

JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE QUESTION OF SUICIDE

By C. B. COX, M.A., M.LITT.

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND DIRECTOR OF THE
POETRY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

I

EARLY in the winter of 1878 Joseph Conrad's uncle, Thaddeus Bobrowski, received an urgent telegram from France: "Conrad wounded, send money—come."¹ Bobrowski, who had assumed control of Conrad's upbringing after the death of both parents, had been under the impression that Conrad was sailing somewhere in the Antipodes. He hurried to Marseilles, where Conrad had entered upon his sea career four years previously. There he spent two weeks sorting out his nephew's affairs, particularly by paying his debts.

What events had precipitated this dramatic crisis? In his later years Conrad led his family and friends to believe the scar on his left breast resulted from a duel. In the semi-autobiographical *The Arrow of Gold* (1919), M. George (Conrad's nickname in Marseilles) fights a duel with a Captain Blunt, and is shot through the left side of the breast. The cause of the duel is Rita, a brilliant, cold, neurotic adventuress, with whom they are both in love. In the copy of *The Arrow of Gold* owned by Richard Curle, a young admirer, Conrad wrote that "all the personages are authentic and the facts are as stated".² In a review of 1919,³ Sir Sidney Colvin, at Conrad's instigation, emphasized the factual history behind the novel, particularly of the duel which ends the book.

It was not until 1957, when a letter of Bobrowski describing Conrad's attempted suicide was published in Poland, that the truth fully emerged. This letter was quoted at length in Jocelyn Baines's excellent biography of 1960, and, although some hero-worshippers have demurred, the evidence now published of three separate references in Bobrowski's letters seem conclusive. The

¹ Zdzislaw Najder, ed., *Conrad's Polish Background. Letters to and from Polish Friends* (Oxford U.P., 1964), p. 176.

² Richard Curle, *The Last Twelve Years of Joseph Conrad* (Sampson Low, Martin, 1928), p. 105.

³ *The Living Age*, 27 September 1919.

main letter was sent to Stephen Buszczyński, a close friend of Conrad's father. It describes how Conrad had lost a large sum of money through smuggling and gambling:

Having managed his affairs so excellently he returns to Marseilles and one fine evening invites his friend the creditor [Mr. Fecht] to tea, and before his arrival attempts to take his life with a revolver. (Let this detail remain between us, as I have been telling everyone that he was wounded in a duel. From you I neither wish to nor should keep it a secret.) The bullet goes durch und durch near his heart without damaging any vital organ. Luckily, all his addresses were left on top of his things so that this worthy Mr. Fecht could instantly let me know, and even my brother, who in his turn bombarded me. Well, that is the whole story!¹

As is usual in many attempted suicides, witness Sylvia Plath, Conrad hoped his self-injury would not prove fatal. He did not shoot himself in the head, and he arranged for a friend to arrive soon afterwards. The self-wounding represents a cry for help.

Was there a woman in the case? We shall probably never know. Bobrowski mentions no such person, and there is psychological evidence that Conrad's amorous adventures in Marseilles had more existence in his imagination than in fact. It seems certain, therefore, that Conrad lied to his family and friends about his career in Marseilles, just as in his early days he lied to Bobrowski to obtain additional advances of money.

II

After the attempted suicide in Marseilles, Conrad suffered from fits of depression and nervous breakdowns, of varying importance, for the rest of his life. The injury he sustained while working as first mate on the *Highland Forest* on his way to Samarang in 1887 was followed by a sudden collapse of will, by inexplicable periods of powerlessness, and this pattern was repeated during many future crises of illness. Paul Langlois, who met Conrad in Mauritius in 1888, called him a "neurasthénique", and noted a tic of the shoulder and the eyes. He was easily startled by the least unexpected thing, the fall of an object on to the floor, or a banging door.

In letters to friends Conrad continually deplored his mental condition, using powerful language that on occasions must have

¹ Najder, p. 177.

thrown the recipients into consternation. In 1896 he wrote to Edward Garnett, his publisher's reader: "I have long fits of depression, that in a lunatic asylum would be called madness. I do not know what it is. It springs from nothing. It is ghastly. It lasts an hour or a day; and when it departs it leaves a fear."¹ And in 1898 to Garnett again: "I feel suicidal."² Words such as "weariness", "depression", "paralysis" and "suicide" crop up again and again, giving evidence to his continual struggle against the urge to self-destruction. At times, his letters breed, as from a dunghill, images of disgust and horror at his own mental condition. "Difficulties are as it were closing round me," he wrote to Cunninghame Graham, the explorer, in 1900, "an irresistible march of blackbeetles I figure it to myself. What a fate to be so ingloriously devoured."³ And to a distant relative, Marguerite Poradowska: "Comme tout est noir noir noir . . . j'ai des accès de melancholia qui me paralysent la pensée et la volonté."⁴ Literary composition in particular turned his brain into a quagmire, in which he struggled heroically against paralysis of the imagination. In 1898 he wrote to Cunninghame Graham of his "nerve-trouble—a taste of hell": "An extreme weariness oppresses me. It seems as though I had seen and felt everything since the beginning of the world. I *suspect* my brain to be yeast and my backbone to be cotton. . . . It seems to me I am disintegrating slowly. Cold shadows stand around. . . . My brain reduced to the size of a pea seems to rattle about in my head. I can't rope in a complete thought; I am exhausted mentally and very depressed."⁵ In 1903 he told John Galsworthy: "I am trying to keep despair under. Nevertheless I feel myself losing my footing in deep waters. They are lapping about my hips."⁶

After he completed *Under Western Eyes* in 1910 the nervous tension laid him up for three months. The manuscript of the

¹ Edward Garnett, ed., *Letters from Joseph Conrad, 1895-1924* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1928), p. 56.

² *Ibid.* p. 141.

³ C. T. Watts, ed., *Joseph Conrad's Letters to Cunninghame Graham* (Cambridge U.P., 1969), p. 129.

⁴ J. A. Gee and P. J. Sturm, *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marquerite Poradowska, 1890-1920* (Yale U.P., 1940), letters of February and April 1895.

⁵ Letters of 16 February 1898, 9 December 1898, and 28 July 1900.

⁶ G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad. Life and Letters* (Heinemann, 1927), i. 322.

novel lay on a table at the foot of his bed, and in his delirium he held converse with the characters. He even accused his doctor and Jessie, his wife, of trying to put him in an asylum. After he had recovered he wrote to Norman Douglas: "I feel like a man returned from hell and look upon the very world of the living with dread."¹ It is arguable that after this terrifying nightmare Conrad deliberately repressed the sensitive, imaginative side of his nature, and forced his mind into safer, more normal channels of thought. This provides one explanation for the comparatively superficial quality of his post-1910 writings, and the naive falsification of the profundities of his major works in the author's notes he wrote in his later years.

With this background it is not surprising that in Conrad's fiction suicide and thoughts of suicide repeatedly occur. There are fourteen actual suicides in the fiction, though in this number I include Peyrol (*The Rover*) and Lord Jim, who could be called voluntary martyrs to an ideal. The others are Kayerts ("An Outpost of Progress"), Decoud (*Nostromo*), Captain Whalley ("The End of the Tether"), Renouard ("The Planter of Malata"), Heyst (*Victory*), Susan ("The Idiots"), Brierly (*Lord Jim*), Winnie Verloc (*The Secret Agent*), Erminia ("Gaspar Ruiz"), Sevrin ("The Informer"), De Barral (*Chance*) and Jorgensen (*The Rescue*). In *Chance*, Flora is first seen by Marlow on a cliff top contemplating whether to throw herself over. Other characters, such as Alice Jacobus in "A Smile of Fortune", talk about suicide, and many vigorous male characters, such as Cosmo in *Suspense*, and M. George himself in *The Arrow of Gold*, experience inexplicable hours of mental paralysis, of impotence when they are overwhelmed by a *tedium vitae*. Even *Nostromo* nearly jumps overboard from his schooner when he first sees the new lighthouse on the Great Isabel being built near his treasure. Conrad writes: "That man, subjective almost to insanity, looked suicide deliberately in the face."²

The reasons for the suicides vary considerably. Some are acts of desperation by people trapped in an impossible situation, such as Winnie Verloc's jump into the sea. Captain Whalley's suicide is a calculated manoeuvre in his struggle to provide

¹ *Ibid.* ii. 113.

² Everyman's Library edition, 1957, p. 525.

financially for his daughter. Renouard is a masochistic, enraptured lover, who swims out to sea and oblivion when rebuffed by Felicia Moorsom, his *belle dame sans merci*. But the most interesting examples are Brierly and Decoud, who appear to choose suicide deliberately and consciously as a proper response to the meaninglessness of their lives. These two suicides reflect the temptation to which Conrad himself was attracted.

When in Mauritius he filled in a playful questionnaire prepared by the daughters of his host, he answered the question "Que désirerez-vous être?" "Should like not to be".¹

III

A variety of interpretations for Conrad's depression have been put forward. Clearly the view that attributes his illness to the suffering and shock of his Congo adventure in 1890 is untrue; his numerous childhood illnesses and complaints, plus his life-long periods of breakdown, prove the existence of more deeply ingrained causes.

When Conrad was only 4 years old, he was taken with his parents into exile at Vologda in Russia, a punishment for their Polish nationalist activities. Of Vologda, with its bitterly cold climate, Conrad's father wrote: "The population is a nightmare: disease-ridden corpses."² Evelina, Conrad's mother, soon showed symptoms of an advanced stage of tuberculosis, and she died when he was 7. His father, Apollo Korzeniowski, died only four years later, after spending his last years absorbed in morbid religiosity and a cult of his dead wife. These early experiences must have put a great strain on Conrad's oversensitive nature. For some time he had no friends of his own age, and he developed habits of solitude, a depressive sense of loneliness which he carried with him to his grave.

Conrad's decision at the age of 16 to leave Poland and become a sailor was naturally opposed by his family. It has often been argued that this created in him a sense of betrayal and that he never overcame his guilt at his desertion of his country. According to this theory, in his heart he knew he had abandoned the

¹ Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad* (Pelican, 1971), p. 127. ² *Ibid.* p. 28.

cause for which both his parents sacrificed their lives. The desire for atonement and self-justification, therefore, dominated his life. Baines sees Lord Jim's jump over the side of the Patna, or Razumov's betrayal of Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*, as possibly unconscious symbolical representations of Conrad's action in leaving Poland. He draws attention to Conrad's use of the word "jump" to describe his own case: "I verily believe mine was the only case of a boy of my nationality and antecedents taking a, so to speak, standing jump out of his racial surroundings and associations."¹ Parallels can be drawn between Jim's efforts to vindicate himself after his desertion of the Patna and Conrad's own life. His sense of exile is brilliantly recreated in "Amy Foster", in which Yanko Goorall, from Austrian Poland, is treated with cruelty and incomprehension when he is shipwrecked on the Kentish coast.

This theme of betrayal can be over-emphasized. Conrad's letters do not suggest a mind ridden by guilt complexes about Poland. He enjoyed the prospect of a return visit in 1914, and often wrote easily and sensibly about the folly of Poland's messianic ambitions. If we are looking for psychological explanations for his depression, then his sexual problems are probably more important. These have been astutely analysed by Thomas Moser in *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline* (1957) and by Bernard Meyer in *Joseph Conrad. A Psychoanalytic Biography* (1967), though the latter is carried away by his theories. Conrad's misogyny is evident throughout his life and works. He could not write satisfactorily about a physical relation between a white man and woman, and this explains why his worst short story is "The Return". It also partly explains why *The Rescue*, particularly the sections dealing with Lingard's infatuation with Mrs. Travers, gave him such difficulties in composition, so that it took him twenty years to complete. He was imaginatively more comfortable with miscegenation, as in *The Outcast of the Islands*, but even in this novel the sexual embrace soon produces disgust and impotence in the man. There is no doubt that Conrad himself had strong heterosexual desires, for he was constantly infatuated with women. He made a fool of himself in

¹ *A Personal Record* (Dent, 1946), p. 121.

Mauritius over Eugénie Renouf, who was already engaged ; and over the seductive American, Jane Anderson, when he was an old married man. Yet the early death of his mother appears to have retarded his development, leaving behind an unconscious fear of incest with a white woman of his own family. His marriage with Jessie, so different in background from himself and out of touch with his intellectual pursuits, suggest that sexual arousal depended to some extent for him on an element of miscegenation. It is not surprising that after his successful proposal of marriage to Jessie he disappeared for three days, apparently too afraid to return.

At the core of these psychological disturbances there seems a basic uncertainty about his own identity. In many of his stories a kind of dismemberment of personality takes place. Just as Virginia Woolf divided herself up into six characters in *The Waves*, so Conrad is repeatedly concerned with two characters who reflect the composite nature of a contradictory identity. The best-known example is "The Secret Sharer", where Leggatt is an alter ego, an unrealized potentiality in the character of the captain-narrator. There is also Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, who in certain ways reflects the unconscious urges of Marlow's soul. The breakdown of such composite personalities into separate identities reflects Conrad's difficulty in creating a synthesis for the warring elements in his own nature. He often uses the image of the mirror, like a man obsessively scrutinizing his face in search of his real self. In "The Secret Sharer", the Captain is struck by the similarity between himself and Leggatt : "It was, in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror." The same phenomenon appears in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. This uncertainty about identity is endemic in modern literature, of course, and in this way Conrad reflects the malaise of the contemporary disintegrating personality. His own jumps from Poland to France to England, from aristocrat to seaman to novelist, made him a living embodiment of this breakdown. His life and art testify to a continual, by and large unsuccessful search for a stable identity.

Also, he had to endure the problems of an alien language. Like Nabokov, he understood the fallibility of words, their

different roles in different languages. He chose English for his fiction probably because for ten years he had grown accustomed to the language ; perhaps he wanted to hide his fiction in a form unavailable to his Polish family. But, whatever the hidden reasons, the writing of English involved him in the radical problems of identity which haunt the twentieth-century imagination. George Steiner's comments on Nabokov also apply to Conrad :

A great writer driven from language to language by social upheaval and war is an apt symbol for the age of the refugee. No exile is more radical, no feat of adaptation and new life more demanding. It seems proper that those who create art in a civilisation of quasi-barbarism which has made so many homeless, which has torn up tongues and peoples by the root, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language.¹

IV

Although his childhood and his self-imposed exile must count as major sources for his depressions, just as important was his conscious philosophy, his personal response to what he considered as the absurdity of the universe. His suicidal tendencies were nourished by a nihilism derived from his reading of books (particularly Schopenhauer) and from the climate of thought in the late nineteenth century. His doubts about his own identity were linked to philosophical scepticism about the nature of reality.

Conrad often explained the grounds of his pessimism in his letters. That the world must eventually cool down and disintegrate destroyed for him the illusion of progress. In 1898 he wrote to Cunninghame Graham :

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

¹ George Steiner, *Extraterritorial* (Faber, 1972), p. 11.

don't know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each 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 to-morrow—only the string of my platitudes 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 is love, nor where God is. *Assez*.¹

"We, living, are out of life." This sense of a divorce between man and "reality", of the inadequacy of our thought processes to comprehend our experience, is crucial in Conrad's best work (as in many twentieth-century writers). It is not surprising that he was fascinated by X-rays, for their hidden existence suggested to him the unknown realities of matter behind the illusory forms available to our senses. After attending a demonstration of a Rontgen X-ray machine, he wrote to Garnett:

The secret of the universe is in the existence of horizontal waves whose varied vibrations are at the bottom of all states of consciousness . . . there is no space, time, matter, mind as vulgarly understood, there is only the eternal something that waves and an eternal force that causes the waves—it's not much—and by virtue of these two eternities exists that Corot and that Whistler. . . .²

Conrad is saying that the human world, including the finest productions of art, has developed from undifferentiated matter. This applies to the forms observed by the senses, to the structures of behaviour demanded by society, to the rational formulations of the mind. Behind such human ideas of order lies inert matter, formless, the primal darkness which transcends even the most basic categories of time and space. For many of Conrad's characters, the climax of their experience occurs when they journey into the darkness before creation; the best-known example is Decoud's ride in the open boat across the blackness of the Placid Gulf towards his eventual suicide.

This central feature of Conrad's art has been brilliantly analysed by Royal Roussel in *The Metaphysics of Darkness* (1971). He demonstrates how for Conrad this darkness lies far behind all material things, as long as they continue to possess qualities of weight and mass. Stripped of all accessory details, the darkness stands as an indefinite, silent immensity, still as death. Objects

¹ Watts, p. 65.

² Garnett, p. 143.

like silver in *Nostramo* or the Russian plains in *Under Western Eyes* exist, in one form or another, from generation to generation. The human mind is vulnerable and infinitely precarious, whereas matter can be altered, but never annihilated. Decoud's suicide results from loss of faith in the world presented to him through his senses. The awareness of the eventual annihilation of the individual mind and all its constructs breeds a sense of ultimate illusion, of a universe absurd and meaningless.

In a letter to Cunninghame Graham in 1897, Conrad compares the universe to a knitting machine in a manner which would not seem inappropriate in one of Ted Hughes's nightmare poems :

There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. You come and say : “ this is all right ; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—celestial oil and the machine will embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.” Will it? Alas no. 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.¹

This is the paralysing vision with which Conrad was wrestling during his great creative years. The same kind of torment has had something to do with the suicides of modern artists such as Virginia Woolf, Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath or John Berryman ; it influenced the breakdowns of T. S. Eliot and Robert Lowell. Such pessimism is not a peculiarly modern phenomenon ; but post-Darwin the primal darkness has taken one step nearer. In *Poets of Reality*, J. Hillis Miller writes : “ The special place of Joseph Conrad in English literature lies in the fact that in him the nihilism covertly dominant in modern culture is brought to the surface and shown for what it is.”² As in Stein's words in *Lord*

¹ Watts, pp. 56-57.

² J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Harvard U.P., 1966), p. 5.

Jim, society is a house of cards poised over an abyss. The Victorian illusion that mind can understand and control matter, can create a permanent civilized order, is shattered. Instead the eternal knitting machine annihilates mind. It knits us in and it knits us out.

Conrad would have agreed with the American poet Louis Simpson's scorn in "Moving the Walls", for the Victorian attempt to transform leviathan into a museum-piece :

Idiots.
We too are all for reducing
The universe to human dimensions.
As if we could know what is human!

V

But how can human art fail to reduce the universe to human dimensions? What kind of artistic vision is appropriate to Conrad's pessimism? The withering paradox, with which Conrad struggled so desperately, is that the artist must be engaged in making shapes to prove that shapes cannot be made, in giving form to the formless. Like T. S. Eliot when he was composing *The Waste Land*, Conrad is seeking a *modus vivendi* to save him from silence in art and suicide in life.

In *The Limits of Metaphor* (1967), James Guetti explores how writers such as Melville, Conrad and Faulkner cope with this modern situation, and how they adequately express the inadequacies of language. Their narrative techniques exhibit a fundamental imaginative instability, a failure to compose experience in any way or to create coherent metaphorical structures of any sort. Ishmael, Marlow, Quentin Compson surround problematic experience with disparate allusions and suggestions, never emphasizing a single perspective as definite, and constantly relying, at crucial moments, upon the nearly simultaneous use of separate kinds of language and upon similes of the greatest but vaguest dimensions. Uncertain about the mimetic function of words, feeling that artistic consciousness is always, in a sense, outside "life", Conrad seeks for imaginative formulations to prevent his readers from resting at ease in illusion. In *Heart of*

Darkness we sense the inadequacy of language to express the existences that lie outside the thinking mind. Marlow is engaged on a quest, on a search into the interior for truth. This arouses an expectation in the reader of an approaching revelation, but the outcome frustrates this desire. For Conrad, a prime purpose of the novelist should be manipulation of the reader's responses. The breakings of time scheme, the multiple points of view, the device of the reflector within a reflector, ensure that no coherent interpretation can be imposed on the novel. Perspectives shift, waver, disperse, like mist on water.

According to Conrad, the proper response to the suicidal claims of moral nihilism is a stoical recognition of the precarious status of mind. The artist builds in language an acknowledgement of our incomprehension, a form of poised irresolution. Modern art, as Frank Kermode has written, goes out into the neutral air, remains in an area of non-commitment. In Conrad's greatest works there is a non-resolution of meanings; endlessness is made an end. Hillis Miller describes how the novels hover between contradictions, light and darkness, motion and stillness, personality and anonymity, nothingness and substance, speech and silence, meaning and meaninglessness, servitude and freedom, time and eternity.

Such an approach must particularly stress the virtues of *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, "The Secret Sharer" and *Nostromo*. Conrad's genius also manifests itself in works such as *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, but in my view these novels do not convey so completely his essential vision as an artist. Conrad found the poise of irresolution difficult to maintain. Like T. S. Eliot, he was often unsure about the effects he intended to achieve. Particularly after 1910 he was seduced by the allurements of chronological progress through plot development, and by a psychological longing for secure values. From his first contacts with the sea he admired the order and work ethic imposed on the crew of a ship. But his best work casts doubt on the validity of even this form of purposeful activity. In *Lord Jim*, for example, Conrad makes his own journey into the darkness, and looks for the kind of sensibility that can survive in the universe of the knitting machine.

This type of art presents difficult problems to the critic. What can rational criticism say about literature which denies the validity of reason? Recently a university professor began a lecture on Samuel Beckett by pointing out that his enterprise would seem absurd to Beckett. This did not prevent him from continuing with fifty minutes of polished exegesis. *Heart of Darkness*, for example, rejects the simplistic interpretation of critics. Baines's biography is excellent in its treatment of the life, but almost always inadequate in its critical commentary on the fiction. After quoting Conrad telling Cunninghame Graham that the idea behind *Heart of Darkness* is so wrapped up that his friend may miss it, Baines writes :

So wrapped up is it that one wonders whether Conrad was always clear as to his intention and whether one is justified in trying to unravel the story to the extent of imparting a coherent meaning to it.¹

Here Baines fails to comprehend an art concerned to express a profound metaphysical scepticism, to be coherent about what must remain incoherent. On another occasion Baines writes straightforwardly in a manner characteristic of much Conrad criticism about how Jim was blameless to let Brown go free : " Some critics have asserted that Jim's life ended in defeat but despite the reference to his ' exalted egoism ' which recalls Brierly's suicide there can be little doubt that Conrad approved of Jim's action."² Conrad might have replied : " If only issues were so simple! " In *Lord Jim* Conrad creates multiple points of view towards Jim's martyrdom, in order to disturb his readers into a lively sense of the uncertainties involved in moral action. Talking of " The Secret Sharer ", Baines says that " Conrad had no wish to condemn Leggatt but considered him an honourable man who had done something that other honourable men might equally well have done under similar circumstances ".³ Conrad is not thinking in these terms. Baines's language is too assertive, too categorical, in its discussion of motivation. He is out of touch with an artistic sensibility that feeds on irresolution, that makes art out of uncertainty, and considers human rationality an illusion.

¹ Baines, p. 273.

² Ibid. p. 305.

³ Ibid. p. 430.

VI

The suicide of Brierly in *Lord Jim* provides me with a final example of Conrad's method. The story is mediated to us through the subtle, wavering narration of Marlow; and Marlow himself is not a first-hand observer of many important details. The account of the drowning is told to him two years later by Mr. Jones, Brierly's mate, whose selection of material is influenced by prejudice and sentimentality. The suicide remains mysterious, held at a distance because only known through these partial explanations. This element of mystery is also evoked by certain bizarre effects. Just before he jumps overboard, Brierly sets the log, and even puts in a drop of oil. His efficiency does not desert him even at the end, and yet ironically his suicide undermines his belief in confident service of the social order imposed by ship routine. The detail of the oil adds a little touch of absurdity, a hint that human habits of order are laughable illusion.

Both Marlow and Jones introduce doubt into their narration: "he was *probably* holding silent enquiry into his own case" says Marlow about Brierly's behaviour in the court-room. After describing how Brierly put four iron belying-pins in his pockets to weigh him down, Jones interjects: "*Maybe* his confidence in himself was just shook a bit at the last." These uncertainties can be seen in the following paragraph:

The sight of that watery-eyed old Jones mopping his bald head with a red cotton handkerchief, the sorrowing yelp of the dog, the squalor of that fly-blown cuddy which was the only shrine of his memory, threw a veil of inexpressibly mean pathos over Brierly's remembered figure, the posthumous revenge of fate for that belief in his own splendour which had almost cheated his life of its legitimate terrors. Almost! Perhaps wholly. Who can tell what flattering view he had induced himself to take of his own suicide? (Chapter VI)

The story comes through a "veil". The mean pathos is "inexpressible". Such words, often repeated, reflect the impossibility of complete communication. And the final sentence is a question. We can never know Brierly's state of mind, for Marlow's supposition may be quite wrong.

We must speak in terms of probabilities. Brierly says to Marlow about the Patna: "Such an affair destroys one's confidence." Apparently Jim acts as a mirror for Brierly, as he

does for Marlow. They recognize in him hidden aspects of their own nature. Jones finds words for Marlow's own view of Brierly: "Ay, ay! neither you nor I, sir, had ever thought so much of ourselves."

And so we come to the enigma. Brierly's suicide, like Jim's own decision to die, results apparently from a consciousness of his own unworthiness. Is it true, therefore, that the order of society is suited only to less imaginative natures? Are Brierly and Jim superior because of their awareness of their inadequacy? Is all human activity a sham, only acceptable to the deluded and the hypocritical? Is the man who commits suicide the man who sees most? The novel offers no resolution, hovering uncertainly around these uncertainties. For a critic to offer some final conclusion about Brierly's conduct is to abuse the novel's essence as a work of art. *Lord Jim* exists in the neutral air, somewhere between a complete moral nihilism and a commitment to ideals of service to the community; the novel never rests finally in any decisive posture. Conrad's response to pessimism is an art that accepts the impossibility of clear values and positive commitment.

And so my paper ends in contradiction. With regard to Brierly's suicide, I am certain that nothing can be certain. I assert that nothing can be asserted. In this situation it is not surprising that modern artists have held rational criticism in contempt. At his best, Conrad insists that we must live with our uncertainties, and not evade our enigmas. Confronted by the mystery of human experience, he offers us only strange high-sounding phrases whose implications are deliberately left uncertain. These we take away with us, finding in them what satisfaction we can—the horror, the horror, in the destructive element immerse, heart of darkness.