Joseph Conrad and the Shadow-Line of Disorientation

To see! To see!—this is the craving of the sailor, as of the rest of blind humanity. To have his path made clear for him is the aspiration of every human being in our beclouded and tempestuous existence.

—Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*

Though Conrad had no preoccupation with artificially induced states of mind, as did the English romantics and French symbolists, the imagery of his fiction is nearly as extravagant as that of De Quincey, Poe, or Barnes. Conrad was interested in portraying the extraordinary mental states of the cultural outcast. To delineate these outcast characters and their experiences, Conrad drew equally from his personal experience at sea and from the convention of the voyage of sensuous derangement that appeared in the work of his nineteenth-century predecessors. Whether Conrad consciously adopted the conventions of their art is uncertain, but it is clear that he, like his predecessors, was preoccupied with exceptional mental states and felt a peculiar kinship with these authors regarding their literary careers. In a 1905 letter to Edmund Gosse, Conrad writes of being troubled by periods of creative inertia and sterility: “I need not tell you that this moral support of belief is the greatest help a writer can receive in those difficult moments which Baudelaire has defined happily as ‘les stérilités des écrivains nerveux.’ [De] Quincey too, I believe, has known that anguished suspension of all power of thought” (Jean-Aubry 2:14). The mental state of which Conrad speaks not only reflects his psychological condition as an artist, it is an apt de-

scription of the extraordinary physical sensations recorded on his voyages of disorientation. During these voyages, character and reader journey across both physical and psychological shadow-lines, away from the culturally familiar and into a heretical landscape.

While the bulk of Conrad’s fiction depicts some kind of disorienting journey from cultural knowledge, no single work treats the theme of cultural disintegration more centrally or explicitly than *The Secret Agent*. Written when Conrad’s personal life was at a low point, this darkly ironic tale depicts the disintegration of social value and order. The novel is peopled by characters who, like those of Joyce or Barnes, operate on the fringe of society; but unlike the revellers in the “Circe” chapter of *Ulysses* or the sensualists in *Nightwood*, Conrad’s London anarchists seek the disintegration of moral order as an end in itself. Although many of the so-called anarchists are portrayed as pathetically ineffectual—as patrons of destruction rather than as destructive men—the Professor in *Secret Agent*, who seeks “the disintegration of the old morality, a clean sweep and a clear start for a new conception of life” (Conrad 1926, 13:73), is depicted as dangerous. The great danger of the Professor is that he pursues his heretical vision with “frenzied puritanism of ambition. He nursed it as something secularly holy” (13:81). The practical ambition of the Professor to create the perfect detonator is ironically realized when the half-witted Stevie trips and is instantaneously dismembered and fragmented, becoming “a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained, half concealing what might have been an accumulation of raw material for a cannibal feast” (13:86). Conrad’s use of cannibalism, like that in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, expresses the disintegration of cultural value. Like Poe, Conrad disjoins the cultural episteme through an analogous disintegration of human flesh and moral order.

While *The Secret Agent* provides the most obvious thematic treatment of a disintegrated cultural or moral order, the novel is eccentric within the body of Conrad’s fiction which more often disjoins the cultural episteme through the use of allegory or
symbolism. Typically, Conrad employs the convention of the disorienting journey, which leads character, narrator, and reader to a point of sensual, cognitive, or psychological derangement. Marlow's remark at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* that his journey to meet Kurtz "was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of [his] experience" (16:51) illustrates the widely accepted view that Conrad's geographical journeys are also psychological journeys. Because Conrad often stated that the duty of the artist is to descend within himself (Prefaces 49–50), it is perhaps natural for the reader to concentrate attention on defining the nature of Conrad's spiritual or psychological voyages of discovery. But to dwell on the psychological world and ignore the character's or narrator's response to the sensate world is to risk a fundamental misunderstanding of how Conrad most commonly structures his symbolic voyages, and how he continues the conventions of the heretical symbolist voyage of disorientation.

In much of Conrad's work—like that of Coleridge, De Quincey, and Rimbaud—the journeyer undergoes an extraordinary sense experience which immediately precedes and sometimes causes an altered awareness of self and humankind in relation to the universe. Conrad's disorienting voyages are journeys away from the culturally familiar; his tales are about physical and psychic exile. Whether the moment of sensate derangement he describes involves synesthesia, anesthesia, visual clouding, or tempestuous kinesthetic disorder, this moment of "uncommon or personal sensation" (17:3) represents the crossing of a "shadow-line" that severs the voyager from the cultural episteme.

Early in his career, Conrad seemed pained by the realization that his tales were generated not by ideas but by sensations. He complained in an 1896 letter to Edward Garnett of having no "starting point" as he imagined other writers did: "They know something to begin with—while I don't. I have had some impressions, some sensations—in my time:—impressions and sensations of common things" (Garnett 38). Conrad's admission suggests not only that he was interested in writing about his
experiences, but more importantly that, as an artist, Conrad depended less on cultural knowledge than on direct sensual experience. In later years, when his success as a man of letters was confirmed, Conrad spoke with more assurance about the sources of his writing: "My work shall not be an utter failure because it has the solid basis of a definite intention. In its essence it is action—nothing but action—action observed, felt and interpreted with an absolute truth to my sensations (which are the basis of art in literature)" (Blackwood 155–56).

When Conrad asserts the primacy of sensation in his literary-epistemological process, he admits the heresy of the empiricist, who immerses himself in the density of a physical world and is implicitly free of any divine order. Like a sensationalist or a positivist, Conrad thought of himself as an artist who sought to define—in concrete and not impressionistic terms—the fundamental nature of reality. Although Conrad's temperament was far from scientific and his mind far from systematic and disciplined in the manner of a positivist thinker, Conrad could be quite enthusiastic about scientific concepts of sensation. In a letter dated 29 September 1898, Conrad tells Edward Garnett of a scientific discussion he enjoyed in Scotland. The discussion revolved around "the secret of the universe" which is "composed of the same matter, matter, all matter being only that thing of inconceivable tenuity through which the various vibrations of waves (electricity, heat, sound, light, etc.) are propagated, thus giving birth to our sensations—then emotions—then thoughts. Is that so?" (Garnett 136). Conrad's tag question surely reveals his uneasiness in dealing with such problematical "matters of fact," yet his interest in them and his admission that the scientist, thinker, and artist seek the same truths using different methods (Prefaces 49–50) are testimony of his keen, if naive, interest in the positivist tenets of sensationalist thinking, which was flourishing in Europe at the time.

There is no reason to suspect that Conrad ever read any of the sensationalist thinkers. Though it is remotely possible that Conrad could have been introduced to the latest theories of physiological perception by his medical-student tutor, Pulman,
this is highly improbable, for the young Conrad neither enjoyed nor rigorously pursued his studies which were often interrupted by illness and ultimately discontinued in favor of travel (Karl 88ff.). It is thus unlikely that Conrad had either formal or informal exposure to philosophical sensationalism, but rather developed an artistic sensibility and aesthetic epistemology that mirrored the philosophic concerns of his age. Conrad’s statement of artistic intent in the Preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” however, expresses many of the major concerns of the sensationalist thinkers of the time, particularly those of Ernst Mach. Mach’s Analysis of The Sensations (1896), a translation of Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen (1885), explores the relation between the physical and psychical worlds. This basic sensationalist concern is at the heart of Conrad’s artistic intent: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see” (Prefaces 52). Conrad’s emphasis on the word see implies not only visual sensation but perception and knowledge as well. The coalescence of image and knowledge—a collapsing of the distinction between external stimuli and internal response—emphasizes the primacy of sensation as a way of knowing. Conrad’s position is thus closely aligned with that of the sensationalists which is essentially heretical in nature, depending neither on Logos nor revelation but rather on direct sensate experience as the primary way of knowing.

Conrad’s sensationalist episteme is evident in the well-known opening lines of the preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus” which states that art should be “a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe.” Conrad proceeds, suggesting that the artist, in describing the visible universe, attempts “to find in its form, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality—the very truth of their existence” (Prefaces 49). Those critics who label Conrad an impressionist frequently cite this passage as evidence of a kind of painterly aesthetic. But it is surprisingly like Mach’s
definition of sensation as the individual’s transmuting of the physical elements of the phenomenal world into thought and knowledge of that world.\(^4\) Mach explains the nature of phenomenal reality by theorizing that objects or bodies, though interpreted by the perceiving mind as whole “things” are actually complexes of individual sensations. As a phenomenologist, Mach seeks “to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe,” and, as an artist, Conrad stresses sensation as a way of knowing because “all art appeals primarily to the senses” (Prefaces 51). When the artist takes a less direct approach, the understanding we bring away from art is less “enduring and essential.”

To render justice to the visible universe Conrad thus develops a sensationalist literary epistemology, dependent less on cultural givens than direct sensate experience. Like Mach, who posits three levels of perceptual response involving “sensation, intuition, phantasy” (Mach 1976, 105–19), Conrad explores the epistemological process as “action observed, felt, and interpreted” in a narrative that delineates first “sensations—then emotions—then thoughts.” The connection between this sensationalist epistemology and the literary imagination is clearly articulated by Conrad in an 1895 letter to Edward Noble:

> You must treat events only as illustrative of human sensation,—as the outward sign of inward feelings,—of live feelings,—which alone are truly pathetic and interesting. . To accomplish it you must cultivate your poetic faculty,—you must give yourself up to emotions (no easy task). You must squeeze out of yourself every sensation, every thought, every image—mercilessly, without reserve and without remorse. (Jean-Aubry 1:183)

In the remainder of the letter Conrad reiterates the order of the three responses to experience: sensation, knowledge, and image. This careful emphasis clearly suggests the importance Conrad attached to this modified Aristotelian triad as the foundation of his theory of the literary imagination. More importantly, this order of response indicates his epistemological process and,
as we will see, provided a basic structure for his fiction: Extraordinary sensations lead to knowledge or altered awareness which leads to a visionary moment.

Sensation, Knowledge, Image

The term *sensation* is pervasive in Conrad's fiction. As the most immediate, fundamental response to the experiential world, sensation implies, quite simply, the excitation of the senses. But in Conrad's work sensation can also describe the apprehension of space and time or the "feelings" of pain or exhilaration or even joy, as it does in sensationalist theory (Mach 1897, 7–8). Though the word is applied broadly, it is used consistently to denote a prerational, even preconscious, response to experience. Because of the primacy of sensation in his epistemology, Conrad often denies his characters any rational reflection on events, which are presented to the reader as uninterpreted phenomena. "An Outpost of Progress" offers a good example of this technique. A particularly interesting passage occurs in the text just after Kayerts and Carlier resolve their disagreement:

All at once he heard the other push his chair back; and he leaped to his feet with extreme facility. He listened and got confused. Must run again! Right or Left? He heard footsteps. He darted to the left, grasping his revolver, and at the very same instant, as it seemed to him, they came into violent collision. Both shouted with surprise. A loud explosion took place between them; a roar of red fire, thick smoke; and Kayerts, deafened and blinded, rushed back thinking: 'I am hit—it's all over.' He expected the other to come round—to gloat over his agony. He caught hold of an upright of the roof—'All over!' Then he heard a crashing fall on the other side of the house, as if somebody had tumbled headlong over a chair—then silence. Nothing more happened. He did not die. (8:112–13)

In using Kayerts as a central consciousness, Conrad stresses the difference between sensation and thought and also shows that
in an uninitiated or stupid individual the gap between sensation and thought is dangerously large. Edward Said makes the more sweeping generalization that in Conrad’s short fiction “action of any sort is either performed or witnessed without accompanying reflection or interpretation, as if the overriding and immediate sensation of action done to, by, or in front of one crowds out the informing work of reason” (87). Working with the same passage from “Outpost” to define Conrad’s impressionism, Ian Watt similarly concludes that “one of the devices that [Conrad] hit on was to present a sense impression and withhold naming it or examining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist” (175). Watt’s terminology, however, is somewhat misleading. Since perception often implies conscious apprehension and rational interpretation, the term sensation or percept is more useful here as it implies only that one is sensible of phenomena. As Watt himself later says, “Conrad’s main objective is to put us into intense sensory contact with the events; and this objective means that the physical impression must precede the understanding of cause” (178). This certainly is Conrad’s point. The gap between sensation and perception is an indicator of the nature and quality of a character’s epistemological process, a process in which the reader is simultaneously engaged.

Kayerts and Carlier are “incapable individuals” either because the gap between sensation and perception is too large or, worse, because no real perception occurs. In fact, the pair are so unreceptive to experience that at times sensations themselves, particularly unfamiliar ones, make little impact. Conrad describes them as two “blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly)” (8:92). The downfall of Kayerts and Carlier stems from their failure to apprehend the warnings of impending disaster transmitted by their senses. After the threatening strangers intrude upon their station, Kayerts and Carlier ignore all evidence of their perilous situation:
There was some talk about keeping a watch in turn, but in the evening everything seemed so quiet and peaceful that they retired as usual. All night they were disturbed by a lot of drumming in the villages. A deep, rapid roll near by would be followed by another far off—then all ceased. Soon short appeals would rattle out here and there, then all mingle together, increase, become vigorous and sustained, would spread out over the forest, roll though the night, unbroken and ceaseless, near and far, as if the whole land had been one immense drum booming out steadily an appeal to heaven. And through the deep and tremulous noise sudden yells that resembled snatches of songs from a madhouse darted shrill and high in discordant jets of sound which seemed to rush far above the earth and drive all peace from under the stars.

Carlier and Kayerts slept badly. (8:98–99)

Conrad portrays their numbness to the experiential world by presenting uninterpreted sense data to the reader. The lack of authorial comment, used so frequently in this ironic tale, here emphasizes the distance between the characters' and the reader's understanding. Having expressed satisfaction with what seems to be true and having consciously elected not to keep watch, the uninquisitive, semiconscious pair experience a night of disturbed sleep which is the counterpart of their somnambulant workdays.

Lord Jim is another character who sees imperfectly. When assassins lurk in his campong, Jim remains unaware of their presence and depends on Jewel to see for him. As Jim walks to the storeroom to face the assassins whom he does not believe exist, the "dense blackness" of the night is not threatening but rather a "friendly beauty" (21:298). Nor is Jim threatened when "something dark, imperfectly seen, flitted rapidly out of sight." Jim is still unconvinced of the presence of danger, even when he enters the storehouse (lit by Jewel):

'He pushed violently; the door swung with a creak and a clatter, disclosing to his intense astonishment the low dungeon-like interior illuminated by a lurid, wavering
glare. A turmoil of smoke eddied down upon an empty wooden crate in the middle of the floor, a litter of rags tried to soar, but only stirred feebly in the draught.' (21:300)

Jim's failure to respond to the visual sensation of the stirring rag heap nearly causes his death: "'He had perceived in the very act of turning away that he was exchanging glances with a pair of eyes in the heap of mats. Next moment the whole mound stirred, and with a low grunt a man emerged swiftly, and bounded towards Jim'" (21:301). Throughout the novel, Jim's physical sensibilities, and consequently his ability to perceive, are permanently deranged by his jump from the Patna. Jim's disorientation of the senses leads to his retreat from the world and his inability to see that world realistically. He is doomed to reenact the fall until near the end of his life when he finally accepts the consequences of his action: "'Then Jim understood. He had retreated from one world, for a small matter of an impulsive jump, and now the other, the work of his own hands [his life at Patusan], had fallen in ruins upon his head'" (21:408).

Jim's and Kayert's shortcomings as sentient beings contrast with the potential of a pair like Nostromo and Decoud. While Kayerts and Carlier operate blindly in the full light of day and Jim fails to "see" by torchlight, Nostromo and Decoud initially seem capable of heroic action because of their heightened states of physiological perception. In the perfect darkness of the Placid Gulf, they execute their escape from Sulaco "like a pair of blind men aware of each other and their surroundings by some indefinable sixth sense" (9:296). Like Kayerts and Carlier, they are blind men doomed to fail, yet they are superior in kind to these two characters because of their physiological sensitivity to each other and their surroundings which makes them more capable of handling their immediate experience. The distinction between sensation and thought is explicit in Conrad's description of Decoud's response to the lighter's brush with the steamer: "For the space of two or three gasping breaths that new rope held against the sudden strain. It was this that gave Decoud the
sensation of the snatching pull, dragging the lighter away to destruction. The cause of it, of course, was inexplicable to him. The whole thing was so sudden that he had no time to think. But all his sensations were perfectly clear" (9:292). Decoud shows an immediate and sure apprehension of sensate experience, and there is only a brief gap between sensation and understanding. There is a similarly short delay in decoding the data of the senses in Heart of Darkness (Ian Watt 175). Marlow sees his "poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in" (16:109), and then sees "sticks, little sticks flying about." After a delay of several seconds, Marlow divests himself of his cultural perception and realizes, in a quasi-comical way, that the sticks are arrows and that his steamer is under attack.

The second stage of Conrad's theory of the literary imagination, the second level of response to experience, is the translation of sensation into rational perception. Although this process may at first seem self-evident, many of Conrad's characters are defined by whether or not they are capable of creative thought as a response to sensation. For Conrad, a character's success in the experiential world is based on the character's perceptual faculties and thought processes. On this point, Conrad is closely allied with the sensationalist position. In sensationalist thought sensations are experienced on a preconscious level: "By sensations are exited, in animals, the movements of adaptation demanded by their conditions of life" (Mach 1897, 82). Sensation impinges on the animal or human in a fundamental and prerational way. Mach further asserts that in intelligent species—presumably including man—"the parts of these complexes necessary to produce the excitation constantly diminish, and the sensations are more and more supplemented and replaced by the intellect, as may be daily observed in children and adolescent animals" (83–84). Sensationalist thinkers thus posit two avenues of knowledge in humans: the direct sensuous one and an intellectual one that is further removed from sensate experience. Mach warns that one level of knowing does not absolutely replace the other and that the two must work in tandem: "Rep-
representation by images and ideas, therefore, has to supply the place of sensations, where the latter are imperfect, and to carry to their issue processes initially determined by sensations alone. But in normal life, representation cannot supplant sensation, where this is at all present, except with the greatest danger to the organism” (Mach 1897, 84).

In Conrad’s fiction, when a character’s knowledge is divorced from sensate experience by either habit or sustained withdrawal into the intellect, the individual often fails to prosper and may eventually even die. Conversely, the characters who remain in touch with their senses have a better knowledge of their immediate circumstances and thus a better chance of survival.

Kayerts and Carlier are an obvious example of characters who fail to prosper due to the disjunction between sensation and thought. Because Kayerts and Carlier are all but insensible for the better part of the story, they are also untroubled by any real mental activity, any real thought. As creatures of civilization, their “every great and every insignificant thought” belongs not to them “but to the crowd” (8:89). It is only through Kayerts’s unavoidable confrontation with the undeniable fact of “a pair of white naked feet in red slippers” (8:113) that he finally realizes, to his horror, that “he had shot an unarmed man” (8:114). Conversely, Martin Decoud is an example of a man totally absorbed in audaciously skeptical thought. He is capable of such immersion in thought because he is particularly susceptible to empirical sensations. But the sensuous over-stimulation of the Placid Gulf, followed by the island solitude of the Great Isabel, proves dangerous:

The enormous stillness, without light or sound, seemed to affect Decoud’s senses like a powerful drug. He didn’t even know at times whether he were asleep or awake. Like a man lost in slumber, he heard nothing, he saw nothing. Even his hand held before his face did not exist for his eyes. The change from the agitation, the passions and the dangers, from the sights and sounds of the
shore, was so complete that it would have resembled death had it not been for the survival of his thoughts. In this foretaste of eternal peace they floated vivid and light, like unearthly clear dreams of earthly things that may haunt the souls freed by death from the misty atmosphere of regrets and hopes. (9:262)

Here, the absence of sensuous stimuli is itself experienced as a kind of hyperesthetic synesthesia. Hearing nothing and seeing nothing, Decoud becomes sensuously disoriented. The stillness assumes an "enormous" size, and the unseen hand held in front of his face ceases to exist for the skeptical Decoud. In the absence of all sensation, only his thoughts remain and, consequently, he is in great danger.

This dichotomy between "perceptive" and "imperceptive" characters is readily apparent in *Typhoon*, though in this tale Conrad treats the issue comically. On the one hand, Captain MacWhirr is wonderfully out of touch with the world of the senses. He is so mistrustful of and lacking in empirical knowledge that he never has an imaginative thought. Conrad describes him as a man who has "just enough imagination to carry him through each successive day, and no more" (20:4). As skipper of the *Nana-Shan*, MacWhirr is first introduced examining a meteorological instrument: "He stood confronted by the fall of a barometer he had no reason to distrust. The fall—taking into account the excellence of the instrument, the time of the year, and the ship's position on the terrestrial globe—was of a nature ominously prophetic" (20:6). His conclusion that "there must be some uncommonly dirty weather knocking about" and the verbal poverty he exhibits by repeating the phrase reveal a corresponding mental impoverishment. And yet ironically MacWhirr's limitations and inadequacies are the very qualities that save the ship. Far from constituting a shift in Conrad's epistemology, which stresses the need for sharpened senses and creative thought in the face of danger, the triumph of MacWhirr's ineptitude is simply an artistic variation in tone and mode. The positive results of MacWhirr's bookishness are both ironic and comic.
Jukes, in the same story, provides yet another comic inversion. Though Jukes's empirical observations of the weather are decidedly more acute than MacWhirr's, he is portrayed as neither unusually intelligent nor imaginative. Before the passage where Jukes makes an entry into the ship's log, Conrad describes the evening in painterly images: "The coppery twilight retired slowly, and the darkness brought out overhead a swarm of unsteady, big stars, that, as if blown upon, flickered exceedingly and seemed to hang very near the earth" (20:26). The dense sensuous imagery is an appropriate prelude to the scene that follows:

He copied neatly out of the rough-book the number of miles, the course of the ship, and in the column for 'wind' scrawled the word 'calm' from top to bottom of the eight hours since noon. He was exasperated by the continuous, monotonous rolling of the ship. The heavy inkstand would slide away in a manner that suggested perverse intelligence in dodging the pen. Having written in the large space under the head of 'Remarks' 'Heat very oppressive,' he stuck the end of the penholder in his teeth, pipe fashion, and mopped his face carefully.

'Ship rolling heavily in a high cross swell,' he began again, and commented to himself, 'Heavily is no word for it.' Then he wrote; 'Sunset threatening, with a low bank of clouds to N. and E. Sky clear overhead.'

Sprawling over the table with arrested pen, he glanced out of the door, and in that frame of his vision he saw all the stars flying upwards between the teakwood jambs on a black sky. The whole lot took flight together and disappeared, leaving only a blackness flecked with white flashes, for the sea was as black as the sky and speckled with foam afar. The stars that had flown to the roll came back on the return swing of the ship, rushing downwards in their glittering multitude, not of fiery points, but enlarged to tiny discs brilliant with a clear wet sheen.

Jukes watched the flying big stars for a moment, and then wrote: '8 P.M. Swelling increasing. Ship la-
bouring and taking water on her decks. Battened down the coolies for the night. Barometer still falling.\textsuperscript{1} (20:26–27)

Like MacWhirr, Jukes must be concerned with factual data, but when he records these observations, he is quick to add details based on personal sense experience. His word choices reveal an evaluation of the situation: "calm" to describe the wind, "heat very oppressive" to indicate temperature and atmospheric conditions, and "ship rolling heavily" beneath a "threatening sunset." These comments reveal an active, interpreting mind that is not only sensible of the phenomenal world but also depends on direct sensations to imaginatively recreate reality. Immediately after Jukes's notation of these observations, the omniscient narrator describes the stars which appear to fly upwards and downwards with the rolling of the ship. The sense data that the reader receives is unadorned and uninterpreted, for Conrad presents a vivid but objective description of the stars rushing from bottom to top and top to bottom of the door which frames the outside world, much like De Quincey's perceptual frames. Immediately, Jukes translates this sense experience into a rational evaluation of the storm's progress: "Swelling increasing." To make sure that the reader is aware of Jukes's epistemological process, Conrad ends the scene with a dramatic rendering of Jukes's mental activity as he struggles to read the signs of the coming storm and to reconcile himself to its reality: "'Barometer still falling.' He paused, and thought to himself, 'Perhaps nothing whatever'll come of it.' And then he closed resolutely his entries: 'Every appearance of a typhoon coming on'" (20:27).

The level of knowledge that is most difficult to achieve is, according to Conrad's epistemology, like sensation, a non-rational experience. But unlike sensation, which is prerational, this ultimate knowledge which Marlow calls the "culminating point of [his] experience" is a transrational, visionary image. It exists apart from sensuous apprehension, rational understanding, or even verbal articulation and typically involves a character's defining his self in relation to the universe. This knowl-
edge is made manifest by the author in an "image" that he retrieves from deep within himself. As Conrad advises Edward Noble, "you must search the darkest corners of your heart, the most remote recesses of your brain,—you must search them for the image" (Jean-Aubry 1:183). When Conrad speaks of the image, it is likely that he means something similar to but by no means identical to the common notion of image. Rather, he is describing the image which inheres in the visionary moment, something like Coleridge’s symbolic involution, De Quincey’s involute, Baudelaire’s correspondances, or Joyce’s epiphany. As Conrad and his characters illustrate, this type of image, though literally expressed through sensation and thought, transcends both and manifests itself in a single symbolic expression such as an imaginatively conceived situation, a secular icon expressing a moral ideal, an ambience or allegorical setting, or another similar visionary summation of experience.

Marlow, in Lord Jim, provides a convenient definition of the Conradian moment of vision and its relation to the senses:

'It’s extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it’s just as well; and it may be that it is this very dulness that makes life to the incalculable majority so supportable and so welcome. Nevertheless, there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash—before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence.' (21:1423)

It is the recollection of the moment of vision, the poignant memory of this rare moment, that forms the basis of the Conradian image. In many ways, Marlow’s last view of Lord Jim provides the clearest and most interesting example of this visionary image, interesting because it suggests an identification between Conrad the novelist and Marlow the yarn spinner. Like Conrad, who starts a tale with "definite images," Marlow is obsessed by his final iconic vision of Jim:

'For me that white figure in the stillness of coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma. The twi-
light was ebbing fast from the sky above his head, the strip of sand had sunk already under his feet, he himself appeared no bigger than a child—then only a speck, a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world. And suddenly, I lost him.

(21:336).

In this image, which is repeated several times in the novel (21:175, 393), Conrad is able to sum up the temperament of the romantic Tuan Jim, the ambience of Patusan, and the human condition as expressed by the outcast in an alien land. Marlow's image of Jim is thus a symbolic expression of the entire novel.

Though other images in Conrad's work are not quite as central to their respective tales or novels, these visionary moments are usually existential in nature and are frequently the culminating point in the character's life. Often they are directly associated with a character's mortality and either are brought on by thoughts of death or bring on death itself when the image proves too terrifying, as in the case of the skeptical Decoud and the unimaginative Kayerts. On the Great Isabel, Decoud finds these visionary images fatal: "Not a living being, not a speck of a distant sail, appeared within the range of his vision; and, as if to escape from this solitude, he absorbed himself in his melancholy. His sadness was the sadness of a sceptical mind. He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images" (9:498). In a man who "recognized no other virtue than intelligence," the incomprehensibility of these images, evoked by solitude and magnified by loss of sleep, leads to suicide. Kayerts has a similar experience in "Outpost." Like Decoud, he is a character who has lived a "misdirected life" by recognizing no virtue other than familiarity. As Decoud has sublimated his passion and humanity in favor of skeptical intellection, so Kayerts has ignored the imaginative intellect for the security of the habitual. With the murder of Carlier, however, this changes:

Night came, and Kayerts sat unmoving on his chair. He sat quiet as if he had taken a dose of opium. The vio-
lence of the emotions he had passed through produced a feeling of exhausted serenity. He had plumbed in one short afternoon the depths of horror and despair, and now found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him: neither had death! He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very new thoughts... His old thought, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared in their true light at last! He, Kayerts, was a thinking creature. He had been all his life, till that moment, a believer in a lot of nonsense like the rest of mankind—who are fools; but now he thought! He Knew! He was at peace; he was familiar with the highest wisdom! (8:114–15)

Though obviously ironic, this passage nonetheless contains a darkly comic element of truth. The extraordinary sense experiences that accompany the act of murdering Carlier rouse Kayerts from his waking sleep. He is for the first time engaged in genuine thought. But this intellectual breakthrough, clichéd though it is, leads to a terrifying vision: “Then he tried to imagine himself dead, and Carlier sitting in his chair watching him; and his attempt met with such unexpected success, that in a very few moments he became not at all sure who was dead and who was alive” (8:115). Were “Outpost” written after Nostromo, Kayerts would be an ironic parody of Decoud as he grapples with an incomprehensible image. Kayerts’s image of his own death is impossible for him to bear.

There are, of course, Conradian characters who benefit from or even triumph in their experience with such images. Singleton in The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” for example, has a visionary experience which reconciles him to his mortality. Because of his sensibility and experience, the image is a profitable summation of his life as a seaman:

He looked upon the immortal sea with the awakened and groping perception of its heartless might; he saw it unchanged, black and foaming under the eternal scrutiny of the stars; he heard its impatient voice calling for him out of a pitiless vastness full of unrest, of turmoil,
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and of terror. He looked afar upon it, and he saw an immensity tormented and blind, moaning and furious, that claimed all the days of his tenacious life, and, when life was over, would claim the worn-out body of its slave. (23:99)

His vision is triumphant because it ends in what Conrad calls “completed wisdom,” a transcendent understanding of human mortality in a vast and indifferent universe. In *Heart of Darkness*, too, the image or vision of the central character is the culmination of human experience. In that tale, Kurtz has a paradoxically triumphant vision of human failure. During this undefined epiphany, Marlow sees an expression of pride, power, and terror on Kurtz’s face and wonders:

“Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during the supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

‘The horror! The horror!’” (16:149)

Despite Kurtz’s shortcomings, Marlow believes that Kurtz achieves a “victory” because the European, having defamiliarized his vision of the world and himself, sees beyond his blind idealism and acquires “complete knowledge.”

Conrad’s sensationalist epistemology is thus both a key to the mental lives of his characters and a model for structuring dramatic scenes and narrative events. His characters typically illustrate a three-stage epistemological process, beginning with a disorienting voyage of unusual sensual experiences which lead to a new, rational understanding of the world or human experience. This new knowledge, in turn, leads to a transrational image or vision through which the character apprehends a higher truth about reality and achieves a still deeper understanding of the human condition.

These three stages of the epistemological process—sensation, thought, and image—are often compressed into a relatively short fictional space and leave little doubt that Conrad
meant to juxtapose these responses to the phenomenal world. One illustrative passage comes from one of Conrad’s late works, near the beginning of Section 3 of *The Shadow-Line* when the narrator, a captain, boards his first command:

The mahogany table under the skylight shone in the twilight like a dark pool of water. The sideboard, surmounted by a wide looking-glass in an ormolu frame, had a marble top. . . The saloon itself was panelled in two kinds of wood in the excellent, simple taste prevailing when the ship was built.

I sat down in the arm-chair. . .

A succession of men had sat in that chair. I became aware of that thought suddenly, vividly, as though each had left a little of himself between the four walls of these ornate bulkheads; as if a sort of composite soul, the soul of command, had whispered suddenly.

‘You too!’ it seemed to say, ‘you too, shall taste of that peace and that unrest in a searching intimacy with your own self—obscure as we were and as supreme in the face of all the winds and all the seas, in an immensity that receives no impress, preserves no memories, and keeps no reckoning of lives.’ (17:52–53)

The first paragraph of the passage describes the new captain’s sensations, primarily visual, as he enters the saloon for the first time; the third short paragraph relates his thoughts about taking over the command; and the fourth paragraph translates those thoughts into a more cosmic image of the voyage of the soul. Here, in the space of around two hundred words, Conrad expresses in the order they occur all three modes of perception. Elsewhere, Conrad deals more extensively with these three levels of response, structuring his tales and novels around a critical, sensually disorienting event that severs the journeyer from what is culturally known. Knowing what is unknown to others in his culture, the disoriented voyager becomes a cultural heretic.
The Disorienting Voyage

Perhaps the most obvious example of the disorienting voyage is in *The Shadow-Line*. In the dead calm of the Gulf of Siam, the narrator experiences a near total loss of sensation that disorients him: "My command might have been a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence. I clung to the rail as if my sense of balance were leaving me for good" (17:74). The crew and captain are caught in a "life-in-death" state like the one known to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner; the normal aural, kinesthetic, and visual senses are negated in the absence of stimulation. The narrator remarks that "the brooding stillness of the world seemed sensitive to the slightest sound like a whispering gallery" (17:101). While Conrad may not have been thinking specifically of De Quincey's *Confessions* in this passage, he is fascinated with sensate extremes similar to those that preoccupied the opium-eater. During the calm, starless nights in the Gulf of Siam, the captain, his visual sense impaired, finds himself in an atmosphere of unreality: "Such must have been the darkness before creation. I knew I was invisible to the man at the helm. Neither could I see anything. Every form was gone, too, spar, sail, fittings, rails; everything was blotted out in the dreadful smoothness of that absolute night" (17:113). This catalogue of absences is followed by a description of disconnected visual and kinesthetic experiences which are normally combined aboard ship:

The ship had no steerage way. She lay with her head to the westward, the everlasting Koh-ring visible over the stern, with a few small islets, black spots in the great blaze, swimming before my troubled eyes. And but for those bits of land there was no speck on the sky, no speck on the water, no shape of vapour, no wisp of smoke, no sail, no boat, no stir of humanity, no sign of life, nothing! (17:95–96)

In the absence of the motion of sailing, the islands themselves, the only visual stimulus, swim before the troubled eyes of the
narrator. Conventional perception is stripped away, as the captain confronts the unfamiliar.

The disorientation of the senses that Conrad describes in *The Shadow-Line* is analogous to the experiences of Nostromo and Decoud in the Placid Gulf. For them, too, their very existence is called into question by the anesthetic quietness, darkness, and windlessness of the Sulaco harbor and gulf: "When [Nostromo’s] voice ceased, the enormous stillness, without light or sound, seemed to affect Decoud’s senses like a powerful drug. He didn’t even know at times whether he were asleep or awake. Like a man lost in slumber, he heard nothing, he saw nothing. Even his hand held before his face did not exist for his eyes" (9:262). As if he were entering an opium dream, Decoud crosses a shadow-line to a state of exile on the Great Isabel and faces a crisis in his philosophic skepticism; the universe becomes a "succession of incomprehensible images." For Nostromo, too, the Placid Gulf serves as a shadow-line. Once the silver has been hidden, once he has taken his night journey and is archetypically reborn (Rosenfield 43ff.), he has a new perception of himself, of his career, and of those who have used him. He realizes his corruption.

Scenes involving fog in Conrad’s works may also induce a state of anesthesia in a character which is followed by new awareness or understanding. The most poignant example of this is Marlow’s encounter with fog immediately below Kurtz’s station:

‘Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed and began to suspect yourself of being deaf—then the night came suddenly and struck you blind as well. When the sun rose there as a white fog, very warm and clammy, and more blinding than the night. It did not shift or drive; it was just there, standing all around you like something solid... We could see just the steamer we were on, her outlines blurred as though she had been on the point of dissolving, and a misty strip of water, perhaps two feet broad, around her—and that was all. The rest of the world was
The blinding fog disorients the senses and reality seems to dis­solve; the physicality of the world is called into question. This extraordinary experience occurs immediately before Marlow meets the heretical Kurtz, who will alter the tale-teller’s conception of himself, humanity, and his culture. The disorienting fog is thus a sensory threshold that marks the boundary between the culturally familiar and the unfamiliar.

If the extraordinary sensation preceding altered awareness sometimes takes the form of anesthesia brought on by becalming, darkness, or fog, it just as often takes the form of syn­esthesia brought on by a tempestuous storm. In The Nigger of the “Narcissus” and Typhoon, Conrad describes the violence of the storms by piling on sensual details which evoke a synesthetic response in the reader. For the crew aboard the Narcissus, the sensual tumult brought on by the gale is reminiscent of De Quincey’s hallucinatory experience in the Shrewsbury hotel:

Now and then, for the fraction of an intolerable second, the ship, in the fiercer burst of a terrible uproar, re­mained on her side, vibrating and still, with a stillness more appalling than the wildest motion. A fierce squall seemed to burst asunder the thick mass of sooty vapours; and above the wrack of torn clouds glimpses could be caught of the high moon rushing backwards with frightful speed over the sky, right into the wind’s eye. . Soon the clouds closed up and the world again became a raging, blind darkness that howled, flinging at the lonely ship salt sprays and sleet. (23:54–55)

As if to emphasize the primacy of sensation as a way of know­ing the phenomenal world, Conrad describes the storm itself as being an organ of sensation: the gale has an eye, and the clouds “close up” to leave the storm’s victims in a state of confusion. In the last sentence of the passage, Conrad appeals to the oral, visual, aural, kinesthetic, and tactile senses, all of which are
disturbed by the storm. The storm is imagined as an animistic force; the world becomes a darkness which howls and flings salty spray and frozen rain.

In *Typhoon*, the crew of the *Nan-Shan* experiences an identical disorientation. The storm seemed to explode all round the ship with an overpowering concussion and a rush of great waters...

The motion of the ship was extravagant. Her lurches had an appalling helplessness: she pitched as if taking a header into a void, and seemed to find a wall to hit every time... The gale howled and scuffled about gigantically in the darkness, as though the entire world were one black gully. (20:40, 42-43)

The typhoon is even more literally disorienting to those aboard the *Nan-Shan* than to the men of the *Narcissus*. Though both crews are tossed about a good deal, the men in the hold of the *Nan-Shan* are virtually dismembered, reduced to "an inextricable confusion of heads and shoulders, naked soles kicking upwards, fists raised, tumbling backs, legs, pigtails, faces" (20:58), and the ship's crew members experience a "bodily fatigue" from the "mere holding on to existence within the excessive tumult" (20:52).

This tumultuous derangement of the senses exhausts the crew, but it also brings "a profound trouble to their souls" (20:47). Conrad here emphasizes the close connection between physical and psychical experience, the former largely determining the latter. This physical and psychic upheaval is met by attempts to reestablish order aboard ship. Wait's symbolic birth scene and MacWhirr's distribution of the crew's possessions are attempts to regain the equilibrium of ordinary perception and experience that characterizes the reality of the civilized world. In the former case, the crew tries to deliver Wait from his regressive, duty-shirking withdrawal, a dangerous form of chaos aboard ship. And the literal-minded MacWhirr tries to reestablish order after the storm by dispensing silver dollars.

The souls of Conrad's characters are troubled by chaotic and unfamiliar sensations which interrupt their habitual ways
of seeing and thinking. Habitualized experience, the preoccupation with the reality of everyday duties, is a form of experience that many critics think Conrad strongly advocates. Yet it is the figure who rejects the culturally familiar (or who is rejected by the culture) that Conrad portrays most sympathetically, in part, perhaps, because of his own cultural estrangement. His fiction is peopled with outcasts, exiles, hermits, and solitaries whose careers deviate sharply from what is culturally acceptable and who struggle desperately with a defamiliarized world which they, like the reader, do not know how to see. The aim of Conrad’s fiction, as we know from the preface to The Nigger of the “Narcissus,” is to inspire the reader to see and to understand something beyond what the ordinary, culturally competent individual sees and understands. To be sure, Conrad would be the last to say that this forsaking of duty and habitual perception is without danger. But his fascination with the heroic outcast who grapples with the unfamiliar is a testament to his preoccupation with, and attraction to, those individuals, even if they are ultimately destroyed by their venture.

In Conrad’s fiction the characters most endangered by the unfamiliar are those outcasts who have functioned mindlessly in a culture which has deadened them to sensation, thought, and imagination. Carlier and Kayerts certainly fit this category. The journey they take away from their government offices, where all is routine, is a journey to their inexorable deaths:

Dull as they were to the subtle influences of their surroundings, they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness; a wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained. They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds. (8:89)

For the highly civilized individual who depends on the structure of society to organize his or her response to experience, the incomprehensibility of the wilderness is analogous to an ex-
The crew of the Nan-Shan experience "a profound trouble to their souls" because the typhoon, which disturbs the order of the ship, isolates each of them. When the typhoon hits, each man is rendered an exile unto himself: "In an instant the men lost touch of each other. This is the disintegrating power of a great wind: it isolates one from one's kind" (20:40). The social outcast is likewise troubled in his soul as he confronts the unfamiliar sensations of the wilderness and an alien culture:

But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations—to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike. (8:89)

The "negation of the habitual," or the disjoining of the cultural episteme, means the loss of a comfortable, a priori sense of reality. The reason Kayerts and Carlier fail, and fail quickly, is that they are incapable of responding to unfamiliar sensation.

The outcasts like Decoud and Willems, who are banished unwillingly from their civilizations and fail to comprehend unfamiliar sensations, also decline quickly. More capable outcasts, some of whom are self-exiled, find the unfamiliar equally intolerable and just as destructive. Lingard, Kurtz, and Lord Jim, for example, attempt to construct a society of their own in the wilderness, but their own civilization ultimately reclaims them. Even the hermit Heyst of Victory, who tries to cut himself off from nearly all human intercourse, cannot escape the "envoys of the outer world" (15:329).

Conrad concentrates on sharing with the reader the outcast's sensual experience; the reader sees what the exile sees. In
virtually every case, Conrad’s exile feels distanced from his own normal sensations; as if floating in a dream, he feels totally unconnected with the earth. This dreamlike suspension is usually hallucinatory in nature and signals a crossing of the shadow-line, a movement away from conventional perception. When Nostromo and Decoud leave the protection of the Sulaco jetty, for example, it is as if they were being “launched into space . . . and suspended in the air” (9:261). After Kurtz has succumbed to the “heavy, mute spell of the wilderness,” Marlow describes him as one totally divorced from earthly experience: “He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air” (16:144). Kurtz’s heretical alienation from civilization is described through a confusing and suspending of sense experience. This alienation induces a kind of cosmic vertigo in which the soul of the outcast is set adrift in space, no longer in touch with the earth which is the emblem of all that he once knew and was sure of. Like the less distinguished outcast Kayerts, who “kicks free of himself,” Kurtz—and, to some degree, Marlow when in his presence—divests himself of his habitual restraints and perceptions as he disjoins the cultural episteme. This same sensation of suspension, used by Conrad to describe the moment when the outcast keenly senses his exile, is found in the hallucinatory passages in Nostromo. The Placid Gulf journey is likened to a dreamy state just before death: “Decoud shook himself, shuddered a bit, though the air that drifted past him was warm. He had the strangest sensation of his soul having just returned into his body from the circumambient darkness in which land, sea, sky, the mountains, and the rocks were as if they had not been” (9:262). Though for the moment Decoud is able to drift from his dream world back to the phenomenal world of water, land, and sky, once he is isolated on the Great Isabel, he again becomes “like a man in a dream” (9:301). “All his active sensations and feelings from as far back as he could remember seemed to him the maddest of
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dreams" (9:267). This hallucinatory state, brought on by sleeplessness and solitude, induces Decoud’s fragmentary view of the universe.

The same hallucinatory dream state is used more extensively in conjunction with the theme of exile toward the middle and end of An Outcast of the Islands. Willems’s decline in the novel is marked by progressively exaggerated sense perceptions, the first of which is a vision of his sudden death. As Willems lies drowsing in Aissa’s arms, he has a vision of himself in exile:

There was a long interval of silence. She stroked his head with gentle touches, and he lay dreamily, perfectly happy but for the annoyance of an indistinct vision of a well-known figure; a man going away from him and diminishing in a long perspective of fantastic trees, whose every leaf was an eye looking after that man, who walked away growing smaller, but never getting out of sight for all his steady progress. . There was something familiar about that figure. Why! Himself! . . It had been half a dream; he had slumbered in her arms for a few seconds. Only the beginning of a dream—nothing more. (14:144-45)

Like Kurtz and Kayerts, who cut themselves off from the restraints of the civilized world and their cultural selves, Willems imagines himself out of his self. He envisions a double who is an outlaw, and who, like Leggatt in “The Secret Sharer,” expresses the main character’s social marginality: “It as like an evasion, like a prisoner breaking his parole—that thing slinking off stealthily while he slept” (14:145). Though clearly a metaphor for both exile and death—“If he had not woke up in time he would never have come back again from there; from whatever place he was going to” (14:145)—the hypnogogic vision that Willems has is transformed into the threatening reality of Aissa’s blind but homicidal father. Willems recognizes Omar’s face and the weapon clenched in his teeth, but he remains impassive before the ominous vision, his senses anesthetized: “The uneasy wonder and the obscure fear of that apparition were drowned in the quietude of all his senses, as pain is drowned in
the flood of drowsy serenity that follows upon a dose of opium” (14:147). Suggesting the neurotic paralysis that Conrad personally feared, Willems’s paralysis is caused by a fear of the unfamiliar, the incomprehensible, the inscrutable: “It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, control, comprehend nothing and no one—not even himself” (14:149).

Near the end of the novel, after Lingard’s departure, Willems’s dreamlike visions turn into nightmarish visions that are virtually identical to the alternating anesthesia and hyperesthesia of the opium addict. Willems’s hellish visions culminate in an image of his own moral corruption; the very land overcomes him and hastens the disintegration already begun in his soul:

He would be stretched upon the warm moisture of the ground, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, knowing nothing: he would lie stiff, passive, rotting slowly; while over him, under him, through him—unopposed, busy, hurried—the endless and minute throngs of insects, little shining monsters of repulsive shapes, with horns, with claws, with pincers, would swarm in streams, in rushes, in eager struggle for his body; would swarm countless, persistent, ferocious and greedy—till there would remain nothing but the white gleam of bleaching bones in the long grass. (14:331–32)

Once again, Conrad fuses the physical and psychical worlds; corporeal and moral corruption coalesce in a state of negated sensation, of “feeling nothing, knowing nothing.”

The epistemology of An Outcast, like that in other Conrad novels, is heretical in that it offers a disoriented vision of the phenomenal world. The episteme of Conrad’s work is characterized by a subversion of cultural perception brought on by the exile’s estrangement from his native land. Like Coleridge’s Mariner, Conrad’s exiles experience a profound sensual disorientation—in fog, at night, in a typhoon—that separates the character from his culturally conditioned responses to experience.
While the heretical space of Conrad's journeys may be more conventionalized than that of other writers discussed in this study, his canon demonstrates the most consistent preoccupation in modern letters with the sensuous voyage of disorientation, a voyage that subverts the archetypal circular journey of the Christian episteme.