

Conrad's *Victory* Reconsidered

Greater Britain furnishes a convenient limbo for damaged characters and careers.

— J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*

Conrad was not very well understood in his time, and it is a mordant comment on the quality of the reading public that one of the great writers of the world found it extremely difficult to live by his pen during his prime (from 1901 to 1911). Even Virginia Woolf, in her obituary essay (1924), said:

Therefore, though we shall make expeditions into the later books and bring back wonderful trophies, large tracts of them will remain by most of us untrodden. It is the earlier books — *Youth*, *Lord Jim*, *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* — that we shall read in their entirety. For when the question is asked, what of Conrad will survive and where in the ranks of novelists we are to place him, these books, with their air of telling us something very old and perfectly true, which had lain hidden but is now revealed, will come to mind and make such questions and comparisons seem a little futile. Complete and still, very chaste and very beautiful, they rise in the memory as, on these hot summer nights, in their slow and stately way first one star comes out and then another.¹

It was F. R. Leavis, in his articles in *Scrutiny* (1941), who pioneered acutely discriminating criticism of Conrad's fiction. He argued that Conrad had written valuable tales with sea settings and that his greatness rested mainly on his later novels, *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes*, *Chance* and *Victory*.² Although I do not wholly endorse Leavis's analysis or regard it as complete in essentials, I am very much in agreement with his basic judgement of *Nostramo*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*. But is *Victory*, as Leavis says, "among those of Conrad's works which deserve to be current as representing his claim to classical standing"?³ Or, is a more recent minority view (held by critics like Albert J. Guerard and Douglas Hewitt) correct, is the novel "very badly written and very roughly imagined"?⁴

The "undeveloped" world of *Victory* is the same as that of *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, *Lord Jim* and *The Rescue*; it is like that of *Nostramo*. Axel Heyst, like Willems and Lord Jim, is virtually a protagonist. But, unlike in the case of Willems and Lord Jim, all those who play a

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1. Virginia Woolf, "Joseph Conrad" (August 1924): Leonard Woolf (ed.), *Collected Essays*, Virginia Woolf, London, 1966 ed., Vol. 1, pp. 307-8.
 2. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, London, 1962 ed., p. 247.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 230. Leavis' high opinion of *Victory* has not changed—Leavis, *Anna Karenina and other Essays*, London, 1967 ed., p. 95.
 4. Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist*, Massachusetts, 1962, p. 255; Douglas Hewitt, *Conrad: A Reassessment*, Cambridge, 1952, pp. 110-1. To G. S. Fraser, *Victory* seems "not much more than a first-rate melodrama"—Fraser, *The Modern Writer and his World*, London, 1964 ed., p. 88.

decisive role in his drama are Europeans — his father, Morrison, Lena and the desperadoes. The Malaysians are referred to as part of the background, but they never come on stage. Indeed, *Victory* is unique among the Malayan novels in this respect. The only “coloured” characters who appear as *dramatis personae* are the three Chinese immigrants.

Heyst’s character is strikingly dissimilar to all Conrad’s earlier Europeans in the Malay Archipelago. He scorns mankind.

Heyst was not conscious of either friends or of enemies. It was the very essence of his life to be a solitary achievement, accomplished not by hermit-like withdrawal with its silence and immobility, but by a system of restless wandering, by the detachment of an impermanent dweller amongst changing scenes. In this scheme he had perceived the means of passing through life without suffering and almost without a single care in the world—invulnerable because elusive.⁵

Thus when he goes to Samburan, he is not running away from life but coping with it in a peculiar way. His extreme scepticism, like that of Decoud in *Nostramo*, goes with rootlessness; and in this way, both of them bear affinities to Conrad’s own sensibility. Moreover, in the case of Heyst, to these is added isolation, another condition familiar to Conrad. Thus, he is particularly close to the author. True insight makes Conrad place Heyst in an “undeveloped” region; as J.A. Hobson puts it, “Greater Britain furnished a convenient limbo for damaged characters.”⁶ Heyst does not recover from the damage caused to his mind when young by the influence of his deeply unhappy, cynical father, and he comes to the East with his damaged mind.

A convincing impression of “white” colonial society in the tropics is created by the accumulation of a wealth of authentic features; there are the white suits, cork helmets and pipe-clayed white shoes of the Europeans; there is the apartheid in Schomberg’s hotel. But Heyst lives, not in this exclusive society of Sourabaya, but on a distant island without any company until he takes Lena there. A part of his drama takes place in Sourabaya, but most of it in Samburan. Conrad’s central concern in *Victory* is with Heyst’s affairs. Thus the success of the novel depends on his presentation of Heyst’s drama, not on his evocation of European society in Sourabaya.

The key to Heyst’s plight lies in these words of the anonymous narrator of the early phases of *Victory*:

...his detachment from the world was not complete. And incompleteness of any sort leads to trouble. (p. 23)

What essentially makes Heyst vulnerable is an humanity which has not been killed by his scepticism. This goes out to decent people in distress and makes him appreciate worthiness; it leads to ties with certain people. His first relationship is with Morrison. He pities the unbusinesslike trader and helps him financially. He is unable to resist participation in Morrison’s activities

5. Conrad, *Victory*, London, 1954 ed., p. 72; all later quotations from the novel are from this edition and their page-numbers are noted in my text.

6. J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*. London, 1938 ed., p. 51.

and even becomes "the manager on the spot of the Tropical Belt Coal Company, with offices in London and Amsterdam" (p. 13). His humanity extends to "undeveloped" countries:

We doubted whether he had any visions of wealth — for himself, at any rate. What he seemed mostly concerned for was the "stride forward," as he expressed it, in the general organisation of the universe, apparently. He was heard by more than a hundred persons in the islands talking of a "great stride forward for these regions." (p. 3)

He is idealistic in a conventionally Victorian optimistic way, but his motives win our respect; they are the reverse of Almayer's and Willems's greed. His involvements meet with disaster: Morrison dies before long on a visit to England and the Tropical Belt Coal Company goes into liquidation soon. Heyst detaches himself from "facts" again, but these setbacks leave their mark: he feels "a sort of shame before his own betrayed nature"; he suffers absurdly from "remorse" over Morrison's death and from a new "sense of loneliness" (pp. 51, 52) His appreciative kindness remains: he confesses to Davidson, "I am touched by your humanity", because he "understood in a proper sense the little *Sissie's* periodical appearance in sight of his hermitage" after his reversals (p 25).

These episodes, indeed all episodes of the first part of the novel, are rendered efficiently. Heyst comes alive dramatically as a complete and developing character. But our interest flickers when his relationship with Lena occupies the centre of the stage. This is the first time that Conrad is presenting a relationship between a "white" man and a "white" woman in an "undeveloped" country. It brings about the more important developments in Heyst and, indeed, forms the body of the drama. His humanity makes him pity Lena, and she is glad to be rescued from Zangiaco's orchestra. Their feelings for each other at the beginning are very romantic and this is plausible given their respective circumstances: though thirty-five years old, Heyst has not as yet become friendly with any woman and Lena appeals to him; Lena has suffered from miseries since childhood; Heyst is her rescuer and he is a distinguished person. Consider one of the interesting scenes, the scene in Heyst's house in Samburan just before Wang announces the arrival of the desperadoes:

"Tired, are you! It's my fault, taking you up so high and keeping you out so long. Such a windless day, too!"

She watched his concern, her pose languid, her eyes raised to him, but as unreasonable as ever. He avoided looking into them for that very reason. He forgot himself in the contemplation of those passive arms, of these defenceless lips, and—yes one had to go back to them—of these wide open eyes. Something wild in their grey, stare made him think of sea-birds in the cold murkiness of high latitudes. He started when she spoke, all the charm of physical intimacy revealed suddenly in that voice.

"You should try to love me!" she said.

He had a movement of astonishment.

"Try!" he muttered. "But it seems to me—" He broke off, saying to himself that if he loved her, he had never told her so in so many words. Simple words! They died on his lips. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

She lowered her eyelids and turned her head a little.

"I have done nothing," she said in a low voice. "It's you who have been good, helpful, and tender to me. Perhaps you love me for that—just for that; or perhaps you love me for company, and because—well! But sometimes it seems to me that you can never love me for myself, only for myself, as people do love each other when it is to be for ever." Her head drooped. "For ever," she breathed out again; then, still more faintly, she added an entreating: "Do try!"

These last words went straight to his heart—the sound of them more than the sense. He did not know what to say, either from want of practice in dealing with women, or simply from his innate honesty of thought. All his defences were broken now. Life had him fairly by the throat. But he managed a smile, though she was not looking at him; yes, he did manage it—the well-known Heyst smile of playful courtesy, so familiar to all sorts and conditions of men in the islands.

"My dear Lena," he said, "it looks as if you were trying to pick a very unnecessary quarrel with me—of all people!"

She made no movement. With his elbows spread out, he was twisting the ends of his long moustaches, very masculine and perplexed, enveloped in the atmosphere of femininity as in a cloud, suspecting pitfalls, and as if afraid to move.

"I must admit though," he added, "that there is no one else; and I suppose a certain amount of quarrelling is necessary for existence in this world."

That girl, seated in her chair in graceful quietude, was to him like a script in an unknown language, or even more simply mysterious: like any writing to the illiterate. (pp. 176-7)

The attachment of Heyst and Lena as well as their want of complete fulfilment are conveyed with dramatic and descriptive power. Heyst's kind of embarrassment, introversion and impercipient are indicated by his movements such as "twisting the ends of his long moustaches", his "smile of playful courtesy", his urbane remonstrance and the final rather platitudinous rationalization which is self-consoling, peace-making and also evades the real problem. The sophistication of his speech fits the educated aristocrat. Now turn to Lena. Douglas Hewitt argues that her speech is "literary" that Conrad "can never catch the note of the uneducated" and that this is a major flaw in *Victory* because "it is essential for the effect of the book that we should see Lena as coming from a background of lodgings off the Kingsland Road, as having the naïveté of the uneducated waif, and yet as bringing love and faith to the intellectual and highly educated Heyst."⁷ Of course, her way of speaking never resembles that of characters like Eliza Doolittle before her training under Professor Higgins, but it seems to me that Conrad usually gives her a simple living idiom which suits her and "the effect of the book". She is an uneducated working-class girl, but she has experience

7. Douglas Hewitt, op. cit., pp. 109-10.

in higher social strata. Moreover, this does not serve to introduce her into Heyst's world, though they are not as extremely different as they would have been if she had remained stuck to her origins. The image of the "sea-birds" illuminates her present state and is in keeping with her hard life as a wanderer.

Still, Conrad's presentation of the Heyst-Lena relationship as it develops is vitiated by a conventional romanticism. The little use to which Conrad puts Lena's 'background' is usually in this vein: her miseries are brought in to add sentimentality; her "purity" is incredible. One can scarcely believe that a girl such as Lena has had no sexual experience: she is a poor employee of cheap musical entertainments; by her own admission, she is "not the sort that men turn their backs on" and "it isn't easy to stand up for yourself when you feel there's nothing and nobody at your back" (p. 68).

The final developments in their relationship and in Conrad's themes take place when the three desperadoes enter the drama. Jones bears a certain similarity to Gentleman Brown in *Lord Jim* who "was supposed to be the son of a baronet";⁸ he claims to be a "gentleman". Both carry over into the criminal world something of the airs of their former "social sphere" (p. 301). But Jones is not violent as Brown is and, when violence is necessary, he directs his men to use it. The essential differences between Jones, Ricardo and Pedro are suggested by Heyst's description to Lena when she sees them for the first time from her bungalow:

"...Here they are before you—evil intelligence, instinctive savagery, arm in arm. The rute bforce is at the back..." (p. 262)

But the desperadoes do not become symbols of these qualities. There are other similarly explicit attempts to endow them with a symbolic importance: Lena sees Ricardo as "the embodied evil of the world" (p. 237); Jones regards himself as "a sort of fate" (p. 301). An acceptable symbolic extension of meaning is almost impossible in their presentation because, in the first place, they do not come alive sufficiently as real human beings. Leavis thinks that they are "a kind of Morality representation, embodiments of counter-potentialities",⁹ but it seems to me that Conrad does not follow allegorical modes as Leavis suggests. When Shakespeare depicts the witches in *Macbeth* he starts from contemporary popular belief and life, and presents them as embodiments of evil; he does not attempt to make the witches human and they remain moral forces throughout the play. Conrad's villains, however, are not allegorical figures of this type. Nor do they resemble figures from a Morality play like *Everyman*: the writer of such a play commences with moral concepts and, then, tries to lend them human interest. Conrad's method of portraying the desperadoes is not allegorical but symbolic. He begins with human beings¹⁰ and, then, tries to invest them with a symbolic moral significance. But his effort in this direction is a failure, as indicated above. M. C. Bradbrook is wrong to consider Jones "the Living Skeleton, the Heart of Darkness":¹¹ none of the criminals gains

8. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, London, 1953 ed., p. 259.

9. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 229

10. Conrad speaks of originals in life for his desperadoes in his "Author's Note" (1920): *Victory*, London, 1960 ed., pp. xi-xv.

11. M. C. Bradbrook, *Joseph Conrad: Poland's English Genius*, New York, 1965 ed., p. 65.

a serious symbolic significance. Still, because they are not exactly like the villains of popular melodramatic fiction, say, of Peter Cheynely, Leslie Charteris or "Sapper", who begin from nothing but melodramatic convention and remain within this convention they offer an human interest. It is marked in their early appearances in Schomberg's hotel:

Schomberg tried to face the situation bravely, but that steady, black stare affected him. And when he glanced aside uncomfortably, he met Ricardo's grin uncovering a lot of teeth, though the man seemed absorbed in his thoughts all the time.

"And, moreover," went on Mr. Jones in that distant tone of his, "you can't help yourself. Here we are and here we stay. Would you try to put us out? I dare say you could do it; but you couldn't do it without getting badly hurt—very badly hurt. We can promise him that, can't we, Martin?"

The secretary retracted his lips and looked up sharply at Schomberg, as if only too anxious to leap upon him with teeth and claws.

Schomberg managed to produce a deep laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Mr. Jones closed his eyes wearily, as if the light hurt them, and looked remarkably like a corpse for a moment. This was bad enough; but when he opened them again, it was almost a worse trial for Schomberg's nerves. The spectral intensity of that glance, fixed on the hotel-keeper (and this was most frightful), without any definite expression, seemed to dissolve the last grain of resolution in his character.

"You don't think, by any chance, that you have to do with ordinary people, do you?" inquired Mr. Jones, in his lifeless manner, which seemed to imply some sort of menace from beyond the grave.

"He's a gentleman," testified Martin Ricardo with a sudden snap of the lips, after which his moustaches stirred by themselves in an odd, feline manner. (pp. 88-9)

The "discomfiture" of the pusillanimous Schomberg and the breakdown of his "resolution" appear completely human. Jones's quietly menacing speech and demeanour and Ricardo's crude actions and sense of social inferiority are realized as fully as if they were part of any domestic scene, lurid though they could easily have become. Yet, generally speaking, Conrad's presentation of the desperadoes does not come off. The key to Conrad's descriptions of all three desperadoes is found in Schomberg's reaction to them as "a spectre, a cat, an ape" (p. 118), and their actions are too often conceived within the framework of these three exaggerated analogies. This is partly why they soon begin to appear cardboard melodramatic caricatures rather than human criminals. Moreover, as they play a larger role in *Victory* than all the other characters and as they play an important role in the denouement, the weakness in their presentation mars the novel more than any other.

When they reach Samburan, Heyst's character changes radically in response to demands unfamiliar to him. His attitude of scornful detachment falls off. He feels responsible for Lena and their relationship. He even cares for "what the world would say". He cannot put into action wily and brutal methods of defence, but he thinks of them after Wang stole his revolver.¹² Lena comes to feel that their only hope of safety lies in getting hold of Ricardo's knife. She tries to do this to prove her feelings for Heyst and to break through the "sense of incompleteness" in their love. She dies in the attempt, and her death scenes form the climax of the novel. Her death brings out ironically the novel's positive significance. It is useless as far as her relationship with Heyst or their lives as individuals are concerned (Heyst commits suicide soon after). At the same time, on her side, it is a victorious assertion of love—victorious because Heyst finally recognizes the full value of her love for him and of love as a valuable human quality in a general sense. On his side, it leads to this recognition of love and complementary qualities, to a final triumph over lifelong deep scepticism: these are "practically the last words he said to" Davidson:

"Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love,—and put its trust in life!" (p. 326)

Here Conrad, however, is putting the novel's positiveness in terms which are explicit, sentimental and unnecessary. The prominence of sentimentality and melodrama in the presentation of Heyst and Lena and their affairs reduce their lifelikeness and make especially Lena a simplified character. The positive values are unexceptionably humane; but these artistic weaknesses and the moral tag enfeeble their affirmation. In fact, Conrad's method of affirmation suggests that he is seeking ethical consolation rather than facing life whole and steadily; this tendency forms a marked contrast to, say, the naked and unflinching disillusion of *The Secret Agent*.

Victory is a flawed but notable work. It is not a "classic", but nor can it be dismissed as "very badly written and very roughly imagined". It has a mixed value like that of E. M. Forster's pre-War novels.

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12. See *Victory*, pp. 287-8.