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FROM SIGNS TO PROPOSITIONS: the Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory

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S.K.L.

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Introduction

Each of Conrad's full-length novels and most of his shorter stories are written around some variant of a common structural framework, a core of conceptual interrelations and interactions of character types. This is not to say that Conrad continually rewrote the same story, or that he failed to develop over the thirty years of his career as a novelist; on the contrary, working with the structural framework he set up, Conrad was constantly experimenting, rearranging the components of his fictional universe to achieve different effects, so that almost every one of his longer works is in some significant way an advance on its predecessor. The first purpose of the present study is to trace this development.

Certain motifs, character types, situations, and even particular characters obviously recur across several of Conrad's works. Thus, the treasure which Almayer seeks in *Almayer's Folly* reappears as Kurtz' ivory in *Heart of Darkness*, as the silver of the mine in *Nostromo*, as Allègre's fortune in *The Arrow of Gold*, and as Peyrol's hoard in *The Rover*; the guilty outcast Willems is duplicated in Jim and echoed in Razumov and Heyst; and the colourful figures of Schomberg, Ellis, Lingard and, of course, Marlow, are each present in more than one of Conrad's stories. Some of these repetitions are symptomatic of the underlying common pattern, but the pattern consists not simply in recurring characters and situations but rather in a set of conditions and associated motifs which constitute the Conradian fictional universe, the common set of laws, circumstances, and concepts under which Conrad's plots unfold.

The details of the pattern shift and change from one story to the next, although once seen it is recognizable in all but the least significant of Conrad's fictional works. Its chief constituents can be briefly outlined, bearing in mind that not all of these elements occur together in all of the stories, and that there are many highly significant variations which remain to be considered.

(*a*) In most of the novels there is a central figure whom we will call the *hero*, meaning simply that his career and actions are the focus of the plot.

(*b*) The action of the story is initiated by, and generally flows from, some specific and readily identifiable *exertion of will* on the hero's part, which may consist in some deed or (as in the later novels) in an attempt to avoid the commitment of decisive action.

(*c*) Because of his own shortcomings and of the difficulties inherent in his circumstances, the hero, unable to achieve his aims through his initial efforts, accepts a *compromise*, taking what amounts to a moral shortcut to his goal, frequently entailing some form of betrayal or dereliction of duty.

(*d*) The primary law of Conrad's universe is that the hero's compromised exertion of will contains or brings about its own negation; the very act in pursuit of a specific goal entails its own frustration. This, the fundamental constant of all Conrad's major fiction, is the *paradox*, frequently imaged in an overtly contradictory character or situation, that purposive action is self-nullifying.

(*e*) In most of the stories the hero's exertion of will and compromise take place in the context of a *dualism* of antagonistic forces. The hero is caught between two opposing worlds or parties, sometimes (as in the Malayan and African stories) objectified as conflicting racial cultures, sometimes (as in the political novels) represented in a dialect of conflicting ideologies. His actions stand in relation to this dualism, either as an expression of commitment to one side or the other or as an effort to maintain a neutral middle path against the encroachments of both. It is through the dualistic setting of Conrad's plots that the paradox finds expression.

(*f*) In some of the stories the means whereby the hero exerts his will is objectified, usually in the form of a quasi-talismanic *treasure*. This may be an actual hoard of gold, silver, or some other valuable commodity, such as the mine in *Nostromo*, Kurtz' ivory, or Peyrol's booty, or else a merely speculative fund, such as Lingard's treasure in *Almayer's Folly* or Heyst's secret store in *Victory*, the existence of which may be doubtful or even false.

(*g*) The goal of the hero's exertion of will varies from the dubious strivings of Almayer and Willems to the dignified public aims of Charles Gould. From the time of the political novels onwards, moreover, it becomes not so much an action as an attempt to avoid action and to maintain neutrality. Most of the later heroes, notably Heyst, Anthony, George, and Peyrol, are men whose exertion consists primarily in withdrawal from society, normally a withdrawal to the isolation of the sea. In the earlier stories, where the hero's strivings are directed towards some positive goal, there is frequently a female figure associated with this objective, union with whom therefore becomes part of the hero's purpose. In the later stories, however, where the hero's aim is withdrawal, the female figure generally appears not as a reinforcement of his intention but as a distraction from it. In either case we will call the female the *heroine* of the story, using the term in the plain and traditional sense to indicate the woman with whom the hero falls in love, although we shall have to stretch this sense to cover a few cases where the heroine is a daughter-figure to the hero and where the love between them is consequently not sexual. Heroines are variable features of the pattern; Conrad changed their rôle considerably in about 1910, and he not infrequently constructed stories from which they are wholly absent (e.g. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and *The Shadow-Line*).

(*h*) Where the heroine is present she is frequently opposed, in her tendency towards the hero, by a contrasting female who is representative of a hostile orthodoxy. In the earlier novels, where the heroine belongs to one of the two worlds of the dualism, this second woman is of the other world, representing the counteractive pull upon the hero. In the later novels, where the heroine is independent of the dualism, her opponent remains simply an extreme representative of conventional values and, as such, antagonistic to her interest in the hero. This second woman we call, for want of a better term, the *anti-heroine*. Such are Joanna in *An Outcast of the Islands*, Kurtz' fiancée in *Heart of Darkness*, and Therese in *The Arrow of Gold*.

(*i*) The anti-heroine usually opposes the hero's exertion of will, particularly in so far as this is a striving towards the world of the heroine, and she sometimes, as most obviously in the cases of Joanna Willems and Linda Viola, has a hand in his final catastrophe. The hero is more directly opposed, however, by another male character, who stands in much the same relation to him as does the heroine to the anti-heroine. This man, moreover, has some prior claim upon the heroine, either as a husband, established lover, or close male relative, and is often sexually jealous of the hero. Such men are Omar in *An Outcast of the Islands*, Cornelius in *Lord Jim*, and Mr Travers in *The Rescue*. This figure we will call, for obvious reasons, the hero's *rival*.

(*j*) The rival, like the anti-heroine, usually has a hand in the hero's ultimate failure, but the hero's chief antagonist in the

Conradian universe is a figure distinct from both of these, who comes in some way from the hero's past, from a world or party the hero has deserted, and who is frequently portrayed as a hostile *alter ego*, a man who reflects a number of the hero's essential qualities but who is none the less his opponent in some crucial matter. Such men are Brown in *Lord Jim*, Jones in *Victory*, and Blunt in *The Arrow of Gold*. Because he is generally the immediate cause of the hero's downfall, and because the downfall (except in the one or two cases where Conrad permits it to be averted) is presented as an inevitable reaction to the hero's initial exertion of will, we refer to this figure as the (agent of) *nemesis*.

These in brief are the chief elements which, with their interrelations as defined, make up the Conradian universe. The hero's exertion of will and compromise usually precipitate a dualistic conflict of interests in the paradoxical consequences of which he becomes enmeshed. He is often engaged at the same time in pursuit of a heroine. His interest in the heroine provokes a rival, who already has some claim upon her, although the hero is generally successful in pushing him aside. In many of the stories the union of hero and heroine is also resisted by an anti-heroine. Most important, however, is the fact that the hero's exertion is invariably countered by the figure of nemesis, who is prevented from causing the hero's destruction in only one or two of the stories.

The most prominent feature of the structure, at this high level of abstraction, is its tendency to counterbalance conflicting forces: hero and rival over the heroine, heroine and anti-heroine over the hero, and hero and nemesis, action and reaction, through the whole of the plot. In addition, most of the stories are woven across a clear conceptual dualism of implacably opposed interests. The overall feeling, although this naturally varies from one novel to the next, is one of heroic impotence, of human striving in a universe whose condition of finely balanced conflict is such that no lasting progress or achievement is possible.

The heart of the structure is the anomaly that purposive action is self-defeating. This we shall call the Conradian paradox, as it is the metaphysical core of most of his fiction. The paradoxical condition is brought into operation in almost every case by a recognizable moral ambivalence in the hero's initial exertion. His conduct, however disinterested or well-intentioned, usually involves or implies some form of avoidance or betrayal, for which, in the end, he suffers defeat. In order to pursue his original goal he is obliged to cut corners, to make a moral compromise, and in Conrad's strict and inflexible universe such an offence, however understandable and however harmless the outcome, demands retribution.

The present study aims initially to show how this pattern is present in most of Conrad's works, suggesting in each case that a view of the story in terms of the pattern provides a useful approach to a grasp of Conrad's purposes and craftsmanship. More important, by considering the stories chronologically in order of their composition, it aims to present a view of Conrad's development as a novelist in terms of certain progressive changes he made in successive handlings of the pattern. Thirdly, and as a result, it strives towards an overview of Conrad's fictional work, in which fundamental constants can be distinguished from salient developmental trends, and by means of which some understanding of Conrad's craft as an architect of complex fictional structures may be obtained.

Such goals raise certain procedural issues. Discussion of development presupposes a clear picture of Conrad's chronology, a picture which is in fact clouded by his tendency to work on more than one piece at a time and by the failure of his publication dates to reflect invariably the order of his compositions. Not only are there such notorious problems as *The Rescue* (begun in 1896 but not completed until 1919) and *The Black Mate* (which Conrad once said was his first story, although Jessie, his wife, asserted categorically that he wrote it in 1908), but we also know of several cases (that of *Chance*, for instance) where Conrad had ideas for specific stories many years before he began in earnest the work of writing them out. None the less a fairly definite chronology of the longer works (apart from *The Rescue*) can be obtained if we confine ourselves to composition dates, to the periods in which Conrad was working more or less continuously on material which emerged as particular novels. Most of the longer works then fall into a clear-cut sequence, occasionally overlapped by shorter stories written while the novels were in progress. A rough chronology of titles is provided in the Appendix.

A more serious procedural problem is raised in the objection that when dealing with structures or patterns in fiction one can, by means of a sufficient volume of persuasive explanation, show virtually any pattern to be present in almost any work. The undertaking, after all, is not remotely analogous to that of unpacking a miscellany of tangible objects from a box, at the end of which operation the items, discrete and palpable, may be produced for exhibition. How are we to know that the shapes we find in a story are genuinely aspects of its construction and not mere retinal shadows seen in the dark? The answer, short of a vast deal of theorizing, must be pragmatic: the pattern is there, in each case, to the extent to which it provides a coherent and unified approach to the story without bypassing features which, on a careful reading of the work, appear to be important, and without emphasizing features which are apparently trivial. Such an answer, which consists essentially in an appeal to the intelligent reader's intuition, leaves open the possibility that the pattern might be less present in some stories than in others. It also avoids any claim to exclusiveness; the validity of other patterns, as well as of other different critical approaches which may be of help towards an understanding of Conrad's work, is unchallenged by the present discussion.

The very nature of the undertaking excludes consideration of any work of which Conrad was not sole author. No mention is made, therefore, of his collaboration with F. M. Hueffer (Ford), or of the three novels which they jointly produced. Nor are Conrad's non-fictional writings discussed.

The edition of Conrad used is the 'Kent' edition published in twenty-six volumes by Doubleday of New York in 1926, which has the same pagination as the contemporary edition published by Dent in London. These, the popular collected editions of Conrad, are still those most commonly found in libraries in England and the United States. Page references are given parenthetically in the text.

Part I The Early Works

1 *Almayer's Folly*

Almayer's Folly, Conrad's first novel, bears a striking resemblance in the structure of its plot to the story told in the four operas of Wagner's *Ring*. Conrad, who knew Wagner's work, may well have been influenced by it when undertaking his first substantial work of fiction, although it would be a complicated matter to argue this in detail. It remains possible, for instance, that Wagner's actual influence on Conrad was at second hand, through the French *symbolistes*, or that similarities in their work arose from a common cast of thought, which found a degree of expression in the writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. The present purpose, however, is not to argue any historical connection between the writings of Conrad and Wagner, but rather to illustrate the first appearance of the Conradian pattern through comparison with a familiar work by another author. An outline of the *Ring* story is given in the following paragraphs.

Wotan, chief of the gods, awakes and sees that the fortress Valhalla, from which he plans to govern the world, has been constructed for him while he slept by the giants Fasolt and Fafner. In return for their labours Wotan has contracted to give them Freia, goddess of love and beauty and keeper of the golden apples of eternal life. The giants demand their payment, but Wotan cannot keep the bargain without depriving himself of youth and immortality. His counsellor, the crafty fire-spirit Loge, induces the giants to accept instead the Rheingold, the treasure stolen from the river-daughters by the dwarf Alberich who, having complied with the condition and foresworn love, has forged from the gold the Ring which bestows measureless power upon its wearer. Aided by Loge's trickery Wotan steals the treasure and the Ring from the dwarf and, after a personal struggle, delivers both to the giants in exchange for Freia's freedom. The giants at once dispute possession of the Ring, and Fafner, having slain his brother, takes the whole treasure for himself. The gods meanwhile enter Valhalla.