow hopes to find him. (It is apt to recall that Conrad once wrote a French correspondent that *Heart of Darkness* was, among other things, a study of racial differences [*Lettres*, 64]. Kurtz's German origins are partially responsible for his deeds, since Germanism, as Conrad

wrote in “Autocracy and War,” “is a powerful and voracious organization, full of unscrupulous self-confidence, whose appetite for aggrandisement will only be limited by the power of helping itself to the severed members of its friends and neighbors” [III.104]. No wonder that Russia and Germany were the two opposing forces in Europe.) Marlow wishes to use the energetic light of egoism to get to the original fount of truth, to discover for himself what is there. He leaves the world of straightforward facts behind him and descends into the heart of darkness. Like the dying Wait, Kurtz is able to feel both the hypnotic claim of truth and the saving requirement of imposture, the truth of darkness and the palliating image of light and the love of man. When he dies, he has exhausted his will to live, giving “the horror” back to the world for others to find. The horror of it all is that his soul cannot finally maintain both light and darkness, although he requires both. Marlow, on the other hand, cannot deny his own will to live and returns to Kurtz’s fiancée with a lie on his lips, an image of Kurtz’s good nature created for the unhappy girl’s benefit. He too cannot bear looking at reality for very long. The only way he can apprehend truth is through Kurtz’s dramatic plight; and this, as Marlow tells it, is only a dramatic image of Kurtz’s predicament, making the whole experience intelligible, and untrue.

The heroes of Conrad’s next two stories, unlike Kurtz and Marlow, yield nothing to the darkness. Falk and MacWhirr differ only in the mode of their successful self-preservation: Falk is passionate and nervous, MacWhirr quiet and deliberate. Each is a “monopolist” of the available methods for surviving disaster, and each in his own way is a compelling egoist. To Falk the sea is the ground of his continued existence; he leads that existence under the spell of his own imperialistic power. When he takes Captain Hermann’s niece from aboard the *Diana*, it rouses an idea of abduction and rape in the narrator’s mind: since the girl herself is described as an artistically assembled image of feminine beauty (XX. 151–152), Falk, in possessing her, has been goaded by his shameful nervousness into giving up the almost deified idea of his self-preservation for her magnificent body. Having possessed *himself* to distraction (for it was not easy to live with the memory of the cannibalism he had practiced in order to preserve himself), he now seeks a new *raison d’être*, a new ideal for himself. The more Falk’s appropriation of the girl dovetails with the story of his cannibalism, the more noticeably the genial narrative

changes into a tale of distress and increasingly unpleasant trouble. In “Typhoon,” MacWhirr stares into the darkness of the gale to discover its secret, fails to grasp the idea behind the gale’s attack on him, and becomes, in front of his barometer, a pagan worshiping before a statue. The barometer and Hermann’s niece are the images to which MacWhirr and Falk respectively submit themselves.

All of the stories considered so far deal with experiences in which, assailed by darkness, the protagonists create various substitute images that enable varying degrees of conquest and self-assertion. They are men who, as Conrad wrote Sanderson on December 26, 1897, were “following an *ignis fatuus” (LL*, I.219) that kept off the invasion of darkness. By analogy, the artist’s ego allows him the power of manufacturing incident and explanation in order to resist the abstract power of the experience, its thoughtless action. It is, in other words, only the Schopenhauerian artist who, with artistic imagery, temporarily denies the will to live. Now it is left to Captain Whalley and Yanko Goorall to close out Conrad’s early study of the assertive individuality. Yanko is shipwrecked on a foreign shore where his individuality cannot articulate itself. Caught in an alien sphere of existence, he is like a bird in a snare. When Amy releases him from his loneliness, her love alone sustains his existence. Upon discovering that his genuinely buoyant nature is a dark cipher to her, and cannot inform her life, her love for him fades. Her image of him dissolves into the banality of her life; she realizes that the bovine obscurity of her own existence had forced her to find in him what was not there. She is not long in stubbornly perceiving that he is a romantic idea of her own inept making. When he dies, her life also returns to its true state.

Similarly Whalley, that magnificent pilgrim on the earth, dedicates his life to maintaining an image of himself in his daughter’s mind. But the placid mask of the sea, its surface, on which he had once traced his life like “a screed written in obsolete words,” is indifferent to him (XVI.186). He is like a cliff, always presenting an indomitable front to the sea, hoping that the record of his achievements will guarantee him a place in the sweeping currents of time. But his mind and his infirm body no longer have the power to sustain the “light” he had once shed upon the world. Darkness renews its invasion. Forced by unfortunate circumstances to loose his hold upon his former idea of life, his individuality as a result

becomes increasingly limpid and undefined, its protective outlines growing less and less clear. He succumbs slowly to a darkness that destroys even the illusion of appearances. When he kills himself, he is not facing the truth of his present situation but pathetically gesturing his loyalty to the image of his past. The cruel paradox is that it does not really matter—he dies anyway. At the end of the story his daughter continues to love him, even though she can no longer picture him in her mind.

Conrad's progress up to this point had carried him in and out of a troubled examination of the individuality as it fruitlessly expends its energies trying to achieve transitory passage through darkness. Evidently the contrary impulses toward truth and toward an effective idea of life, which Conrad was trying to balance off, had by 1902 almost brought his work to a stop. But he was still enough of a sailor to know that all voyages must have an end. Navigating a way across an ocean of ink with pen instead of oars (*LL*, 1.262), as he had written to Angèle Zagorska on December 18, 1898, implied a port and a place of rest. However uncertain its reality, the psychological moment for claiming success in the venture had come about.

Expressly tailored in its design to assert confidence in the ideas and images of a sailor's life, *The Mirror of the Sea* was Conrad's next book (he worked on it from 1903 to 1906). Between the poles of a sailor's life, Conrad wrote in the book, between departure and landfall, between the adventure of the dark sea and the security of rest, the sailor is aware that an anchor is one of the emblems of hope and rest (IV.15). There is an ever-constant rhythm in sailors' lives that is periodically slowed or stopped either by the conventions of the sailing life itself (port and anchor) or by the trained skills of the sailor. An example of the latter is the sailor's ability to bring his ship to an attitude of perfect repose, its sails furled, its motion arrested. The art of sailing, like all the other arts by which men attain mastery, makes bondsmen of its practitioners (IV.25). This is analogous to society's making machines of its members. Yet the sense of artistic accomplishment sustained by the sailor, when he sees his ship as the meeting ground between his art and the sea, can be formed into a lively, exhilarating image that partially frees him from his bonds. The image—Conrad saw it as cobwebs and gossamer chaining

the ship to the ocean's surface (IV.37)—is the highest representation of the sailor's struggle to keep his ship afloat, an image that helps him to continue his work, a source of pride and encouragement. Knowing that sails are but cobwebs before the inconceivable might of sea and wind keeps the endless variety of obstacles to his work before his eyes; the ethereal, but discernible, beauty of cobwebs and gossamer is both the sailor's very own creation and a *fact* rendered poetically, just as a gale, for example, is properly itself not only in the infinite force of its winds, but also in the effects it has on the sailor's heart (IV.76). Not only the imageless truth, in other words, but with it the image we mysteriously create to describe our version of reality: this is what makes up the whole reality.

It is Conrad's acknowledgment of the power of subjectivity—its apparent ascendancy over what it reacts to—that keynotes the works of his middle period (1902–1910). And, for these works, *The Mirror of the Sea* is a consummately executed preparation. There is, in this period, a special relation between the effects of darkness and the individual's reaction to them: the prototype of this relation is the way in which a beset sailor magically shapes an image of the action that engages him. For sailing, as Conrad writes in *The Mirror*, is an art, and the life of art is a magic existence (IV.64). But we are never entirely sure that a created image is not the result of an individual's pathological self-hallucination. Perhaps this is why one of the presiding muses of *The Mirror* is Don Quixote, that adventurous knight whose personality was drugged with the art and images his madness had appropriated. The other patron of the book is Ulysses. On the one hand there is Quixote, who has irreproachably true, human impulses but can find no worthy goal upon which to settle them, and Ulysses, on the other, who has an irreproachably true, human goal but employs his native tendency for trickery in order to gain it—Conrad has need of them both, madness and trickery.

Although madness and trickery are ultimately unsatisfactory explanations of existence, they pervade Conrad's stories now. Whenever one or another of Conrad's hounded protagonists is led to create an image of promised achievement—Gaspar Ruiz, for instance, is forced to see himself as a glorious revolutionary leader—he comes to an unfortunate end, either because he loses his mental balance or because

he is exposed as an unscrupulous imposter. Conrad's attitude to these poor new heroes is uncertain. Toward Ruiz, for instance, he feels pitying condescension: like Kayerts, the huge fellow dies a mock-ritual death, which is a reminder that, revolutionary martyr or not, Ruiz is an errant, unwelcome creature in the eyes of the world. Gaspar's attachment to the strange woman who inspires his semihysterical deeds is not only his strength but his weakness as well. He is separated from her and thereby from the further exercise of his gigantic but troublesome strength. The canny professionals who cause his downfall understand perfectly the power of his imagined role, a form of madness that they deliberately stamp out. Or consider the even more pathetic case of the hero of "The Anarchist," another of the stories in *A Set of Six*. Circumstances force on him the role of anarchist, for no other reason than immediate convenience. His lawyer explains to him that he must be a socialist-anarchist, and he believes himself to be one. He is exiled for his alleged deeds and escapes from the penal colony, becoming more and more the person he has been told to become. He is a slave, an unbalanced *bovaryste*, without the leisure to examine the real basis of his existence—in short, a madman. Then there is the disguised police spy in the story told to the narrator by the charming X in "The Informer. The police informer tricks his way into an anarchist cell, falls in love with an "amateur" radical, is found out and punished for his pretense. All of these men, in one way or another, are captives of an unsuitable, uncongenial idea or image. Yet during their careers they have brief moments of success because their self-images "pay off."

It is, of course, the Count in "Il Conde" whose experience most plausibly illustrates the plight of these captives. Like Hervey and Kayerts, the Count is a devotee of ordered existence, leading a life of monotonous but safe regularity. His object in life, seen by Conrad with gentle pity, is simply to wait for the unavoidable (XVIII.273), which we assume to be death but which is actually a rude invasion of his genteel privacy. The relevance of the tale's epigraph—"vedi Napoli e poi morir"—is that the ruffian who accosts the Count is a microcosmic image of Naples. After seeing this unpleasant creature the Count can die. No one, not even a completely harmless man like the Count, is immune from what has now become every man's inescapable fate. One simply cannot lead one's life without unwarranted distractions. Feraud and D'Hubert in "The Duel"

themselves see no possibility of living life without unnatural excitement; the duel, a crystallization of life's latent and meaningless excitement, is their particular addiction. What they *must* have is what the Count cannot avoid. Thus the difference between the compulsive duelists and the Count is very slight. The individual's progress toward death, oblivion, truth, is hampered by images of "desired unrest," artifices, if you like, of individuality. Such images have the invaluable capacity of provoking a conclusion of some sort. They are willfully created ports at the end of a voyage of unmitigated darkness that Conrad and his heroes can no longer indefinitely sustain. This is another way of saying that Conrad had put Marlow behind him, Marlow with his inconclusive experiences and his sense of unspeakable horrors.

Having created a series of images of conclusive attainment, starting with hopeful ones in *The Mirror of the Sea* and moving through to disastrous ones in *A Set of Six*, Conrad now turned his attention to images of definite beginning. A landfall is only the end of a voyage; equally important is a departure. Once again Conrad first establishes his theme in a book of autobiography, this time *A Personal Record* (1909–1912). The core of the book is the birth of Conrad's career as a novelist, and the germ of this career may be found in the story of his great-uncle. Once an officer in Napoleon's army, the old gentleman can never forget the retreat from Russia when, near starvation, he and some comrades had made a meal off a Lithuanian dog. This is "the very first, say, realistic, story" Conrad says he ever heard (VI.32), and its similarity to Falk's experience is, I think, purposely emphatic. For if Falk's cannibalism antedates his appropriation of Hermann's niece, then the great-uncle's degrading repast is the antecedent "germ" of Conrad's literary career. We are then treated to an impressionistic study of this episode's effect upon the young Conrad's sensibility, how such a story became the ghostly master image of his inner world. Conrad's literary talents make this experience the start of his writing life; he reminds us that the advice he has always followed is not to "*gâter sa vie*" (VI.126). The danger of disturbing the order and regularity, the economy, of his writing life now emerges as the paramount thing, and the other reminiscences in *A Personal Record* are testimonials to the careful use to which the past, in the form of other "ghost" images, is put. There is Flaubert, a master artist whose spirit hovers over the budding writer; then there is the spirit of the

storyteller that is born into the body of the sailor; and finally there is the shade of the inexplicable, a mysterious truth that can only be acknowledged, not investigated. Writing, Conrad goes on to tell us, is not a means of self-expression but rather a constant fidelity to the emotions resulting from images called up from the deep well of the past. This surely is Conrad's public profession of his now fiercely personal vision of truth. Imperialism and egoism have been subsumed into a comfortable solipsism—there is no need to speak solely of one's "standing jump" from one country to the next, or from one life to the next. In addition, one can speak of the ghosts whose presence launches, then nourishes, the writer's inner life and also protects it from darkness. Only by confessing his life in this manner can a writer's world possess continuity and self-containment: departure *to* landfall, and departure *and* landfall.

Both volumes of autobiography close with rapt invocations to symbols of national sentiment. Ending *The Mirror* is a peroration on the English national spirit, an "elixir of memory." *A Personal Record* closes with a hail to the red ensign, that embodied ideal of purposive existence. The ensign reminds one of the English spirit, and that spirit returns us again to the ensign, one of its products. Rather than leading us back to an abstract truth, the "symbolic" image strategically leads us to still another image, keeping us within a tidy realm of circumscribed intelligibility. For Conrad has now established the sweep of his literary universe: he has question-begged away the process by which truth is corrupted into serviceable ideas by man's egoism. England and her closet of imagery have become his, shielding him from the heart of darkness. And it is precisely into this eminently British realm, inhabited with youthful discomposure by the narrator of "The Secret Sharer," that Conrad introduces Leggatt.

The challenge before the neophyte captain (whom I shall call X) is seen against an English background of "fair play" and innate racial superiority. His ideal conception of himself, he thinks, will have to be tried according to British tradition and the exigencies of Leggatt's difficult, but unmistakably British, presence. X's self-conscious effort to play his part is not only to keep Leggatt safe; he also wants to keep his activity within certain strategic restrictions. Together, the two young men threaten these restrictions by revealing their discontent with them. Leggatt shares X's unadmitted wish to escape from the national, social, and philosophic prison in which for better or for worse X had, like Conrad, willfully placed

himself. In order to attain goals that his prison does not allow, X must honestly ask himself the question: Am I able to realize my ideal of freedom by myself? The question is answered when X receives the man out of the dark, as a phosphorescent gleam of light emanating from the indifferent sea, and keeps him hidden on board as a temporary apostle of unrestricted freedom. X performs his risky concealment of the fugitive, but then goes no further. It is difficult to believe, as some critics have suggested, that X is a great deal better for his brief encounter with Leggatt. Leggatt simply increases X's confidence in the world of his previous choice. There is no probing of the idea because that idea "will not stand much looking into" (XIII.xiii). Once X has no more use for Leggatt, Leggatt returns to the sea.

Just as a storm gains its full identity in the heart of the exemplary sailor who resists its attack, so Leggatt's presence on the ship endows X with an image of his secret self. But the image is both covert and strangely shameful. On his own ship, in bondage to its limited world, alienated from his crew, X uses Leggatt to gain an even more determined hold on himself *as he is*. The test of his "ideal" view of himself returns X to the British world he knows best. In short, "The Secret Sharer" is a hortatory intellectual fable about why a tricky escape from so-called duty is not after all possible. The image of the double, and with it a plot that tests the hero, does not occasion the searching, profoundly serious self-examination that Marlow, say, undergoes in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad chose what was certainly the easier treatment of the theme, perhaps because—as I have already suggested—by the time of "The Secret Sharer" he had exhausted himself in his own struggles with darkness. By seeing an image of himself in another person, X can ascertain his own identity and exert a tamer, less exacting assault upon his surroundings. When Leggatt swims off to a new destiny, there is a significant absence of further description of X's future. A letter from Conrad to Galsworthy on May 5, 1905, is especially revealing on this point:

I own I expected good news from you. They are none the less welcome for that. I was more concerned than uneasy at your seediness, which I seemed to know so well. It was like beholding one's own weird acquaintance in a looking glass: my own well known mysterious, disturbing sensations reflected in your personality, which is as near the

inner me as anything not absolutely myself can be. I saw you depart from Naples with a feeling of confidence that no usual current mistrust of life could qualify. You were going off in good hands. And I returned tranquil as to your fate—to the tortures of my awful, overwhelming indolence—the very negation of tranquility—just as a cage is not a shelter, is the negation of a place of rest. (*LL*, II.18)

If X is later to suffer like this, from indolence, we can be sure that it will be because he has lived in a cage that looks like a shelter.

Significantly, two of the stories that follow “The Secret Sharer” take place in seemingly idyllic settings that are really prisons. The settings of “A Smile of Fortune” and “Freya of the Seven Isles” are also remarkably Wagnerian, as if Conrad had to substitute ready-made scaffoldings for what he could no longer convincingly create on his own. “A Smile of Fortune,” the story of a young English captain’s delay on a small Pacific island, his encounter with Alice Jacobus, a sensual creature, whose strange father has an equally strange brother, takes place largely in Alice’s beautiful garden. Alice’s long hair, the almost unconscious beguilements she practices on the innocent hero, the climactic kiss the hero gives the girl—all of these suggest the enactment of a Pacific *Parsifal*, with Alice playing Kundry to the hero’s Parsifal. But Alice’s garden is a haven on the enchanted island where the narrator spends his enforced leisure. The island first apepars to him as a magical apparition in the sea, promising rest and pleasure after a sixty-day passage on his ship (XIX.3). When he reaches the smiling harbor, he feels that he has at last escaped from the mercantile world in which he has been, like Kayerts and Carlier, a harried prisoner. But his meeting with the two Jacobus brothers brings back to him the commercial world he thought he had left behind: the brutal, unpleasant brother embodies that world’s obviously grasping side, and the more ingratiating but profit-seeking brother embodies its seductive mercenary rewards.

The pleasant Jacobus takes him to his house where, in her “cemetery of flowers” (XIX.53), Alice passes the time gazing blankly around her, langorously wrapped up in herself. The hero is fascinated by the girl and her garden, returning there day after day, first to stare at her, then fruitlessly to draw her out and discover the secret she so fixedly guards. And all the time the girl’s father tries to interest the captain in potatoes

because, he endlessly reminds the uninterested youth, there is a good profit to be had. Soon the young man realizes that he has become a prisoner of his sensual hallucinations, as if his idle imaginings of Alice's pleasures had now replaced the world of strict seafaring. His mind has sought escape from the idea of commerce in an idea of bliss. When he finally kisses Alice, he finds to his immense discouragement that the search for unknown pleasures through the senses is a mediocre and false one (XIX.79). If his original way of life had been a cage, Alice's garden now reveals itself as an empty dream, just another cage that looks like a shelter. Conrad makes him say that his questioning of the mercantile idea he has always served must be punished: he must pay the full price for that kiss (XIX.87). He does this by accepting the potatoes from Alice's father, ironically turning them to exorbitant profit. Although his commercial enterprises have succeeded, his future, he concedes to his mate, is endangered (XIX.88).

Alice, of course, is the hero's wrongly imagined secret sharer. But whereas Leggatt leaves X with a feeling of uncertain elation, Alice simply returns the captain to the unsatisfactory life he has always led. He knows now that there will be no other escape for him with things remaining as they are; his bitter knowledge reflects Conrad's own. A prisoner in a world that is a closed system of images, one that had been hopefully created to shield him from darkness, Conrad can only imagine other, even more restricted, worlds for his depressed energies.

Nevertheless he continued to try. In its first third, "Freya of the Seven Isles," his next tale, depicts another Wagnerian paradise, a more hopeful one. Freya Nelson and Jasper Allen, her fiancé, have created a world of real promise for themselves. On a high point in one of the Seven Isles in the glistening Pacific, Freya lives with her father, making of her life with the old man a preparation for a blissful future with Jasper. When they marry, the two young people will live aboard Jasper's graceful brig, the *Bonito*. Freya spends a good deal of the time during Jasper's absence playing Wagner on the piano, and we soon gather that the *Bonito* is the prospective bower of love for Jasper-Tristan and Freya-Isolde. On the boat they will lead their lives together, deliriously happy, shielding each other from the world's troubles, free from all land entanglements. Freya, however, has one rather gratuitous motive for delaying the marriage: she will not be married until she is twenty-one. Notice how the couple's

accession to an imagined final joy is predicated on the fulfillment of a totally abstract reason; by *abstract* (this is Conrad's word) we are to understand that Freya wants to start her married life on a wholly undifferentiated condition. It is not as if she will inherit money or change in any way when she reaches twenty-one. She will simply be twenty-one, and that is all.

Freya's condition is a transparent stratagem of Conrad's. He is allowing himself and his characters the maximum hope for success, although that hope is manifestly unreal. In any event, the plan is disrupted with the appearance of dark, evil Heemskirk, the Dutch commander of the region. He desires Freya with an unholy passion. Between her father's cowardly evasions, Jasper's foolhardy exploits, and Heemskirk's fiendish plans, Freya's happiness is destroyed. When the *Bonito* is sunk by Heemskirk in a fit of jealous rage, and when Jasper becomes a mad, shipwrecked destitute, Freya understands that she has been the victim of three men's absurdities. Touched by disaster, she becomes "a speck in the brilliant emptiness of space" (XIX.220). She dies of anemia while her father, cowardly fool that he is, blames it all on the unfortunate Jasper. The world's horror has claimed her, and Conrad, once again, has endowed an image of escape with disastrous results. Jasper, Freya, old Nelson, and Heemskirk all secretly share the same dream; their concerted efforts destroy everything.

To these reflections of Conrad's final, prewar unhappiness, "The Planter of Malata" adds a last word in despair. The planter, Renouard, leads a life of promise and imagination in his mind, as do many of his predecessors in Conrad's tales of this period. Yet his mind is not filled with images of escape and utopia; on the contrary, his state of mind functions in what Conrad calls "clear obscurity" (X.31, 35). Already we see that Conrad has not bothered to supply his hero with an image or idea of hope. To his friend, the editor, this fact of Renouard's character appears both absurd and unpleasantly genuine. When Renouard falls in love with Miss Moorsom, he feels his passion as a malady and not, as was the case with Jasper and Freya, as a sure guarantee of spiritual health. Constantly troubled by the restricting social forms that the Moorsoms set between him and the girl, Renouard views their presence balefully. Still, the force of the girl's physical charms has nothing of promise in it. He knows quite well that his composure has been trifled

with; his strange dream of her is a demonic explanation of the unhappiness she is causing him. He sees

his very own self, carrying a small bizarre lamp, reflected in a long mirror inside a room in an empty and unfurnished palace. In this startling image of himself he recognised somebody he had to follow—the frightened guide of his dream. He traversed endless galleries, no end of lofty halls, innumerable doors. He lost himself utterly—he found his way again. Room succeeded room. At last the lamp went out, and he stumbled against some object which, when he stooped for it, he found to be very cold and heavy to lift. The sickly white light of dawn showed him the head of a statue. Its marble hair was done in the bold lines of a helmet, on its lips the chisel had left a faint smile, and it resembled Miss Moorsom. While he was staring at it fixedly, the head began to grow light in his fingers, to diminish and crumble to pieces, and at last turned into a handful of dust, which was blown away by a puff of wind so chilly that he woke up with a desperate shiver and leaped head-long out of his bed-place. The day had really come. He sat down by the cabin table, and taking his head between his hands, did not stir for a very long time. (X.31–32)

She is a dead image that will not bring him anything. But he cannot stop himself from seeing her as the consummation of all his desires. Once, in a moment of intense passion, she seems to him to be Venus rising from the immensity of truth (X.36). Here, surely, is a recollection of Conrad's now familiar obsession with dark truth. At the very pinnacle of his desires Renouard is described as follows:

The very intensity of his desire, as if his soul were streaming after her through his eyes, defeated his object of keeping hold of her as long as possible with, at least, one of his senses. Her moving outlines dissolved into a misty coloured shimmer of a woman made of flame and shadows, crossing the threshold of his house. (X.64)

When he finally confesses his deception to her, he realizes that he has given her everything, his mind, his soul, even his tortured body. She refuses him because she is a creature of convention, while Renouard, a man burnt out with the fury of his own passion (X.77), has all along

believed that he has been in love with a shimmering, imageless shade of truth.

This, to my mind, is Conrad's most pessimistic story, and a masterpiece nonetheless. Each of the avenues toward salvation that Renouard takes leads him back to the dull impasse in Conrad's own mind. It is one thing for Conrad to admit that his egoistic, self-compromising adoption of the English idea (and with it all the false images of himself for the public eye) is an unpleasant cage. But to write story after story showing that escape from it is impossible—that is another, bleaker, realization. When, finally, the planter of Malata swims off into the sea seeking death and oblivion, Conrad totally collapses the noetic structure of experience he had so carefully built up: "A black cloud hung listlessly over the high rock on the middle hill; and under the mysterious silence of that shadow Malata lay mournful, with an air of anguish in the wild sunset, as if remembering the heart that was broken there" (X.86). Silence claims the world only because Conrad's English words could no longer cope either with truth or with its many deceiving ideas and images. Beauty, perhaps, and a sense of anguish remain, but these cannot be sustaining. With many of these dreary things in mind, now Conrad began thinking of a return to the sounds and sights of his earliest days. Only by recapturing this native inspiration could his vision and his pen be restored to healthy fluency. His trip to Poland and the outbreak of the war did, after all, occur at the right time. The result of this momentous period was the short novel *The Shadow Line*, and the following excerpt—from a February 1917 letter to Sidney Colvin—sets the scene for my next chapter:

Very dear of you to write so appreciatively about the little book [*The Shadow Line*]. But I don't agree that a local-knowledge man would be the right reviewer for it. The locality doesn't matter; and if it is the Gulf of Siam it's simply because the whole thing is exact autobiography. I always meant to do it, and on our return from Austria, when I had to write something, I discovered that this was what I could write in my then moral and intellectual condition; tho' even *that* cost me an effort which I remember with a shudder. To sit down and invent fairy tales was impossible then. It isn't very possible even now. I was writing that thing in Dec., 1914, and Jan. to March, 1915. The very speeches are (I won't say

authentic—they are that absolutely) I believe, verbally accurate. And this happened in March-April, 1887. Giles is a Capt. Patterson, a very well known person there. It's the only name I've changed. Mr. Burns's craziness being the pivot is perhaps a little accentuated. My last scene with Ran-some is only indicated. There are things, moments, that are not to be tossed to the public's incomprehension, for journalists to gloat over. No. It was not an experience to be exhibited "in the street."—I am sorry you have received an impression of horror. I tried to keep the mere horror out. It would have been easy to pile it on. You may believe me, *J'ai vécu tout cela*. However, I will tell you a little more about all that when we meet. Here I'll only say that experience is transposed into spiritual terms —in art a perfectly legitimate thing to do, as long as one preserves the exact truth enshrined therein. That's why I consented to this piece being published by itself. I did not like the idea of its being associated with fiction in a vol. of stories. And this is also the reason I've inscribed it to Borys—and the Others. (*LL*, II.182–183)

IX

The Shadow Line

CONRAD'S 1920 preface to *The Shadow Line* is in part an explanation of the constraints under which the tale was written. Because of the war, he writes there, the subject and the treatment were the only ones he "found it possible to attempt at the time" (XVII.ix). The date he gives for the composition of the tale, however, does not correspond with the fact of the matter, at least as it is set out in letters to Richard Curle and to his agent, Pinker, in 1915, the year he completed the tale.[1] The tale was not written during "the last three months of the year 1916"—as Conrad says it was in the preface—and it is interesting, though purely conjectural, to consider the possible reason for his inaccuracy about the date of writing.

The single most notable event in Conrad's life during the last few months of 1916 was a trip aboard a Royal Navy sailing ship, the H.M.S. *Ready*, undertaken by Conrad at the request of the Admiralty for the purposes of North Sea reconnaissance. The captain of the *Ready*, John G. Sutherland, has written a rather artless account of the trip with Conrad. What is particularly interesting in Sutherland's book is his description of Conrad's fascination, during his leisure moments on the ship, with Hartley Withers' *The War and Lombard Street*, an analysis of the Treasury's general moratorium on credit just before the outbreak of war in 1914.[2] Withers' object had been to establish a connection between the success of the moratorium—for all its frightening commercial implications of total bankruptcy—and England's fundamental strength and isolation. The concluding sentences of the book deserve quotation:

Summing up the effects of the war, as far as it has gone, on Lombard Street, we may confidently claim that they have given a striking proof of the resourcefulness and adaptability of the Bank of England, the prudent and successful courage of the Government in pledging the national credit in order to maintain our trade, and the masterful power of England's wealth. These things are worth noting, even at a time when most of our

attention is fixed on the bravery and skill of our fighting forces on sea and land.[3]

That the composition date of Conrad's last important sea tale should be confused with his last trip aboard a sailing vessel (during which he read Withers' book) is not at all impossible to understand. If, furthermore, we allow that the writing of the tale, like Conrad's trip on the *Ready* and the moratorium, was a significant event that took place during the war but at one remove from any actual fighting, *The Shadow Line's* theme (the way in which resolute strength faces threatened destruction) was something of an artistic meditation on the larger aspects of Withers' findings. The speculation is a large one of course but, even if there is no way of showing that Conrad actually had Withers' book in mind, *The Shadow Line is* written on a very similar theme. A sign of the tale's richness and universal validity, however, is that it does not merely deliver a self-congratulatory testimonial to man's indomitable spirit. Rather, one finds in it a recapitulation of Conrad's own spiritual experience in all its vitality, tempered, then grasped and presented anew, with hard-won insight.

The mode of the story, like so many of its predecessors', is reminiscent; Conrad's employment of the direct first-person narrator is faithful to his practice in other tales. There is an immediate unfolding present, which, for the first time, is always before the reader's eye. The story's opening sentence is a muted pronouncement—"only the young have such moments" (XVII.3)—but we are then guided to a specific point in time, the moment in the "twilight region between youth and maturity" (XVII.26). When writing the tale, Conrad was also between his own youth and his maturity as an artist. Only a few years before, Conrad had said that his age as an author was an extremely young fifteen years (VI.108). He had even described himself like this in *A Personal Record*, although the insights and capabilities of that transitional phase had culminated, as we have seen, in the grimly hopeless "The Planter of Malata." The "economical" portrait of himself skillfully painted by Conrad in his autobiographies had endured only just as long as the peace had in Europe. The world war, with its powerful effect on Conrad's spiritual life, placed him in the difficult position of having first to find himself aesthetically and spiritually because his literary youth had been cut short.

He alluded to this in the preface, defensively reminding his readers that "nobody can doubt that before the supreme trial of a whole generation I had an acute consciousness of the minute and insignificant character of my own obscure experience" (XVII.viii). In keeping with this sentiment, *The Shadow Line* is subtitled "A Confession," a label that places it in direct sequence with its predecessors. Most of them are versions of Conrad's personal experience, narrated, as I have said, in order to give the experience some kind of coherent meaning.

Although the tale does stand alone on its own considerable merits, two points need to be emphasized, I think, in order fully to appreciate its important relation to the rest of Conrad's work. First of all, it is evident that much in the tale is strikingly similar to many of the earlier works. Yet, if the preceding tales are recollections and interpretations of past experience, reworkings of it, *The Shadow Line* is a reworking of not only a single past experience, but also of the whole experience contained in the other works. Any attempt to locate his fiction within the matrix of Conrad's inner life must see *The Shadow Line* as the final, searching re-examination in a long series of self-dramatizations. Filling "all the world [with] its profundity and magnitude," the full meaning of his own past—Conrad wrote in his preface—now appeared to be a fitting subject for his unembarrassed, summarizing scrutiny.

The second point is that the bond between Conrad's seafaring days and the present, actual concerns of his writing career has undergone a complex and rich metamorphosis. Unlike James's parables of artistic life, whose explicit subject was the writing of fiction—"an index, perhaps, that the world in which he moved did not give him [James] as rich a field of real life as he craved on behalf of the novelist"[4]—Conrad's rich personal experience was easily adequate as the subject of his fiction. We find, moreover, that the surface fabric of *The Shadow Line* is like a controlled dialectic between Conrad's experience of the sea and his experience as a literary man. These two widely disparate experiences are brought together here, in an extraordinary synthesizing process that welds what Nathalie Sarraute has called "conversation" and "sub-conversation."[5] "Conversation" concerns the sea life, what is actually being told, the subject that is sustained in formal and orderly narrative. "Sub-conversation," on the other hand, quietly and allusively making itself felt, is the substance of Conrad's present concerns as a writer. Surely this

subtle interweaving of surface and undertone is an advance over Conrad's description of "Youth" as a narrative through which a "feeling" occasionally pokes its way. That feeling is now sufficiently mature and articulate, formed and molded over more than sixteen years of writing experience.

Conrad's return in his later career to the experiences he had already dealt with in so many tales and novels has been construed by some critics as a failure of artistic invention. But the point of *The Shadow Line*—and the reason for its special beauty and courage—is that it begins with precisely this admission of failure, at that moment in life when all the hopes of youth have been exhausted in the continual search for new truths. For a sailor, as for a writer, this failure is not easy to admit, and it brings one to the point where another candid and general observation is required. Youth, for both writer and sailor, "lives in advance of its days in all the beautiful continuity of hope" and is an enchanted garden; yet it has been so not because it is "a previously undiscovered country." Instead, "one knows well enough that all mankind had streamed that way. It is the charm of universal experience from which one expects an uncommon or personal sensation—a bit of one's own" (XVII.3). Although the exigencies of youth are common to all men, each individual still hopes to find in them something that is his alone.

This often defeated expectation, in retrospect, had been the disillusioning experience of the sailor and of the writer who, with moderate success in "Youth," had attempted to rescue and retain something of spiritual value (if only an image). Resignation to the inevitability of disillusionment, so briefly stated in *The Shadow Line*, had been the subject of "A Smile of Fortune," in which Alice's enchanted garden had categorically denied any but the most disenchanting of revelations. But it had once been possible, before youth's discomfiting approach to the mysterious shadow line, to gain a personal, fresh insight into the common experience of life. Recall that Conrad had written in *The Mirror of the Sea* of initiation, of a lasting image of nobly vanquished adversity, and of fidelity to that image. But now the young narrator-hero has caught up with himself, has become fully himself, ready to harmonize, as it were, the forward-falling shadow of his hopes with the actual substance of his being. The "line" to be confronted, he thinks, is that solid boundary between his wholly discrete self and the outer world,

between inner and outer reality. He alone, without the benefit of inspiring or comforting images, can do this.

But what do we mean when we speak of catching up with ourselves? Ideally, it would be when we reach that state of stoical resignation from which our hopes and fears no longer radiate outwards, seeking to probe the past or future for signs of our providence. It is a totally self-possessed tranquillity, traditionally the good fortune of old age, won through years of adversity. Oedipus' mood, for instance, during the moments he descends into the grove at Colonus. But the situation at the opening of *The Shadow Line* is not restful and does not allow for rest of that sort. It portrays, rather, that moment when the youthful visions of the narrator can no longer sustain him; unfortunately, the placidity of old age is also far beyond him. He cannot deny his past aspirations and their consequences because he finds them wanting; nor can he replace them with any new alternatives. He feels moments of exuberance, perhaps, though there is no real cause for it: the world can offer him very little that is new. The habitual momentum that forces him onward makes him restless to find new paths to explore, but the weight of experience constantly teaches him that he has discovered all there is.

This state of mind, not inappropriately, has elsewhere been made a subject of comedy: that deliciously disillusioning moment, for example, when Fabrice wants to fight at Waterloo but misses the entire affair, galloping around from one sound and sight to another, always anticipating, always moving, but never finding. And, Erich Auerbach says, it is the moment when Pantagruel's army, descending into the giant's mouth, discovers that "tout comme chez nous" but presses on nevertheless.[6] If one can imagine the narrator's initial exuberance removed from *The Shadow Line*, a moment remains that is similar to the opening of *Moby Dick*, in which young Ishmael is encountered as he suffers a dark November in his soul. More closely still, the opening of *The Shadow Line* reflects the first few lines of one of Baudelaire's "Spleen" poems:

> Je suis comme le roi d'un pays pluvieux,
> Riche, mais impuissant, jeune et pourtant très-vieux,
> Qui, de ses précepteurs méprisant les courbettes,
> S'ennuie avec ses chiens comme avec d'autres bêtes.[7]

These, then, are “the moments of boredom, of weariness, of dissatisfaction” that “are likely to come” and that may precipitate “rash moments” (XVII.4).

The narrator of *The Shadow Line* now can remain in the uncomfortable posture of despair, accepting its strictures, checkmated by its insurmountable difficulties, seduced by its hypnotic inactivity, or—and this is what he does—he can extricate himself by a summary gesture of will. To pull up one’s roots seems, as he notes, like an action of divorce, even of desertion (XVII.4); but we are to understand that his previous sphere of experience no longer claims him as it did the heroes of Conrad’s earlier work. Within the larger perspective that includes those earlier tales, the narrator’s leavetaking of the sea, by which he becomes instead a mere “potential passenger” on it (XVII.8), is an implied avoidance of the spiritual impasse to which Conrad’s antecedent stories had inevitably moved. That impasse had been an awareness that no further activity was required of the individual because his past and present had come together: he is one with himself, as Marlow at the end of *Heart of Darkness* is, during and because of the telling of his story, at one with his past and present. The exploration of a darkness so distant and mysterious had brought about a union between individuality and darkness. But the expense of this union was borne by individuality: it surrendered its integrity to the shades that had consumed the protecting, differentiative categories of the mind.

This union is never fully enacted in *The Shadow Line*. That the narrator avoids it is a function both of his courageous withholding of final consent to the darkness and of the equally courageous determination to move at any cost. He knows that the “rebellious discontent” (XVII.8) he continues to cherish will permit only a provisional equilibrium between his integrity and the world. If the men of the *Narcissus* feel restive after they have saved Wait and defied the sea, he proceeds further than they and leaps from what he realizes is a “comfortable branch” (XVII.5). He concedes, however, that the manner of his leap is “inconsequential” because the ennobling images of youth are gone: “glamour, flavour, interest, contentment—everything” (XVII.5). Yet time, apathetically moving forward, catches him as if it were a new trap for an unwary explorer. Accompanying his sense of the heedless progress of time is his sense of the sultry East, which in “Youth” had held out so much promise

and which now seems to stifle the narrator with its cloying inanity (XVII.8). The question Conrad must now answer is clear: where does one go from here?

The Shadow Line is the story of a young sailor who suddenly, half-capriciously decides to quit his ship and to change his customary way of life because he feels there is no new truth to be discovered in the life he has been living. He goes ashore “in an Eastern port,” his connection with his ship broken, and takes a room in the local Officers’ Sailors’ Home to spend three or four days awaiting a ship that will return him to England. The main burden of chapter one is to establish a continuum between the profound restlessness of the narrator’s spirit, warring with what it wishes to avoid, and the apparent irrelevance, meaninglessness, and inertia of his surroundings. What we have is a convincing dramatization of the narrator’s growing loneliness as he abrogates his ties with everything around him, not out of strength and self-conviction, but out of a dissatisfied incertitude. His attitude is that of a man who had hoped to win but, because he cannot, strategically dismisses everything as not worth the trouble. Paradoxically, the more irrelevant and trivial everything seems, the more also it seems to be right and certain. So Captain Giles, a resident of the sailors’ home and an expert in “intricate navigation,” who sometimes seems “guileless, dense, and commonplace” (XVII.18), is nevertheless a man whom the narrator cannot fail to respect, even though he will not acknowledge this respect. It is as if the young sailor is quite willing to grant Giles his adventurous, prestigious past, but will not see anything in Giles that can be of spiritual service to him now. Hamilton, the eternal hanger-on in the dark tomb of a sailors’ home, is made purposely ineffectual and, at the same time, “full of dignity for the station in life Providence had been pleased to place him in” (XVII.11).

There is, however, a marked discrepancy between Giles, so concerned with the narrator’s future, and Hamilton, who regards everyone as “a rank outsider” (XVII.11). The narrator’s progress in the tale is to move ever closer to Giles and farther away from Hamilton. At least Giles speaks and lives from “honest conviction” (XVII.12), even if at the beginning of the tale these convictions are incomprehensible to the narrator. Yet Giles has already lived his life nobly, and the narrator’s inarticulate awareness of this makes of Giles an ideal to which the young

sailor inadvertently aspires. Hamilton has gained his station in life without effort (again we can detect a corrupted version of Bradley's ethical imperative), in much the same way that Alvan Hervey had gained and occupied his. For Hamilton the young narrator can have no respect. Whereas Giles develops out of all the tried heroes of Conrad's earlier tales—men like Kurtz and Falk—in him their voracious imperialism is replaced by maturity and the sanity of deep spiritual vision. But perhaps the essential difference between Hamilton and Giles is the difference between what D. H. Lawrence has called the social being and the human being, between slave and freeman. Giles's desire to go on "keeping white" (XVII.14), free from the degradations of acquisitiveness, is in marked opposition to Hamilton's conniving desires to advance himself and to remain prominent. At first, however, the narrator perceives all of this only intellectually.

The motives of all the young sailor's actions, now that he has left the garden of youth, derive from his intellect, whose power enables him to see critically; emotionally he remains disengaged. He keeps, he says, the sailor's consciousness of freedom from land entanglements (XVII.19), and it is this aloofness that restricts him to criticism. His newly achieved state as a self-contained individual, with no place to go and nothing to do, places him in a similar situation to the young Marlow, anxiously searching for a job in the Congo company. The difference, of course, is that the narrator (whom I shall henceforth call N) has no dark places in his own soul for which to hanker. Is this not like Conrad, the weight of experience behind him, the war before him, unable to entertain images of the future or of himself in which he can wholly believe?

So there is a need for N to get a fresh grip on matters, to relocate himself intellectually and emotionally in a changed world. The mechanisms of action that had led Marlow into the dark are no longer viable—N is like Ulysses already come home to Penelope. He is able to see quite readily beneath the surface of things: able, that is, to see things either as surface or as hollowness. When Giles gives him advice, Giles's voice seems to be the voice of the "universal hollow conceit" (XVII.23). There is nothing in the words themselves to which N can manifestly attach his whole being. He can only reject, and this is surely a sign of the restless intellect: "never in [his] life [had he] felt more detached from all earthly goings on" (XVII.19). When Hamilton and the rascally steward

mutter their contempt for N in the anterooms of the sailors' home, he is able to banish them as idle conspirators who scheme for the job he has just left and for which he has no use. Always solicitous, Giles begins a long, indirect conversation with N, gradually introducing the youth to the realities around him. Giles, in fact, can quietly see the seeds of the future in the present; the young narrator can only see the dead, cast-off branches of the past in the present, without issue or interest. N's responses are characteristic: he finds everything inane and foolish.

By his persistence, however, Giles convinces the young man that his "personality was involved in that conversation" (XVII.21) between the whispering schemers. Fleeing the "menace of emptiness" (XVII.23) and spiritual aridity, N can acknowledge only abstractedly that he is being abused behind his back by Hamilton and the steward: he views their furtiveness quite clinically, but realizes nevertheless that their collusion is a solid reality that at least clears a place for itself in the present absurdity of things.

There is an interesting parallel between this situation in *The Shadow Line* and the situation in stories like "The Return," where Hervey sees in his wife a symbol by which he can order the world to his advantage. N's personality is an object to be rescued because he does not wish it sullied by ruthless collusion. He is also fascinated by a perverse scheme that disorders the musty conventionality of the Home, and he rushes up to intercept the steward and question him about the letter. (Giles has told N about Hamilton's scheme to hide a letter to N from the harbor office.) At the time he does not realize that he is indebted to Giles for suggesting action on this point; he believes that he is simply anxious to save himself from total ridicule. He says:

To this day I don't know what made me call after him: "I say! Wait a minute." Perhaps it was the sidelong glance he gave me; or possibly I was yet under the influence of Captain Giles' mysterious earnestness. Well, it was an impulse of some sort; an effect of that force somewhere within our lives which shapes them this way or that. For if these words had not escaped from my lips (my will had nothing to do with that) my existence would, to be sure, have been still a seaman's existence, but directed on now to me utterly inconceivable lines.

No. My will had nothing to do with it. (XVII.25)

Previously at a standstill, N has become a sort of analogue to Schopenhauer's artist, careless of the demands of the will, denying them in order to see things in an objective manner. N sees that his personality, brought to his attention by Giles's remark about the conversation, is not his own creation but the creation both of circumstances and of other people. Yet his illusion of himself goads him into viewing the matter as dependent upon his own action. Ironically, it is again Giles who reminds him that the letter "must be looked into" further (XVIII.27)—and are we not being asked, however allusively, to recall the "looking into" of ideas that starts the whole train of action in *Heart of Darkness?* Only here N's interest in the idea is, as he says, "purely ethical" (XVII.27); that is, an underhanded collusion between two suspected scoundrels has embroiled his personality. Ethically, it is now N's responsibility to rescue his good name.

As soon as Giles goes on to mention the word "command," N reacts interestingly:

All at once, as if a page of a book had been turned over disclosing a word which made plain all that had gone before, I perceived that this matter had also another than an ethical aspect.

And still I did not move. Captain Giles lost his patience a little. With an angry puff at his pipe he turned his back on my hesitation.

But it was not hesitation on my part. I had been, if I may express myself so, put out of gear mentally. But as soon as I had convinced myself that this stale, unprofitable world of my discontent contained such a thing as a command to be seized, I recovered my powers of locomotion. (XVII.28)

The question to be asked is whether N's sudden enlightenment originates in his discovery of the same disquieting "imperialism" of self and ideas that had driven the heroes of Conrad's earlier fiction to their unsettling experiences. Has he momentarily felt upon him the more-than-ethical urge to challenge the very basis of his existence, even though he is going on to become a ship's master, an imperialist serving a heartless code? Or is there some other reason for N's new perception?

The reason, I think, is a new one, which hinges upon N's inability to act normally because he has rejected his old way of life. Totally

uncommitted to anything in the world, on either land or sea, with little hope of discovering any new truth, an “abstract” situation is offered him: there is a job to be had as a ship’s captain. It will require from him what seems to be a minimal selfishness—his motive in accepting it is a restricted, unambiguous ethical desire to defeat the two men, rather than the selfish desire to assert himself, to foil rascality rather than to perpetuate his own power. The imagined successes of this venture as he sees them, attenuated by his uncertain maturity, are now far less grandiose. He knows that if he gets his command he must do his job with attention to the professional problems that will arise. Beyond that he can only assume that his faithfully executed command will allay his “stale, unprofitable discontent” and, at the same time, contribute to some larger pattern of meaningful order. At any rate the challenge, unheroic though it may seem, has to be met.

Analogously, at this very moment Conrad was selflessly putting behind him the wish for fame and public recognition, continuing his work as evidence of his desire to go on, to face as best he could the intolerable anarchy of life in war-torn Europe. Significantly, Captain Ellis, that benevolent Neptune, laments to N the absence of men who have courage and conscience enough “to catch hold” (XVII.31). Ellis’ words foreshadow Conrad’s eloquent letter to Walpole in 1918, in which Conrad was to point out that even though the call to responsibility is evaded by nations the individual can, and indeed must, accept it (*LL*, II.211).

Upon entering the harbor master’s office before his meeting with Ellis, N’s fears, renewed by memories of the world’s machine-like essence, shake his resolution. He remarks:

> It was there that my buoyancy abandoned me. The atmosphere of officialdom would kill anything that breathes the air of human endeavour, would extinguish hope and fear alike in the supremacy of paper and ink. I passed heavily under the curtain which the Malay coxswain of the harbour launch raised for me. There was nobody in the office except the clerks, writing in two industrious rows. But the head shipping-master hopped down from his elevation and hurried along on the thick mats to meet me in the broad central passage. (XVII.29)

These sentences echo Marlow’s disconcerting entrance into the Congo

Company's offices in that whited sepulchre of a city; N, however, immediately senses a community of interest between himself and the shipping master. That N can feel this community so easily is perhaps a reflection of Conrad's acquiescence to the dynastic continuity of English tradition, the tradition that had been more conventionally symbolized in *A Personal Record* by the red ensign. It is precisely that powerful dynasty of unquestioned tradition and duty that is to guide N through the remaining episodes of *The Shadow Line*.

For the first time in Conrad's short fiction, we are watching a hero who unquestioningly accepts the responsibilities of tradition and the implications of his nationality. Is this not a reflection of Conrad's new, tolerant acceptance of his second nationality, seen as a first step toward the general establishment of Europeanism? We recall, for example, that Marlow is supposed to replace the brutally and capriciously murdered Freselven, and it is all Marlow can do to keep the memory of his predecessor out of his mind. Furthermore, in having chosen to search out Kurtz as his duty, Marlow considers his journey into darkness as being "loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice" (XVI.141). Everything that Marlow does seems to have been prepared by malignant events in his past; there is little that is really original or open to initiative. All his actions are unpleasantly reminiscent of dreams, and he looks at things with a sense of *déjà-vu*. But nightmares and uncomfortable memories are, after 1915, no longer the keynote of Conrad's fiction. There is a personal call to command, accepted by N for the fresh "ethicality" of it, and for the clear-cut desire to make something of that command. If Kurtz and Fresleven were symbols for Marlow, if Wait was a symbol for the men of the *Narcissus*, so now N becomes aware of the fact that *he* is a symbol to Ellis, a pawn in the chain of duties (XVII.34). N is aware that he cannot always command everything, and aware that he must also be a symbol for others. In previous tales it had been the symbol that gradually revealed itself to be hollow and insufficient; now it is the turn of the controlling consciousness to accept this role for itself, chancing the hazards and seeking somehow to translate it into human meaning. N's early inkling of this truth launches us into the second part of the story.

Having entered the realm of abstract ethics by accepting the command, N now feels himself to be dealing with "dream-stuff": he

moves like a man in bonds and is detached from the forms and colors of the world (XVII.33). When he sees the steward again, he realizes that his imagination had been running in conventional channels, for he had envisaged his obtaining of a command as the end of a long process of promotions. Now, however, N has had a command thrust upon him by some power "higher than the prosaic agencies of the commercial world" (XVII.36). These are important observations, and, because they seem to have suggested "supernatural" goings-on to some critics, we had better pause and examine them here.

In the first place, N's sensation of dreaming is not unlike the sensations of Conrad's earlier heroes, who feel that they have left the world of facts and entered a peculiar world of irreality. Yet in those earlier stories, whenever the dream intrudes on life—recall, for instance, Kayerts and Carlier or Yanko Goorall—there has always been a recognizable element in it. The beset individual sees in the dream something that he has always feared, recognizing in it his own half-forgotten thoughts. Here N realizes that he *had* pictured a rather conventional pattern of promotion, one faithful to the limitations that society imposes upon our expectations. There is in this odd new dream, then, not only a strand of total unfamiliarity but also a sense of self-elevation. The call has come to N from outside, as if to refute his timid, unheroic certainty of slow success. He learns that he ought to have trusted himself to entertain seemingly impossible ideals, ideals that must replace the youthful imaginings that no longer have pertinence. The passage from youth to maturity is thus a passage from dreams that vaguely re-create youth's worst fears to dreams that, in their granting of one's noblest aspirations, end in realization. For at best, a nightmare of frightening, specific images can only be disproved; at worst, it is confirmed in actuality. But a dream of ideal self-fulfillment is at best gradually confirmed in actuality; at worst, it is frustrated by a failure in the individual's effort.

What makes this passage from bad dreams to idealizations especially cogent is its intimate application to Conrad's own life. Having seen all his dreams as a youthful novelist echoed in the situation of war-torn Europe (and this is amply demonstrated in his war letters), he can but resort to optimistic ideals rooted in his own acceptance of responsibility. Only this individual action can override the turmoil of intriguing nations locked in a struggle for power. Similarly, N's moral nature, which had at first recoiled

from the steward's suspected intrigues, sees that, even though the intrigue has been partly carried out, there is still something to be done. By going to the harbor office directly, he is given the command without any trouble; gradually it dawns on him, as it never did on any of Conrad's earlier heroes, that it is necessary to take the initiative rather than mysteriously to receive one. He will find out during the course of his difficult command that taking initiative means above all ridding his mind of all the encumbering, atrophied images that work to betray his basically egoistic evasions of truth. If the truth is dark and difficult, it must be submitted to responsibly, no matter how threatening and difficult its burdens. Giles alone perceives this; from the beginning "nothing that went on … could escape his great experience" (XVII.38).

In quickly accepting the command, N has taken a preliminary step forward; when, incorrigibly, he continues to believe that he is in a fairy tale, he is once again responding as a callow youth. This is understandable in human terms: new situations, new resolutions, inevitably overwhelm one. After the first flush of enthusiasm, one falls back upon what is more familiar. N, his abstract command, his ship—all of these, consistently enough, form yet another of the states of enchantment to which he had accustomed himself. This replaces the enchanted garden of youth, giving N, as he thinks of it with anxiety and impatience, "a sense of the intensity of existence as I have never felt before or since" (XVII.40). He discovers that it is on the sea that his vocation must be exercised: there, on its indifferent and beautiful surface, he must prove himself. The story now enters the phase that corresponds with the insight of "The Secret Sharer." But the insights of *Heart of Darkness* are in it too. For N can picture the surface of the course he is to follow—just as Marlow understands the flat surface of the map—although, unlike Marlow (but like the young captain of "The Secret Sharer"), N has a clear conception of what he has to do. At this point, *The Shadow Line* is concerned with three elements: the young captain and his command (an enchanted whole launched by a power higher than "prosaic agencies"), N's abstract knowledge of his course, and his abstract knowledge of duty. His past now seems to N like a broken piece of experience from which he has just parted, and, as he goes out to the ship that is to carry him to his command, he condescendingly acknowledges the existence of the annoying captain to be simply absurd

and unsympathetic. No longer a restless and vaguely troubled youth, N has a new sense of his own importance.

When N approaches his own ship, one's impression that the tale is recapitulating Conrad's experience is intensified, particularly as the narrative tone becomes more like a confession. The latter is Conrad's own subtitle for the tale, and it is no accident that what N has to confess is pertinent to N's creator. Pursuing a difficult vocation upon an ocean of incertitude pretty fairly describes both N's state and Conrad's many years before when, as a young writer, encountering the vastly demanding necessities of his profession, he had also accepted its doubts and risks. N admits that he is overjoyed by the ship's beauty, which drives off his suspicious fears as if they were a bad dream: "only that a dream leaves no shame behind it, and that I felt a momentary shame at my unworthy suspicions" (XVII.49). N's feeling of emptiness, which he had once allayed with childish fairy stories, also disappears. Instead, his whole being is filled with the ship, whose "design and complete finish will never look old … one of those rare creatures whose mere existence is enough to awaken an unselfish delight. One feels that it is good to be in the world in which she has her being" (XVII.49). Doubt in the possibility of a favorable destiny, so unfortunate and yet so human a reaction, dissolves before the good fortune that demonstrably exists and invites confidence. The satisfactory union between N and his ship is similar to that between a practicing artist and his art, surely the deepest reality and truth of Conrad's own experience.

Putting my foot on her deck for the first time, I received the feeling of deep physical satisfaction. Nothing could equal the fullness of that moment, the ideal completeness of that emotional experience which had come to me without the preliminary toil and disenchantments of an obscure career.

My rapid glance ran over her, enveloped, appropriated the form concreting the abstract sentiment of my command. A lot of details perceptible to a seaman struck my eye vividly in that instant. For the rest, I saw her disengaged from the material conditions of her being. The shore to which she was moored was as if it did not exist. What were to me all the countries of the globe? In all the parts of the world washed by navigable waters our relation to each other would be the same—and

more intimate than there are words to express in the language. Apart from that, every scene and episode would be a mere passing show. The very gang of yellow coolies busy about the main hatch was less substantial than the stuff dreams are made of. (XVII.50)

Ideal completeness, self-fulfillment, permanence—these are desirable things indeed, but what is astounding is the lyrical ease with which N feels he has attained them. Temporarily, the tale leaves the habitual world of Conrad's fiction and posits instead a deeply satisfying paradise that resembles the existence of Lena and Heyst on their secluded island. It is for N a world without economies, a world of expansion and happiness that seems already to have been rescued from any corruption that might have destroyed it. It occurs to N now that, since "abstract" forces of purity had so charmed him into happiness, perhaps the same had happened to others as well. His attempt to understand the beauty of things, preserved by tradition and historical continuity, makes him aware of his own powers—he looks into the mirror to see himself—and, at the same time, endows him with a knowledge of the historic background of naval command and tradition. Notice that historical reality is to be realized in terms of his personal responsibility to it—what N calls a "searching intimacy with your own self" (XVII.50)—because that reality has been created by a "traditional point of view on life" (XVII.53), based on common human experience. It is from his awareness of these two things, his self-conscious efforts to abide by tradition and his existence in the essentially simple and expansive world of a sailor, that N's problems arise. He finds that fidelity to tradition and the simple reality of a sailor's existence is not easy because, a complex person himself, the direct stresses of his job make him nervous and uncomfortable. The brief period of idealism ends almost as it began; it had been a vision that he must regain by coming to terms with the concrete reality of his *specific* situation. This begins to break in upon his sensibility as soon as he undertakes a specific course of action.

N's initial plan is simply to get underway, both physically and spiritually, to get a fresh grip on things now that his new circumstances have allowed him to do just that. His first obstacle is the story of his predecessor, the melancholy captain; the grip this story has on the entire ship is what is going to delay him and make it difficult for him to complete

his aims. The crew, still shocked by its first captain's inexplicable disappearance, has no inclination for work. What is unusual, and untypical of Conrad, is that N insistently reformulates his sense of captaincy as the continuation of a noble dynasty; it is this sense that enables him to brand the old captain a shameful betrayer of the tradition. We remember that in most of Conrad's earlier stories the sense of shame felt by a character was caused by an incident in his own past, an incident for which he felt himself directly responsible. N interprets the matter differently:

I was already the man in command. My sensations could not be like those of any other man on board. In that community I stood, like a king in his country, in a class all by myself. I mean an hereditary king, not a mere elected head of a state. I was brought there to rule by an agency as remote from the people and as inscrutable almost to them as the Grace of God.

And like a member of a dynasty, feeling a semi-mystical bond with the dead, I was profoundly shocked by my immediate predecessor.

That man had been in all essentials but his age just another man as myself. Yet the end of his life was a complete act of treason, the betrayal of a tradition which seemed to me as imperative as any guide on earth could be. It appeared that even at sea a man could become the victim of evil spirits. I felt on my face the breath of unknown powers that shape our destinies. (XVII.62)

One might make an analogy between N's sentiments and certain of Conrad's own during the war. The problems of his personal life had been mirrored in Europe's wartime struggles. Seeing one's problems writ large increases the need for action: a delay in attending to the large national problems, Conrad must have felt, would allow them to pass beyond reparation. N's feverish injunctions to himself and to his crew to get underway, to avoid "delay … [which was] like a tolling bell … [with] a deadly meaning" (XVII.66), spring from exactly the same sense of threatened disaster. Yet both Conrad and N are initially vague about whether "getting underway" is necessary because of considerations of personal safety or because it is a fulfillment of the abstract duties required by one's post, regardless of what that post might be, novelist,

sailor, doctor, or businessman. When N, however, understands that the imminent loss of a convention or idea of life transcending personality is vitally connected with his own existence, that this is one's salvation from the bankruptcy of life, he recognizes that he must uphold the idea even at the risk of his own life.

All of this, of course, may have been one of the lessons that the credit moratorium taught Conrad: England, too, in order to survive bankruptcy, had to endure hardship by risking her solid financial position in the world. In suspending all credit, England had compromised, even sacrificed, her economic life so that a larger goal—her continued national existence—might survive the European turmoil. The mysterious fits and distractions of the former captain's life (perhaps an obscure hint of the difficulties of Conrad's earlier life) become the manifest problems of N's present command: his ship, like Europe in Conrad's eyes, begins to act perversely. If, in coping with these problems, great personal suffering must be endured, N is willing to accept that price. A larger, an ideal, value must be preserved; for N, this is his conception of professional duty. For Conrad, it is perhaps the English idea with which, for better or for worse, he had allied himself. N must fight his way out to the sea—friendly, safe, pure—and there work out his large idea: "The sea was now the only remedy for all my troubles" (XVII.71). And, in Europeanism, Conrad sought the remedy for his troubles.

N's desire to find a setting favorable to the solution of his problems often defeats his attempts to make an idea endure. I had better say at once that N's knowledge of this sad fact introduces a streak of defeatism into *The Shadow Line*, but it is significantly presented and worked out. N is made to understand the real meaning of "being oneself," which is to cross the line of shadowy, unrealized ambitions into a sort of restricted, terrible reality (not particularly friendly or pure) that always falls short of those ambitions. So may Conrad have understood his situation as a beginner in circumstances created by others and for which he bears no immediate responsibility. His duty is to move himself and others forward, to do what he can about what he knows is ideally correct, with a minimum of cynical skepticism and a maximum of undismayed energy.

Each situation, when one is in it, may be like a nightmare, but there is at least the consolation of knowing that beyond the dream there is a final, realizable ideal—self-fulfillment in one's duty. We might find this a

disappointing and humbled return to the old uncompromising Bradleyanism of station and duties, but it is also a return that, in *The Shadow Line*, earns its way painfully and energetically through mishaps that promise only calamity. Each of N's predicaments looms like a prison on the brink of nothingness. What cannot be destroyed is N's inarticulate belief in a favoring chance that will be brought into play by accident or by will (he is not always sure which); this will free him.

The final prison, the dead calm on the open sea, forces N to face himself alone, a situation Conrad's tales never before presented as possible. N is neither Falk nor MacWhirr, who act the part of monopolists in order to preserve themselves without any ennobling reason; rather, he is a man willing to risk annihilation for the sake of an enduring idea.

It is, finally, N's abiding, beleaguered belief in a continuity for its own sake, and not for any personal benefit, that makes *The Shadow Line* Conrad's most personally affirmative story and, in a sense, his most human one. N accepts the continuity of tradition (to which he is but a small contributor) with his conscious reason; for consciousness itself has the power to note both the immediate and the ideal value of each action. That is, his consciousness entertains an ideal; when N performs an action, his consciousness measures it against the ideal. This is what Conrad meant, writing to Sidney Colvin on March 17, 1918, by the "'ideal' value" of each human gesture (*LL*, II.185). The rescue of consciousness itself had become paramount, and perhaps this was the result of Conrad's final absorption of Schopenhauer's humanistic denial of suicide.[8]

In chapter four, the ship has gone out on the sea and N's common sense is menaced, he says, because he is caught in a calm that seems to emanate from the island of Koh-Ring. This, no less, is the very island to which, at the end of "The Secret Sharer," Leggatt had fled. Now N is held to it by mysterious, taunting forces. Raving, Burns asserts that these forces are directed by the ghost of the dead captain. It is possible to interpret N's tortured detention within sight of the island as a mocking jest perpetrated by Conrad's memory of "The Secret Sharer." The island, which had been a source of hope for Leggatt and for his secret sharer, is just the opposite for N. This is another of Conrad's ways of showing his new sense of reality.

The important point is that N fears images—those illusory oases in the desert of hopelessness—for what they promise. The land, the sea, the sky, all of them are dark and all of them yield nothing to N's agonized searchings. Even the sun turns everything "into mere dark vapour" (XVII.77). Here Conrad is anxious to restrict N's consciousness to the actuality of his situation in both space and time. "It was a double fight," says N. "The adverse weather held us in front and the disease pressed on our rear" (XVII.85). He can not look forward to any sort of relief; nor can he look backward, figuratively, to the support of his crew behind him. As far as N is concerned, there is only an awful, stifling *now*.

Burns, however, is a gibbering relic from the past. He lives in it, tortured by the ugly, lingering memories of his thwarted ambition and the enigmatic man under whom he had served. He is, in other words, something of a *Narcissus* crew member who, in ousting the aberrant captain, had purged the ship of unhealthy delay but now pays the penalty for a rash action. Ransome, the young cook, is N's most useful ally; yet he too carries in his breast "a [secret] deadly enemy," his bad heart (XVII.68). Any other considerations N might have had for his own problems fade into near insignificance whenever he remembers the sword at whose point Ransome leads his life. N *must* keep his mind full of Ransome's plight and, because Burns is so insistent, Burns's as well. And the terrible calm continues.

Calms, N decides, are worse than violent storms because they provide no tangible threats to combat. The sum of forces—the crew's disease, Burns's belief in ghosts, Ransome's bad heart, the bad weather—imprisons N so completely in the present specific situation that his spirit is unable to breathe out a salutary image of rescue. He realizes that the battle must be waged on the bridge. Only there, in the closest possible contact with the instruments of his craft, can he save the *idea* of his craft (with all that it carries in deeper personal benefits).

It is the Gulf of Siam, so well known to Giles, into which the ship haplessly inches, and it is in the Gulf that the calm begins to take its most radical tolls. But N is able to force himself on:

Seizing eagerly upon the elation of the first command thrown into my lap, by the agency of Captain Giles, I had yet an uneasy feeling that such luck as this has got perhaps to be paid for in some way. I had held,

professionally, a review of my chances. I was competent enough for that. At least, I thought so. I had a general sense of my preparedness which only a man pursuing a calling he loves can know. That feeling seemed to me the most natural thing in the world. As natural as breathing. I imagined I could not have lived without it.

I don't know what I expected. Perhaps nothing else than that special intensity of existence which is the quintessence of youthful aspirations. Whatever I expected I did not expect to be beset by hurricanes. I knew better than that. In the Gulf of Siam there are no hurricanes. But neither did I expect to find myself bound hand and foot to the hopeless extent which was revealed to me as the days went on. (XVII.83)

The sea is now his last great enemy, the last reality into which he had boyishly projected his wish for soundness and purity of accomplishment. Perhaps N's exhausted hopefulness is a natural result of Conrad's wish in this most personal of his works to return to the scene of his earliest experiences, determined to make the sea yield up its secrets. But it simply becomes another prison, taking "on the polish of a steel plate in the calm" (XVII.87), truly a huge mirror of N's despair. When disease breaks loose, even more uncontrollably, there is one last thing that N believes will allow him "to get a fresh grip on things": the quinine in the medicine cabinet.

But even that is a useless hope, and N is left with nothing to hold on to —neither people, nor things, nor places, nor natural forces afford him any assistance. The doctor, his crew, and even Giles and Ransome take on in N's mind (as the *Narcissus* had in the narrator's eyes) the seemingly untouchable beauty of an absolute, the perfect degradation of pure unhealth. N's excessively "magical" imagination, with its tendency to find life absurd, has not equipped him adequately to meet the real truth of his helpless loneliness, always disastrous and a thousand times more difficult to accept than fairy tales. And if the quinine seems to have become salt, the transformation is accompanied by Burns's more perverse, more gratuitous gesture of absurdity: Burns cuts his beard off, for no apparent reason. As the ship becomes more and more of "a floating grave" (XVII.92), N realizes that Burns, for example, totally immersed in the world of his madness, is "a model of self-possession," privately adjusted, like Quixote, to his world's systematic nonlogic. N, with

only trouble to confront, trouble that is openly here and now, cannot possess himself in such a way: he feels the danger of going mad under the horrid illogic of the situation.

The tale takes on a more concentrated emotional and intellectual stress now, as N comes to feel two ideas with equal intensity. One is that the whole mechanism of existence, whose secret purpose he cannot understand, has lured him into a trap. The other is expressed in the following: “The person I could never forgive was myself. Nothing should ever be taken for granted. The seed of everlasting remorse was sown in my breast” (XVII.95). A sense of shame and a belief in the knitting machine exist simultaneously in N’s oppressed mind: he perceives a new relationship between the unfathomable *fact* of existence and the omnipresent *fact* of betrayal and shame, one in which responsibility is apportioned equally between the universe and the individual. Yet N also knows that he must work himself and his ship out and away from “this awful, this death-haunted command” (XVII.98) into which he has been “decoyed.” He must regain the abstract notion of the post he had originally accepted, lifting it from its present degrading morass by a concerted effort to keep life on board going. “Haunted by gruesome images,” his life “sustained on invincible anguish … [that] infernal stimulant” (XVII.105), N does not expect to succeed. The only voice he hears is his own: “at night especially it reverberated very lonely amongst the planes of the unstirring sails” (XVII.101). N convinces himself that his desire “‘to come out of it’ … was purely a personal need for intimate relief and not a call of egotism” (XVII.106).

At his most despondent point, N writes these lines in his diary:

There is something going on in the sky like a decomposition, like a corruption of the air, which remains as still as ever. After all, mere clouds, which may or may not hold wind or rain. Strange that it should trouble me so. I feel as if all my sins had found me out. But I suppose the trouble is that the ship is still lying motionless, not under command; and that I have nothing to do to keep my imagination from running wild amongst the disastrous images of the worst that may befall us. What’s going to happen? Probably nothing. Or anything. It may be a furious squall coming, butt-end foremost. And on deck there are five men with the vitality and strength of, say, two. We may have all our sails blown away.

Every stitch of canvas has been on her since we broke ground at the mouth of the Mei-nam, fifteen days ago … or fifteen centuries. It seems to me that all my life before that momentous day is infinitely remote, a fading memory of lighthearted youth, something on the other side of a shadow. Yes, sails may very well be blown away. And that would be like a death sentence on the men. We haven't strength enough on board to bend another suit; incredible thought, but it is true. Or we may even get dismasted. Ships have been dismasted in squalls simply because they weren't handled quick enough, and we have no power to whirl the yards around. It's like being bound hand and foot preparatory to having one's throat cut. And what appals me most of all is that I shrink from going on deck to face it. It's due to the ship, it's due to the men who are there on deck—some of them, ready to put out the last remnant of their strength at a word from me. And I am shrinking from it. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past. I always suspected that I might be no good. And here is proof positive, I am shirking it, I am no good. (XVII.106–107)

Threatened disintegration and the finality of darkness, the self-revelations of profound insecurity as "proof positive" of N's cowardice—all of these terrors tumble around him, exhausting any last possible refuge in egoism. We are witnessing also the decomposition of Conrad's old individuality—all his personal history of poses, insecurity, fear, and shame—and, with it, the decomposition of modern Europe. But, as Orwell once wrote, "you have talked so often of going to the dogs—and well, here are the dogs, and you have reached them, and you can stand it. It takes off a lot of anxiety."[9] Similarly, at the nadir of his fortunes, N remarks that "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" (XVII.108). The saving fact is that N's "seaman's instinct alone survived in [his] moral dissolution" (XVII.109). The analogy is the fact of England's fundamental moral strength, surviving both the credit moratorium (the dissolution of her credit structure) and the war. Standing alone, trusting in that imperishable instinct, N commands the men to action, proof positive—on the other side of the shadow line—of the pure strength still residing in the seaman's essential duty. The mainyard is squared.

The darkness endures—but so do the still-healthy members of the crew.

I moved forward too, outside of the circle of light, into the darkness that stood in front of me like a wall. In one stride I penetrated it. Such must have been the darkness before creation. It had closed behind me. I knew I was invisible to the man at the helm. Neither could I see anything. He was alone, I was alone, every man was alone where he stood. And every form was gone, too, spar, sail, fittings, rails; everything was blotted out in the dreadful smoothness of that absolute night. (XVII.112–113)

This is another recollection of the heart of darkness in which no form is distinguishable, in which, now as never before in Conrad's fiction, only men *in* the course of their duty, men totally abstracted into their duties, are consciously distinguishable. The storm breaks a few moments later and the darkness turns into water, something palpable that replaces the stretch of nothingness. Just as the darkness has yielded to allow water a passage through it, N expects an appearance of what it was that the darkness had been concealing at its center:

It was something big and alive. Not a dog—more like a sheep, rather. But there were no animals in the ship. How could an animal ….. It was an added and fantastic horror which I could not resist. The hair of my head stirred even as I picked myself up, awfully scared; not as a man is scared while his judgment, his reason still try to resist, but completely, boundlessly, and, as it were, innocently scared—like a little child.

I could see It—that Thing! The darkness, of which so much had just turned into water, had thinned down a little. There It was! But I did not hit upon the notion of Mr. Burns issuing out of the companion on all fours till he attempted to stand up, and even then the idea of a bear crossed my mind first. (XVII.115)

Burns's appearance in the disorienting grips of his madness is providential. For N, in his "innocent" fear, has exercised his essential humanity in saving Burns from death. N's act firmly dispels from his mind the encompassing darkness of anarchic and unsettling stillness (the beastly Thing) and replaces it with a strong, earned notion of his "station and its duties" in relation to his fellow man. An accomplished act of

humanity, in the performance of duty, is the “concrete universal” that Bradley had said was the basis of morality.[10] The ship now progresses on its voyage to port.

Upon the ship’s arrival, N stands with Ransome:

“I want to go and be quiet somewhere. Anywhere. The hospital will do.”

“But Ransome,” I said, “I hate the idea of parting with you.”

“I must go,” he broke in. “I have a right!” He gasped and a look of almost savage determination passed over his face. For an instant he was another being. And I saw under the worth and the comeliness of the man the humble reality of things. Life was a boon to him—this precarious hard life—and he was thoroughly alarmed about himself. (XVII.129)

The humble reality that N sees is that life is a blessing: any life, even the sick, hard one, is worth living. In saving Burns’s life, and indeed the crew’s, N has really done something, has performed a complete action. On the face of it, Ransome’s alarm about his heart is only a matter of physical health. To N, however, it serves to remind him of the spiritual compromise that each man must unashamedly make with his life. Each of us has a “secret enemy” lurking within: Ransome has his weak heart, N his shameful insecurity, Conrad his own tortured past. In the dispatching of one’s duties, the enemy is prevented from causing trouble only as long as one is single-mindedly *doing*. This too is life’s boon. With the relaxation of work comes the relaxation of one’s guard over the enemy. A man must therefore resort to a protection larger than himself: in Ransome’s case a hospital, in N’s time ashore with the venerable Giles, in Conrad’s a belief in Europeanism. “The truth is,” as Giles sagely warns N, “that one must not make too much of anything in life, good or bad” (XVII.131). If “good” is doing the tasks of “my station and its duties,” then “bad” is the lapse between the conscious exercises of one’s moral nature. Acceptance of these facts is, without giving undue importance to either, the only valid reality in an individual’s life. Giles also tells N of this acceptance: “a man should stand up to his bad luck, to his mistakes, to his conscience, and all that sort of thing. Why—what else would you have to fight against?” (XVII.131–132). To have something to stand up to (in Giles’s deceptively simple formulation) is to have *character*, the self-knowledge that accurately and morally adjudicates the claims upon one

of abstract precepts and of concrete experience, of good-and-bad and of confusing occurrences. And this character is what, at the end of *The Shadow Line*, N has.

The shadow line is the edge of darkness that one crosses over to create character. There is no guarantee that an individual ever really leaves darkness, or that his character will remain his own forever. But, having made the voyage out of darkness, out of an undifferentiated truth so troubling and so impossible to grasp whole, one can be certain of the results of that voyage. First of all, the darkness conceals no Thing, no machine of devilish cruelty. N's embrace of Burns is Conrad's realization that what we either fear or are attracted to is transformed, once we are near it, not into an image of horror, but into another individuality seeking just what we do. This embrace of individualities is the "radical innocence" of humanity and the beginning of character. Second, in order to traverse the darkness, one must put his confidence in a historical, hierarchic continuum of imperishable worth. Thus a ship's captaincy is a command within the order of British tradition, and British tradition derives (Conrad came to believe) from European tradition. But these are abstractions that must be filled by each individual's participation in them. In the performance of his duty, a man figures—to borrow from its context Auerbach's fecund word—history;[11] he fills it with his own experience, restores to history its saving efficacy for humanity, and rescues it for others.

Finally, the very briefness of one's voyage out of darkness permits the recollecting mind to concentrate upon the voyage's philosophic pattern: from the beginning in instinctual and civilized problems of duty, sympathy, and self-examination, through terrible calms of spiritual sterility, to a spiritual port of rest. Or, to use Heidegger's terminology, the voyage is a transition from concrete involvement (*existenziell*) to the universal human structure of this involvement (*existenzial*). To look back over the body of Conrad's fiction from the vantage point afforded by *The Shadow Line* is to see Conrad's evolving mastery of this passage. The darkness in which Marlow has so stark and personal an experience gives way first to the intellectual fabrications of "The Secret Sharer," then to the full harmony between experience and understanding gained in *The Shadow Line*. Character, one learns, provides no protective isolation, but is a living ideal constantly in need of renewal in experience: character is

attuned to the rhythm and stresses of life, a strongly marked counterpoint to a difficult *cantus firmus*.

Conrad's achievement is that he ordered the chaos of his existence into a highly patterned art that accurately reflected and controlled the realities with which it dealt. His experience, as both man and writer, is unique in English literature: no expatriation was as complete or as complex as his, no literary production as profoundly strange and creative. Because he, like so many of his characters, lived life at the extreme, he was more acutely conscious of community even if, most of the time, his was a negative or critical view. He dramatized the plight of man divorced from and yet still incriminated by the past, the man committed to but paralyzed by society. Driven back on his individuality, he accepted its burdens and its uncompromisingly pessimistic vision of reality. His unceasing efforts to clarify what was obscure, terrible, and frighteningly compelling within himself were complemented, in 1914, by a comparable effort on the European stage: the Western powers had finally turned their attention to what Conrad would have called the lurking enemy within. This public incarnation of his private struggles left him with the opportunity to memorialize his, and England's, energies; this he did in *The Shadow Line*, a tale that celebrated, intimately and significantly, a belated reconciliation and calm. After that, until his death in 1924, Conrad returned in his fiction to episodes out of his past, now to complete stories he had once begun, now to idealize, almost always to elegize. The self-tormented characters undergoing radical experiences whose chronicler he had been were replaced either by strong old men like Peyrol in *The Rover*, or troubled young people like Rita and George in *The Arrow of Gold*; young or old, Conrad allows them final redemption, like a benign administrator, a Kurtz turned saint, who transmutes suffering into stillness and peace. His own life after *The Shadow Line* brought him more fame but little real rest or security: it is a characteristic Conradian irony that he could not finally transmute all his own suffering into an earned peace.

Chronology, 1889–1924

1889 (*autumn) to April 1894*. At work on *Almayer's Folly* (published 1895).

1895. *September: An Outcast of the Islands* finished (published 1896).

1896. April and following: intermittent work on "The Rescuer."
April–May: "The Idiots" finished.
July 22: sends "An Outpost of Progress" to Edward Garnett.
August: "The Lagoon" finished.
November: returns to England; at work on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus*"

1897. January 19: *Nigger* finished. Preface written a few weeks later.
March: moves to Ivy Walls.
April 14: "Karain" finished. Resumes "The Rescuer."
September 27: "The Return" finished.
Near end of year: at work on "The Rescuer."

1898. March: still working on "The Rescuer."
June: "Youth" finished. *Lord Jim* begun.
Autumn: at work on "The Rescuer."
Mid-December: begins *Heart of Darkness*.

1899. First week in February: *Heart of Darkness* finished.
Later in February: resumes work on *Lord Jim*.

1900. March: *The Inheritors* finished.
July 13–14: *Lord Jim* finished.
Late July: in Bruges with the Fords. Shortly afterwards begins work on *Seraphina*.
September: begins work on "Typhoon."

1901. January: "Typhoon" finished.
May: "Falk" finished.
June 20: "Amy Foster" finished.
During rest of year—at work on *Romance*.

1902. January 16: "Tomorrow" finished.
Early spring: at work on "The End of the Tether."
June 24: first two installments of "Tether" burnt.
October: "Tether" finished. Conrad terminates agreement with Blackwood.
Near end of year: begins work on *Nostromo*.

1903. August: 42,000 words of *Nostromo* finished.
December: at work on sea sketches (later to become *The Mirror of the Sea*; the sketches occupied Conrad throughout 1903, 1904, and 1905).

1904. August 30: *Nostromo* finished.
October: "Henry James" and two more sea sketches finished. Early version of "Gaspar Ruiz."

1905. March: "Autocracy and War" finished. (He had begun writing it a few weeks earlier during a trip to Capri.)
June: *One Day More* (stage version of "Tomorrow") performed.
December: two more sea sketches and "Gaspar Ruiz" finished.

1906. Early part of year: *The Mirror of the Sea* finished. Begins work on *The Secret Agent*.
November: *Secret Agent* finished.

1907. April: "The Duel" finished. Begins work on *Chance*.
Autumn: abandons *Chance*. Begins work on "Razumov."

1908. April: "The Black Mate" finished.
During rest of year: at work on "Razumov" (*Under Western Eyes*) and *Personal Reminiscences (A Personal Record*).

1909. Late November and early December: "The Secret Sharer" finished.
June: *A Personal Record* finished (published in book form 1912).
December: *Under Western Eyes* finished.

1910. June: moves to Capel House.
December: "A Smile of Fortune," "Prince Roman," and "The Partner" finished.

1911. February: "Freya of the Seven Isles" finished.

1912. March: *Chance* finished.
December: "Because of the Dollars" and "The Planter of Malata" finished.

1914. End of June: *Victory* finished.
July 25: leaves England for Poland.
November 3: returns to England.

1915. Early in year: begins work on *The Shadow Line*.
November–December: *Shadow Line* finished.

1916. Early months: “The Warrior’s Soul” and “The Tale” finished.
November: trip on H.M.S. *Ready*.

1917. August: begins work on *The Arrow of Gold*.

1918. June 4: *Arrow* finished.
May 25: *The Rescue* finished. At work on Author’s Notes for collected edition.
October: moves into Oswalds.

1920. Author’s Notes finished.

1921. January: trip to Corsica. Later begins work on *Suspense*.
December 9: 5,500 words of a “short story” finished (*The Rover*).

1922. June: *The Rover* finished.

1923. April: trip to United States.
June: returns to England.

1924. August 3: Conrad’s death (at the age of sixty-six).

Letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham

8th Feb. 1899.

CHERISSIME AMI,

I am simply in the seventh heaven to find you like the “H. of D.” so far. You bless me indeed. Mind you don’t curse me by and bye for the very same thing. There are two more instalments in which the idea is so wrapped up in secondary notions that you,—even you!—may miss it. And also you must remember that I don’t start with an abstract notion. I start with definite images and as their rendering is true some little effect is produced. So far the note struck chimes in with your convictions,—*mais après?* There is an *après*. But I think that if you look a little into the episodes you will find in them the right intention, though I fear nothing that is practically effective.

Somme toute, c’est une bête d’histoire qui aurait pu être quelque chose de très bien si j’avais su l’écrire.

The thing on West. Gar. is excellent, excellent. I am most interested in your plans of work and travel. I don’t know in which most. *Nous allons causer de tout cela*.

As to the peace meeting. If you want me to come I want still more to hear you. But,—I am not a peace man, not a democrat (I don’t know what the word means really), and if I come, I shall go into the body of the hall. I want to hear you,—just as I want always to read you. I can’t be an accomplice after or before the fact to any sort of fraternity that includes the westerness [?] whom I so dislike. The platform! *Y pensez-vous? Il y aura des Russes. Impossible*! I cannot admit the idea of fraternity, not so much because I believe it impracticable, but because its propaganda (the only thing really tangible about it) tends to weaken the national sentiment, the preservation of which is my concern. When I was in Poland 5 years ago and managed to get in contact with the youth of the University in Warsaw I preached at them and abused them for their social democratic tendencies. *L’idée democratique est un tres beau phantome* [*sic*], and to

run after it may be fine sport, but I confess I do not see what evils it is destined to remedy. It confers distinction on Messieurs Jaurès, Liebknecht & Co. and your adhesion confers distinction upon it. International fraternity may be an object to strive for, and, in sober truth, since it has your support I will try to think it serious, but that illusion imposes by its size alone. *Franchement*, what would you think of an attempt to promote fraternity amongst people living in the same street, I don't even mention two neighboring streets? Two ends of the same street.

There is already as much fraternity as there can be,—and that's very little and that very little is no good. What does fraternity mean? Abnegation,—self-sacrifice means something. Fraternity means nothing unless the Cain-Abel business. That's your true fraternity. *Assez*.

L'homme est un animal méchant. Sa méchanceté doit être organisée. Le crime est une condition nécessaire de l'existence organisée, La société est essentiellement criminelle,—*ou elle n'existerait pas. C'est l'égoisme qui sauve tout*,—*absolument tout*,—*tout ce que nous abhorrons, tout ce que nous aimons. Et tout se tient. Voilà pourquoi je respecte les extrêmes anarchistes*,—"*Je souhaite l'extermination générale," Très bien. C'est juste et ce qui est plus, c'est clair. On fait des compromis avec des paroles. Ça n'en finit plus. C'est comme une forêt où personne ne connaît la route. On est perdu pendant que l'on crie: "Je suis sauvé.*"

Non. Il faut un principe défini. Si l'idée nationale apporte la souffrance et son service donne la mort, ça vaut toujours mieux que de servir les ombres d'une éloquence qui est morte, justement parce qu'elle n'a pas de corps. Croyez-moi si je vous dis que ces questions-là sont pour moi très sérieuses,—*beaucoup plus que pour Messieurs Jaurès, Liebknecht et de. Vous*,—*vous êtes essentiellement un frondeur. Cela vous est permis. Ce sont les nobles qui ont fait la Fronde, du reste. Moi, je regarde l'avenir du fond d'un passé très noir et je trouve que rien ne m'est permis hormis la fidélité à une cause absolument perdue, à une idée sans avenir*.

Aussi, souvent, je n'y pense pas. Tout disparaît. Il ne rest que la vérité,—*une ombre sinistre et fuyante dont il est impossible de fixer l'image. Je ne regrette rien*,—*je n'espère rien, car je m'aperçois que ni le regret ni l'espérance ne signifient rien à ma personnalité. C'est un*

égoisme rationnel et féroce que j'exerce envers moi-même. Je me repose là-dedans. Puis, la pensée revient. La vie recommence, les regrets, les souvenirs et un désespoir plus sombre que la nuit.

Je ne sais pas pourquoi je vous dis tout cela aujourd'hui. C'est que je ne veux pas que vous me croyiez indifférent. Je ne suis pas indifférent à ce qui vous intéresse. Seulement mon intérêt est ailleurs, ma pensée suit une autre route, mon coeur désire autre chose, mon âme souffre d'une autre espèce d'impuissance. Comprenez-vous? Vous qui dévouez votre enthousiasme et vos talents à la cause de l'humanité, vous comprendrez sans doute pourquoi je dois,—*j'ai besoin*,—*de garder ma pensée intacte comme dernier hommage de fidélité à une cause qui est perdue. C'est tout ce que je puis faire. J'ai jeté ma vie à tous les vents du ciel, mais j'ai gardé ma pensée. C'est peu de chose*,—*c'est tout, ce n'est rien*,—*c'est la vie même*.

Cette lettre est incohérente comme mon existence, mais la logique suprême y est pourtant,—*la logique qui mène à la folie. Mais les soucis de tous les jours nous font oublier la cruelle vérité, C'est heureux*.

Toujours à vous de coeur.

P.S. Jessie sends her kind regards and thanks for message about the story. It delights. I shall talk with Garnett about your work. He is a good fellow. Eye and ear? Eh? Not so bad. Only if I *could* write like you—if I *knew* all you know,—if I *believed* all you believe! If, if, if!

[Letter from G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1927), I, 268–270).]

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Notes

I. *The Claims of Individuality*

1. “Henry James to Joseph Conrad,” in *Twenty Letters to Joseph Conrad*, ed. G. Jean-Aubry (London, 1926).
2. Richard Curle, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad* (London, 1928), p. 25.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory* (New York, 1948), p. 48.
4. The sufferings and concerns of Conrad in the letters thus form the freely speculative and painful background of his fiction. A few sentences from Heidegger’s essay on “The Essence of Truth” illuminate this kind of connection. In what follows, “letting-be” is what I have called Conrad’s suffering, and “exposition” is the result of this in his personal idiom: “To let something be (*Seinlassen*) is in fact to have something to do with it (*sich einlassen auf*) … To let what-is *be* what it is means participating in something overt and its overtness, in which everything that ‘is’ takes up its position and which entails such overtness … ‘Letting-be,’ *i.e.* freedom, is in its own self ‘exposing’ (*aussetzend*) and ‘existent’ (*ek-sistent*).
“The nature of freedom, seen from the point of view of the nature of truth, now shows itself as an ‘exposition’ into the revealed nature of what-is.” Martin Heidegger, “The Essence of Truth” (trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick), in *Existence and Being* (Chicago, 1949), pp. 307–308.
5. R. L. Megroz, *A Talk with Joseph Conrad: A Criticism of His Mind and Method* (London, 1926), p. 54.
6. Johan Huizinga, “The Idea of History,” in *The Varieties of History*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York, 1956), p. 292.
7. Georg Lukacs, *Histoire et conscience de classe* (Paris, 1960). See also Lucien Goldmann, “Introduction aux prémiers écrits de Georges Lukacs,” *Les Temps modernes*, no. 195 (August 1962), pp. 254–2 80.
8. R. P. Blackmur, *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (New York, 1955), p. 123.
9. Bertrand Russell, *Portraits from Memory* (New York, 1956), p. 86. See also the insinuations of Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad* (Boston, 1924), pp. 3, *55*, 77, *etc.*
10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Drama of History* (New York, 1955), pp. 3–75.
11. Joseph Conrad, “The Congo Diary,” in *Last Essays* (Garden City, N.Y., 1926).
12. Albert Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 3–7.
13. George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York, 1922), p. 160.
14. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York, 1957), p. 78.

II. *Character and the Knitting Machine*

1. It is interesting to compare Conrad’s words with these from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York, 1954), p. 67: “for him who becomes solitary all distances, all measures change; all of those changes may take place suddenly and then … extraordinary imaginings and singular sensations arise that seem to grow beyond all bearing. But it is necessary that we experience this too. We must assume our existence as *broadly* as we in any way can; everything, even the unheard-of, must be possible in it. That is at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most extraordinary, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter” (letter of August 12, 1904).
2. Thomas Mann, *Stories of Three Decades* (New York, 1948), p. 383.

III. *The Claims of Fiction*

1. See, for example, Conrad’s essay, “Tales of the Sea” in *Notes on Life and Letters* (III.53–57).
2. John Henry Newman, “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrines,” in *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (London, 1872), pp. 345–346.
3. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* (London, 1955), p. 187.
4. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1951), Essay IV from *The Friend,* p. 495.
5. Leon Edel, *Literary Biography* (Toronto, 1957), p. 30.
6. James, quoted in *ibid*., pp. 31–32.

IV. *Worlds at War*

1. Henry James, “The New Novel,” in *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. Morris Roberts (New York, 1948), pp. 198–206.
2. Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” in *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, trans. Joan Rivière (New York, 1959), pp. 288–317.

V. *The New Order*

1. Karl Jaspers, *The European Spirit* (London, 1948), p. 37.
2. Curle, *Last Twelve Years of Conrad*, p. 79.
3. Paul Valéry, “La Crise de l’esprit,” in *Variété* (Paris, 1924), p. 20; translation mine.

VI. *The Past and the Present*

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Matte Laurids Brigge* (New York, 1964), p. 138.
2. *Ibid*.,, p. 68.
3. Lawrence’s letter is dated March 20, 1920. The passage I refer to runs as follows: “You know, publishing Conrad must be a rare pleasure. He’s absolutely the most haunting in

prose that ever was; I wish I knew how every paragraph he writes (do you notice they are all paragraphs: he seldom writes a single sentence?) goes on sounding in waves, like the note of a tenor bell, after it stops. It's not built on the rhythm of ordinary prose, but on something existing only in his head, *and as he never says what it is he wants to say, all his things end in a kind of hunger*, a suggestion of something he can't say or do or think" (italics mine). *The Letters of T*. E. *Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (London, 1938), pp. 301–302.

4. Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice* (Cleveland, 1963).
5. E. K. Brown, "James and Conrad," *Yale Review*, no. 35 (Winter 1946), p. 269.
6. "One might go further and say that in the [short] story what precedes the crisis becomes a consequence of the crisis—*this* being what happened, *that* must necessarily be what preceded it." O'Connor, p. 105.
7. Rilke, *Notebooks*, p. 67.
8. Letter to Fisher Unwin, July 1896, quoted in John Gordan, *Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), pp. 221–222.
9. Sartre, *The Emotions*, pp. 61–62.
10. Georg Lukacs, *La Signification présente de réalisme critique* (Paris, 1960, p. 138). Of Conrad, Lukacs writes as follows: "The conflicts he describes are of a purely moral kind, and only concern individuals as individuals; what is at stake is whether these individuals will be able to preserve their personality, or whether they will be able to accept its loss." (Translation mine.) 11. R. W. B. Lewis, "The Current of Conrad's *Victory*," in *Twelve Original Essays on Great English Novels*, ed. Charles Shapiro (Detroit, 1960), p. 205.
12. John Galsworthy, *Castles in Spain* (London, 1928), p. 91.
13. Thomas Mann, *Essays of Three Decades* (London, 1947), p. 409.
14. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (London, 1950), I, 24, 191–195, 345.
15. Of Ferdinand Brunetière's essays, Conrad most likely knew his "La Philosophie de Schopenhauer et les conséquences du pessimisme," in his *Essais sur la littérature contemporaine* (Paris, 1892).
16. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (London, 1927), pp. 160–162.
17. See, for example, Conrad's letter to Edmund Gosse (*LL*, II.14); also the epigraph to *The Shadow Line* and the title of *The Mirror of the Sea*.
18. Thomas Moser, *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 77, 124; Guerard, *Conrad*, pp. 96–99. One critic who treats "The Return" favorably is Tom Hopkinson, "The Short Stories," in *London Magazine Symposium, Joseph Conrad Today* (London, 1957), p. 36.
19. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London, 1960), p. 177.
20. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, pp. 64–65, *et passim*.
21. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Idea*, I, 190–211, 369–397.
22. Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism* (London, 1937), p. 50.

VII. *The Craft of the Present*

1. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris, 1944), p. 32 (translation mine).
2. Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1961), p. 993.
3. *Ibid*., p. 1045.
4. *Ibid*., p. 877.

VIII. *Truth, Idea, and Image*

1. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Idea*, I, 143–144, 224ff.
2. *Ibid*., pp. 251–253.
3. Paul Verlaine, *Poèmes choisis* (Paris, 1950), p. 214.
4. Georg Lukacs, *Existentialisme ou Marxisme?* (Paris, 1961), pp. 25–42.

IX. *The Shadow Line*

1. Mentioned by Jocelyn Baines in his *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (London, 1959), p. 488, n. 130, 131.
2. John G. Sutherland, *At Sea with Joseph Conrad* (London, 1922), p. 53.
3. Hartley Withers, *The War and Lombard Street* (London, 1917), p. 131.
4. John Holloway, "The Literary Scene," in *The Modern Age*, ed. Boris Ford (London, 1961), p. *55*.
5. Nathalie Sarraute, *The Age of Suspicion* (New York, 1963), pp. 75–117.
6. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, 1953), p. 270.
7. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 70.
8. Schopenhauer, *Studies in Pessimism*, p. 50.
9. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London, 1954), p. 21.
10. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, pp. 176–177. For an excellent short discussion of this notion, see Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900* (London, 1960), pp. 11–76.
11. See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 73–76. For a more detailed and expansive treatment of the theory, see Auerbach's "Figura," in his *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (New York, 1959), pp. 11–76.

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