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Typhoon • Falk • The Shadow-Line

JOSEPH CONRAD

SELECTED STORIES

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'Typhoon', 'Falk' and *The Shadow-Line*

Joseph Conrad

Introduction and Notes by
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WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

This edition brings together 'Typhoon', 'Falk' and *The Shadow-Line* for several reasons. They all sympathetically portray seamen whose solidarity and endurance are tested by 'the sea and all its works' ('Falk', 81). Though the first two were composed in quick succession between October 1900 and May 1901, and the third in 1915, Conrad first conceived of the last story in February 1899, under the title ' "First Command" as a companion to "Equitable Division" (a story of a typhoon)' (**2** 168–9); and the experiences of the young captain who tells the story of Falk are extensively reworked in *The Shadow-Line*. Finally, all three manifest Conrad's mastery of 'the form that needs for its development 30,000 words or so' (**2** 441).[1] 'Typhoon', 'Falk' and *The Shadow-Line* are roughly 32,000, 30,000 and 44,000 words long, respectively. This medium-length narrative – variously called the 'nouvelle' by Henry James, the 'long-short story' by Ford Madox Ford (294), 'the short novel' (Guerard, 295) and, more generally, 'the novella' – was at the turn of the century the 'form' that Conrad liked 'best' (**2** 461).[2] Such terminological variety greatly vexes modern genre theorists but was of no concern to Conrad, who throughout the composition of these works invariably called them 'stories'.[3] None the less Conrad's letters (especially between 1898–1902) anticipate and share James's

1 **1/2/3/4/5** refer to the volume number of *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*.
2 As Shaw notes 'the English language has no equivalent to "nouvelle" or "novella" other than "novelette", which has acquired a disparaging connotation' (20). Whenever possible, as here, I use only the author's name to identify a title. For full details see the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.
3 See Good, Pasco and Pratt. Conrad, incidentally, rarely used the term novel, preferring 'tale' and 'story', and he did not distinguish in nomenclature between short fiction and novels (Fraser).

delight in 'the possible scope . . . and the possible neatness' (1 237) of 'the shapely nouvelle' (1 227).[4] Thus in a great letter, 31 May 1902, to William Blackwood, who had read the first 14,000 words of 'The End of the Tether' and felt that 'one can hardly say one has got into the story yet', Conrad wrote that his complaint: 'is in a measure correct but on a large view, beside the point. For . . . in the light of the final incident, the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into place – acquire its value and its significance. This is my method based on deliberate conviction' (2 417).

This form appeals to Conrad because it shares the intense end-directedness and patterning of the short story and depends 'upon the reader *looking back* upon my story as a whole' (2 441).[5] It can, therefore, as he said of 'Falk', be 'highly finished' (5 275): yet like the full-length novel, it also accommodates the construction of a series of 'episodes' which enable him to 'indicate the progress' (2 441) of his characters in time and space. Blackwood's criticism also solicited one of Conrad's most important explanations of his artistic aims:

> I am *modern*, and would rather recall Wagner . . . and Rodin . . . and Whistler . . . who . . . had to suffer for being 'new' . . . My work shall not be an utter failure because it has the solid basis of a definite intention – first; and next because it is not an endless analysis of affected sentiments but in its essence it is action . . . observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations . . . Action of human beings that will bleed to a prick, and are moving in a visible world. [2 418]

I stress Conrad's awareness of method, form and treatment because he was also aware that the subject of the sea itself would smack of 'the light holiday literature' that Jim devours in *Lord Jim*

4 James, Preface to vol. xv of the New York edition of his works (1908–9). *Nouvelle* was first used in the last third of the century in France, and for James it referred to any story between 16,000 and 45,000 words. This length was greatly favoured by the writers James and Conrad most admired, Turgenev, Flaubert and Maupassant. Both James and Conrad knew that this 'bantling' (bastard) form was difficult to place in the periodicals who operated 'the hard-and-fast rule of the "from six to eight thousand words" ' (James, 1227, 1228). Conrad's fondness for the form was encouraged by *Blackwood's Magazine*, which published 'Karain' (17,000 words) in one issue (November 1897), 'Heart of Darkness' (38,000) in three (February–April 1899) and 'The End of the Tether' (47,000) in five (July–December 1902).

5 For this reason, I urge readers who are unfamiliar with the stories to read them first and then return to my Introduction.

(5) and suggest that he was not to be taken seriously as a writer.[6] Thus, in his early essay on Captain Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper, 'Tales of the Sea' (1898), Conrad dissociates himself from the 'exuberant' and 'enthralling' naval novels of the former because for him the sea 'was not an element', but 'a stage, where was displayed an exhibition of valour, and of such achievement the world had never seen before' (*Notes on Life and Letters*, 54, 53). Conrad's sea-fiction, unlike that of his predecessors was not 'a book of adventures or travel with a plot rammed into it' (Reynolds, 163).[7] Rather, as in Cooper, 'the sea inter-penetrates with life: it is in a subtle way a factor in the problem of existence and . . . always in touch with the men, who, bound on errands of war or gain, traverse its immense solitudes' (55). This is so for Conrad, because 'Everything can be found at sea, according to the spirit of your quest – strife, peace, romance, naturalism of the most pronounced kind, ideals, boredom, disgust, inspiration' (*A Personal Record*, 109), and because 'events at sea' test his characters and 'show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the fibre of his stuff; . . . reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to others but to himself' (*Lord Jim*, 10). And 'that,' as Reynolds observes, 'is what Conrad does to the men in his books, be they seamen or landsmen' (167).

I

At the beginning of January 1900, Conrad, anticipating the completion of *Lord Jim*, planned 'to write 20,000 words' for *Blackwood's* and once again suggested 'First Command' and 'A Skittish Cargo' (conceived as 'Equitable Division' and to become 'Typhoon') as a pair (2 237). Conrad began 'Typhoon' in October, but, as the punning term skittish implies, he anticipated that it would be light and satirical. Then in November, in the same vein, he told his newly hired agent J. B. Pinker, 'This is my first attempt at treating a

6 Messenger is good on how Conrad, late in his career, did not want to be remembered as 'primarily a writer of "sea stuff" '. Behrman illustrates the ways the English were weaned on Victorian myths of the sea as the 'natural home of the Englishman' and 'the scene of our greatest triumphs and dangers' (28). 'Given the importance of the sea and navigation to island Britain, it is rather surprising,' as Tanner remarks, 'how few novelists of the sea have emerged here' (Introduction, xvii).

7 Reynolds was a close friend of Conrad's and a writer of sea-stories. His neglected essay is still one of the finest appreciations of Conrad and the sea.

subject jocularly' (2 304), and, echoing the spirit of the storm story, he wrote that 'the typhoon is still blowing', but lamented, 'I find it extremely difficult to express the simplest idea clearly' (2 307). Conrad finished the story in January 1901 hoping that *Blackwood's* would accept it. Pinker, however, looked to popular magazines of high circulation and poor quality and placed it in the *Pall Mall Gazette* who paid £100 for the serialisation.

The moment it appeared in hardback in *Typhoon and Other Stories* (1903), 'Typhoon' was praised by a reviewer as 'the most elaborate storm piece that one can recall in English literature' (Sherry, 1973, 146). Others hailed 'the most amazing description of the utter madness of the sea when tormented by a force almost as great as itself that we have ever read' (143), and 'the typhoon itself' was regarded 'as the most vital personality of the story' (153). The reviewer who praised its 'most simple manner' (143) anticipated two generations of critics who liked 'Typhoon' but who thought it to be 'relatively simple' (Guerard, 299) and 'one of Conrad's simplest tales' (Baines, 254).[8] Such appreciation damned with faint praise and sponsored a reluctance to engage either the qualities of Conrad's 'most amazing description' or the subtlety of its design. I begin, therefore, with an appreciation of two of my favourite passages in order to show the ways in which Conrad's 'descriptive detail' contributes to the 'value and significance' of the whole story:

> The *Nan-Shan* was being looted by the storm with a senseless, destructive fury: trysails torn out of the extra gaskets . . . weather-cloths burst, rails twisted, light-screens smashed – and two of the boats had gone already. They had gone unheard and unseen, melting . . . in the shock and smother of the wave. It was only later, when upon the white flash of another high sea hurling itself amidships, Jukes had a vision of two pairs of davits leaping black and empty out of the solid blackness, with one overhauled fall flying and an iron-bound block capering in the air, that he became aware of what had happened within about three yards of his back. [38]

As ever in 'Typhoon', this sequence attests to the exactitude, energy and virtuosity of Conrad's style. The particular parts of the sturdy 'full-powered steamship' (30) simultaneously 'speak for

8 The single dissenter, Frederick R. Karl, obtusely laments 'the lack of surprise either of word or structure' (1960, 141). The best essays on the story are by Birrel and Brown.

themselves with overwhelming precision' (15) as they are 'looted', 'burst', 'smashed' and 'twisted' by a gale which combines the senseless fury of a mob and the silent and awesome force of a mysterious power in the surprising, soft pressure of 'melted'. Similarly, the marvellous oxymoron of an 'iron-bound block capering' expresses both Jukes' wild sense of the antic power of the storm and the sheer brio of its composer.

Towards the end of Chapter 2, Captain MacWhirr prepares to combat the storm:

> He threw himself into the attitude of a lunging fencer, to reach after his oilskin coat; . . . Very grave, straddling his legs far apart, and stretching his neck, he started to tie deliberately the strings of his sou'-wester under his chin, with . . . all the movements of a woman putting on her bonnet before a glass, with a strained, listening attention, as though he expected every moment to hear the shout of his name in the confused clamour that had suddenly beset his ship . . . It was tumultuous and very loud – made up of the rush of the wind, the crashes of the sea, with that prolonged deep vibration of the air, like the roll of an immense and remote drum beating the charge of the gale.
>
> He stood for a moment in the light of the lamp, thick, clumsy, shapeless in his panoply of combat, vigilant and red-faced.
>
> 'There's a lot of weight in this,' he muttered.
>
> As soon as he attempted to open the door . . . he . . . found himself engaged with the wind in a sort of personal scuffle whose object was the shutting of that door. At the last moment a tongue of air scurried in and licked out the flame of the lamp.
>
> Ahead of the ship he perceived a great darkness lying upon a multitude of white flashes; on the starboard beam a few amazing stars drooped, dim and fitful, above an immense waste of broken seas, as if seen through a mad drift of smoke. [33–4]

'Typhoon' is jocular, and much of the rich comedy in the story is engendered by 'the hilarity of the active opposition between MacWhirr and Conrad' (Brown, 4), that is, between the literal man who 'expostulated against the use of images in speech' (26) and his creator who delights in the imaginative flights his hero's stolidity unleashes – flights that would irk him as surely as Jukes' use of simile to express his sense of the awful weather ('I feel exactly as if I had my head tied up in a woollen blanket' [25]). The title refers, therefore, both to the ferocious natural elements he confronts and to the circling, whirring storm of words and images that simultaneously

tease, engulf and render homage to his 'thick' figure. 'The shout of his name', 'the prolonged deep vibration of the air', 'the remote drum' and 'his panoply of combat' announce both 'the charge of the gale' and MacWhirr's knightly response to its call to arms. Moreover, as we shall see, MacWhirr's 'tongue' and 'voice' will bring order to 'the confused clamour' of the gale. The comedy of the passage, as in the story as a whole, depends upon swift changes of perception. Thus the image 'of a woman putting on her bonnet' is inappropriate to his gender, lack of vanity and to the grim situation he is about to face; but it reinforces his fastidious attention to detail that is stressed throughout the story. Again, his 'sort of personal scuffle' with the door precedes his defiance of an apocalyptic 'great darkness' that threatens to return the world to 'an immense waste of broken seas' from which humankind once emerged. In this respect, MacWhirr's father who has 'a gift for sly chaffing' figures the author who creates a narrator who happily banters with his creation but who, in marked contrast to his father and Jukes, refuses to dismiss him as either a 'half-witted person' (12) or, in the final words of the story, as 'a stupid man' (77).

Indeed, as Conrad carefully explains in his Author's Note (1919), MacWhirr 'with his literal mind and dauntless temperament' was the figure who enabled him after much meditation to illuminate 'the deeper significance' of the anecdote of the cargo of coolies trapped in the hold during a typhoon. MacWhirr provides 'a leading motive that would harmonise all these violent noises, and a point of view that would put all that elemental fury into its proper place' (6). Merely to state his motive – to face rather than to try and out-manoeuvre the typhoon – is, of course, to pose the question that sponsors such different responses among the characters in, and readers of, the story: is MacWhirr 'stupid'? Or, to put it in another way, how are we, finally, to appraise MacWhirr?

The narrator informs us that, 'With a temperament neither loquacious nor taciturn, he found very little occasion to talk . . . the past being to his mind done with, and the future not there yet, the more general actualities of the day required no comment – because facts can speak for themselves with overwhelming precision' (15). And the only sea facts that he can relate to are those he can either see or has experienced, namely 'every-day, eloquent facts, such as islands, sandbanks, reefs . . . tangled facts that nevertheless speak to a seaman in clear and definite language' (19). Such facts absorb him entirely; but they also ensure that, despite 'a conscious effort', he cannot understand 'the terminology' of 'the chapter on storms', because they

anticipate with their graphs ('advancing semi-circles . . . probable bearing of the centre') future conditions and 'things' he cannot imagine and has never encountered; and, therefore, he cannot bring them 'into a definite relation to himself' (31). Hence this man who 'had sailed over the surface of the oceans as some men go skimming over the years of existence to sink gently into a placid grave' makes the preposterous decision to face the typhoon and, unwittingly, ensures that both he and his reader are 'made to see all it [the ocean] may contain of perfidy, of violence, and of terror' (22).

MacWhirr's error has led good critics who are knowledgeable about the sea, such as Bonney and Foulke, to dismiss him 'as an unperceptive clod' (Bonney, 35) and, relatedly, to deride both his maxims about 'facing' the storm and his subsequent treatment of the coolies. Such critics appreciate that MacWhirr's mistake is a consequence of his literal mind, but they fail to realise that his lack of imagination is essential to his comic functions as a harmoniser of all the 'violent noises' that the story entertains and as a point of view that puts 'all the elemental fury' he heaps on himself 'into its proper place'. The central opposition in the story is between the 'overpowering concussion and rush of great waters' (36) and the 'few words' the typhoon wrings out of him (69). And every aspect of the story, such as the contrast between Jukes and MacWhirr, the narrator's commentary, the events, and the intensity and variety of the patterning, are designed to ensure that MacWhirr's 'few words' acquire extraordinary 'value and significance'.

Thus Jukes fears that 'his sight might be destroyed in the immense flurry of the elements' (36) and he is reduced to 'a revolt of misery and despair' until 'his wretched struggles . . . become somehow mixed up with a face, an oilskin coat, somebody's boots . . . and finally was himself caught in the firm clasp of a pair of stout arms. He returned the embrace closely round a thick solid body. He had found his captain' (37). The redemptive, spiritual echoes of Jukes' recognition are smartly tempered by the fleshly 'facts' of MacWhirr, which speak with power and 'overwhelming precision' to his terrified suppliant. The same comic mix of the sacred and the profane recurs in the narrator's famous testimony to the power of MacWhirr's 'voice':

> And again he [Jukes] heard that voice, forced and ringing feebly, but with a penetrating effect of quietness in the enormous discord of noises, as if sent out from some remote spot of peace beyond the black wastes of the gale; again he heard a man's

> voice – the frail and indomitable sound that can be made to carry an infinity of thought, resolution and purpose, that shall be pronouncing confident words on the last day, when heavens fall, and justice is done – again he heard it, and it was crying to him, as if from very, very far – 'All right.' [38]

'It is after all,' remarks Conrad wryly in *The Mirror of the Sea* (1905), 'the human voice that stamps the mark of human consciousness upon the character of a gale' (79); and, as 'Typhoon' superbly illustrates, that mark is registered in both humankind's love of images (as in the narrator's play with the 'black wastes of the gale' as a prefigurement of the end of time) and in the vernacular simplicity of MacWhirr's 'All right'. In Conrad's defiantly secular world, however, 'the still small voice' of God that Elijah hears after the wind and the earthquake (1 Kings 19) is echoed and supplanted and 'made to carry an infinity of thought' when MacWhirr finds his 'voice' and, against all the odds, reaffirms a human sense of order and 'puts all that elemental fury into its proper place'. Humankind grants 'the still small voice' of God the power to control the furious elements: MacWhirr's power is much humbler, but it bears witness to what Conrad in his essay 'Henry James' (1904) calls 'the artistic faculty, of which each one of us has a minute grain' (*Notes on Life and Letters*, 13–14), and it magnificently affirms 'the stubborn human presence' (Wegelin, 46).

MacWhirr's 'All right'[9] is the antithesis of Kurtz's withering final judgment, 'The horror! The horror!'[10] ('Heart of Darkness', 149). Moreover, in marked contrast to the latter who 'presented himself as a voice' and for whom only his 'gift of expression' 'carried with it the sense of real presence' (113), MacWhirr is a squat, burly presence who is presented by the narrator and encountered by Jukes as a 'voice' carrying 'resolution and purpose'. In fact, MacWhirr's voice, in a direct echo of Marlow's in 'Heart of Darkness', is a 'voice that would not be silenced' (44); and it resists 'the spell of the storm' that falls upon Jukes, because it is born out of this experience which, in ways the talk of his fellows cannot do, 'unsealed his lips'. And speaking out 'in solitude and in the pitch darkness of the cabin, as if addressing another being awakened within his breast', he says, 'I shouldn't like to lose her' (66). 'He was spared that annoyance' (69)

9 Reynolds notes that this was one of Conrad's favourite phrases 'in letters and conversation, where he can state his intuition without having to justify it' (168).
10 All quotations from 'Heart of Darkness' are from *Youth, a Narrative, and Two Other Stories*.

because, unlike the dismayed Jukes, who tries to 'outscream' the typhoon when he asks, 'Will she [the ship] live through this?' and then feels his cry merely 'added to the tempest waves of the air' (40), his captain's resisting voice is 'the dwarf sound, unconquered in the giant tumult' (41):

> 'She may!'
>
> It was a dull yell . . . like a ship battling against the waves of an ocean.
>
> 'Let's hope so!' it cried – small, lonely and unmoved, a stranger to the visions of hope or fear; and it flickered into disconnected words . . .
>
> 'Keep on hammering . . . builders . . . good men . . . And chance it . . . engines . . . Rout . . . good man.' [41]

Once again the literal MacWhirr functions as the antithesis of the visionary Kurtz. Thus, whereas the latter loses himself in 'the magic current of phrases' ('Heart of Darkness', 118) and kicks 'himself loose of the earth' (144) and of the works of humankind, MacWhirr is 'a stranger to visions of hope or fear'; and his 'broken shouts' are not essentially disconnected because, unlike Kurtz, he resolutely falls 'back upon' his 'own innate strength' and the 'capacity for faithfulness' ('Heart of Darkness', 116) exhibited by both his ship and the crew. Thus MacWhirr's speech, though broken by the gale ('Facing it – always facing it – that's the way to get through . . . That's enough for any man' [68]), is also wrung out by, and flung back at, it; and, therefore, it constitutes an unconscious 'moral value like the primitive acts of faith on which may be built . . . a rule of life' (2 354).

The moral value of MacWhirr's voice is reaffirmed in the second half of the story in his humane response to the desperate plight of the coolies whose howls and shrieks are linked throughout to the 'howls and shrieks' of the 'gale raging' (46). Jukes, initially, tries to evade 'the tone of deep concern' (44) in his captain's voice; but despite his heart's corruption 'by the storm' and his rebellion 'against the tyranny of training and command' (44), he descends into the 'regular little hell' of the hold, and though he 'had half a mind to scramble out again . . . the remembrance of Captain MacWhirr's voice made this impossible. His orders were to go and see' (50). After the coolies have been made secure, Jukes proudly tells his grateful captain of ' " . . . that infernal job. We did it. And it may not matter in the end." ' But to MacWhirr alone, it does matter: ' "Had to do what's fair, for all – they are only Chinamen. Give them the same chance with ourselves – hang it all. She isn't lost yet" ' (67).

'Typhoon' is unique in the Conrad canon, because it is the only story framed by letters written by the characters. This device, however, is a pure manifestation of Conrad's definition of his art as 'fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on changing lights giving varied effects of perspective' (*Life and Letters*, II, 317). The last chapter, especially, is remarkable because each letter by MacWhirr, Solomon Rout and, finally, by Jukes simultaneously describes the closing events of the story and either (re)interprets or provides fresh information on the events. And because the opinions in each letter spark reactions in their readers, all of which interact with and are monitored by the omniscient narrator, we are persuaded to collaborate with the author in the production of meaning, because we are obliged 'to look back' upon the story as a whole.

MacWhirr's letter groups and interweaves two audiences within the story, his family and his nosy steward who relays details to the cook. The heavy ellipses in the letter are faithful to Mrs MacWhirr's indifferent and perfunctory reading. Because 'the only secret of her life was her abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good' (19), she misinterprets the phrase 'see you and the children again . . . ' to indicate a routine anticipation 'of coming home' (71). The narrator pointedly corrects her dismal, frigid misconstruction: 'It did not occur to her to turn back overleaf to look. She would have found it recorded there that between 4 and 6 a.m. on December 25th, Captain MacWhirr did actually think that his ship could not possibly live another hour in such a sea, and that he would never see his wife and children again' (71).

The sudden revelation of the time and date persuades the reader 'to turn back' and to look again at the 'calm that lasted over twenty minutes' which MacWhirr had spent alone in the chart-room. In the small hours of Christmas Day, when children dream of presents (unless, perhaps, like the MacWhirr women they make a religion out of shopping) and when families gather to celebrate their own continuity and (perhaps) the birth of Christ, MacWhirr is 'made to see' the ocean's capacity for 'perfidy . . . and terror'; and, faced with 'the lowest' barometer 'reading he had ever seen', with 'the worst . . . to come', and endowed with a new respect for the books on storm strategy he had ignorantly disdained, he contemplates his own mortality. (The steward's amazement at his captain's feelings testify beautifully to the confidence he inspired in his crew.) MacWhirr's actions and reflections are a brilliant blend of routine habits and illuminating realisations. Thus we watch him move from 'the feeling

of dismay' induced by his scattered 'rulers . . . pencils . . . inkstand' (65) to his satisfaction that: 'If the ship had to go after all, then, at least, she wouldn't be going to the bottom with a lot of people in her fighting teeth and claw. That would have been odious. And in that feeling there was a humane intention and a vague sense of the fitness of things' (65). Now we can see why the story is set on Christmas Eve:[11] 'In this utterly un-Western, un-Christmas setting, one genuinely Christian value is affirmed – that men shall not be allowed to struggle like beasts for survival, but that they shall face their fate with charitable regard for one another as human beings' (Kolupke, 79).

Then, in a remarkable transition, more narrative attention is given to MacWhirr's obsessive concern 'to put back the matchbox in its corner of the shelf' (65) than to his realisation 'that perhaps he would never have occasion to use that box any more' (66). This brief focus on the self is, however, immediately supplanted by his concern for the ship, and in the blackness of the chart-room, during this 'awful pause', the storm 'penetrated the defences of the man and unsealed his lips': and in quick succession he says, ' "I shouldn't like to lose her" ', and after a vigorous towelling 'a murmur arose. "She may come out of it yet" ' (66). This sequence is one of the most daring and moving in the whole of Conrad's fiction, because MacWhirr neither sees the storm as a supernatural force stripping away his spirit and soul nor does he appeal on the day of his travail to the Christ who was born to save humankind from ultimate destruction. Rather, he is presented as a mere 'man' whose voice is at once involuntary and disembodied, at once unsealed by, and defiant of the gale. And unassisted by any theological faith and without any thoughts of self and home, he proceeds to face, to survive and to out-voice the storm 'in a primitive act of faith' which attests to humankind's capacity to prevail in a godless, indifferent universe.

The last chapter moves from the fragments of MacWhirr's neglected letter to Sol's which is eagerly read by his wife and transmitted to his ancient mother: 'That captain of the ship he is in – a rather simple man . . . has done something rather clever' (72). But, teasingly, Sol does not disclose the details. That task Conrad deliberately assigns to Jukes, who unwittingly undermines his own account when he rewrites the events and presents himself as full of 'light-hearted, indomitable resolution' (73) and as MacWhirr's

11 The narrator refers to 'the season of typhoons' (22), but Conrad must have known that they occur in the China seas from July to October.

intellectual and imaginative superior. His letter is an exercise in pure irony, not least because he 'reveals the secret truth of his pretences' and fails to match his creator's complex, sympathetic evaluation of his momentary funk, grit and good humour. (He is lucky that MacWhirr does not, like Falk's melancholic skipper, abandon his responsibility for his crew). Moreover, he inadvertently reveals his own run-of-the-mill racism and lack of judgement when he hastily arms the crew against an imagined revolt by those 'confounded Chinamen' (73) and then, finally, urges MacWhirr to ' "let us throw the whole lot of these dollars down to them and leave them to fight it out among themselves, while we get a rest" ' (75): a solution that would re-enact the descent into savagery that so disturbed MacWhirr's sense 'of the fitness of things' in the chart-room. Jukes, in an elegant irony, is also the unwitting contributor to one of the story's running jokes, namely 'Solomon says' (19). It originates in Mrs Rout who shares her creator's mirth with her 'trick of firing off Solomon's utterances . . . upon strangers, astonishing them easily by the unfamiliar text and the unexpectedly jocular vein of these quotations' (19); and Jukes, against the grain of his own narrative, verifies that MacWhirr's placidly astute 'Equitable Division' of the dollars among all the coolies, reserving the three remaining for 'the three most damaged . . . one to each' (77), rivals the wisdom of Solomon himself who, in his most famous case, found the true mother of the disputed child by offering to divide it equitably into two.

Unaware of the ironies he occasions, Jukes thinks he has the final word: ' "The skipper remarked to me the other day, 'There are things you find nothing about in books.' I think he got out of it very well for such a stupid man" ' (77). Jukes, clearly, misremembers and still does not know his captain. The reader's response, however, is more complex: on the one hand, we remember MacWhirr's obtuse rejection of the books on storm strategy, and on the other we are aware that this 'jocular' story revolves around the simple man, 'of literal mind and dauntless temperament', who – unloved at home, chaffed and derided by his own father and Jukes – none the less has reserves of sympathy and common sense that enable him to forge a humane morality that is responsive to, and inseparable from, the appalling, and testing circumstances that he solicited, faced and mastered.

II

Conrad first mentioned 'Falk' on 8 October 1900, as 'The [unnamed] other story and much more horrible [than 'Typhoon'] . . . I fancy I can do it in 5000 words' (2 295). Clearly, at this point he envisaged a mere anecdote about the taboo subject of cannibalism. On finishing 'Typhoon', in January 1901, Conrad began the story 'three times over' (5 92), completing it in late May. Such indecision is not surprising because in 'Falk: A Reminiscence' Conrad welds together two subjects that had always existed separately hitherto – first command and cannibalism.

The narrative of 'Falk: A Reminiscence' contains in fact (as perhaps the colon is designed to hint) two reminiscences; one of Falk by the 'more than fifty'-year-old captain, remembering, for the entertainment of a bunch of old salts, ' "an absurd episode in my life, now many years ago, when I got first the command of an iron barque, loading then in a certain Eastern seaport [Bangkok]" ' (82), and the other, long-delayed, *by* Falk to the captain, Hermann, and his niece of his 'misfortune' aboard the *Borgmester Dahl*: ' "Imagine to yourselves . . . that I have eaten man" ' (129). The captain's tale, as he insistently repeats, is absurd because in order to escape the miserable circumstances of his first command – when he followed a swindling, licentious captain and inherited a sick crew – he turns for relief to 'my friend Hermann' (82) and becomes entangled in Falk's 'extravagantly nonsensical' (125) courtship of the former's unnamed niece. Falk owns the only tugboat in the port and he wrongly views the young captain as the rival Hermann favours for the niece's hand. Driven entirely by the instinct of 'self-preservation' (117), after giving Hermann's ship precedence over the captain's, he then utterly refuses to tow the latter's barque across the sand-bar that blocks its route to the open sea. Falk acts like 'a natural force' (117) and is oblivious to the predicament of the self-conscious and immature young captain who fears that some of his enfeebled crew 'would end by dying on board if I couldn't get them out to sea soon' (110). Facing 'Horror, ruin and everlasting remorse', the captain thinks, 'I had fallen amongst a lot of unfriendly lunatics!' (111). Thus, both the potential disaster of the captain and the subsequent revelation of Falk's cannibalism are subsumed in the social comedy of the captain's exaggerated, self-mocking account of his relationship to Falk, the petty-bourgeois Hermann, and to the characters on shore who mistakenly presume, like the constable, that he is quarrelling 'with that tugboat skipper over some girl or other' (113). Then,

in an elegant reversal, the release of the captain and his barque becomes a mere 'episode' in 'Falk's attempt to get married' (Author's Note, 7) to the sumptuous niece and, thereby, escape his appalling isolation. Hence the fulcrum scene in this comedy of misunderstandings is the chance conversation with Falk in Schomberg's hotel (the exact mid-point of the whole narrative) when the captain learns that 'the excellent Hermann had been making use of me . . . holding me up to Falk in the light of a rival' (119); realises that Falk is not his 'enemy' but a man who has been misled by Hermann and traduced by Schomberg and who deserves respect and pity because he is incapable of duplicity and shares Adam's inability 'to live alone . . . ' (122); and agrees 'to stand by' him when he asks permission of Hermann to propose to the niece and to tell of why I have been unfortunate once' (123). Thinking 'that was not so bad as life goes' (124), the captain is, like the reader, surprised and 'enlightened' by Falk's account of his cannibalism, which disgusts the 'squeamish' Hermann, makes the silent niece weep and ensures that the captain gets 'his sickly crew into the sea air' (115) and that Falk wins a magnificent bride.

'Falk' has never been popular with the critics. They claim that its climax is too long postponed and that the captain's urbane humour is strained and limits the tale's expectations (Watts); that his focus on Falk is blurred (Baines, Johnson) and that, unlike Marlow (say) in 'Heart of Darkness', he learns nothing. Johnson also objects that the two subjects, of the captain's initiation into the duplicity and mendacity of Hermann and Schomberg, and Falk's appalling experiences do not hang together. All these positions are tenable, but they fail, I think, to appreciate the boldness of Conrad's conception of his subject and, inseparably, the ways in which his 'highly finished' (5 275), witty design depends upon his reader '*looking back* upon my story as a whole': and, then, if my students' responses are any guide, the rich black humour, submerged below the surface on a first read, never fails to delight and amaze.

Cannibalism was, of course, a taboo subject, because for his late Victorian audience (and even for readers today) to eat another human being entails a descent into savagery and (to quote Hermann) becoming a 'Beast!' (130).[12] And as Conrad wryly remarks in his

12 'Falk', like 'Heart of Darkness', is a tale of Darwinian atavism. Griffiths contains a full account of why 'cannibalism . . . for many Victorians . . . involved the suspension of the most basic moral codes, which had formed as man advanced' and, therefore, threatened the very bases of civilised society (167–8).