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Volcanoes, Disaster, and Evil in *Victory*

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In *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002) Susan Neiman treats the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 as an important moment in the evolution of reflection on the subject of evil, noting that the event instigated a divergent “shift in consciousness” in which “natural evils no longer have any seemly relation to moral evils” (2004: 250). Treating the theodicy of Leibniz and the responses of Rousseau and Voltaire to the disaster, Neiman notes that “After Lisbon, the word evil was restricted to what was once called moral evil” (268). In this reading of modernity, Lisbon, and later Auschwitz, “stand for symbols of the breakdown of the worldviews of their era” (8), with the former the last instance in philosophical tradition where natural disaster is interpreted in the context of evil, and the latter confirming that the origins of evil must be searched for in the earthly and human.

While Conrad’s life and writing do not typically summon the spectre of theological rumination, they are nevertheless, by now, firmly associated with specific historical instances of evil in modernity, or, perhaps more accurately, the evils of modernity. “Heart of Darkness,” inspired by Conrad’s travels to the Belgian Congo of King Leopold II, exposes the atrocities of a particular phase of extractive nineteenth-century imperial exploitation, with the experience offering Marlow a passing glimpse of “something great and invincible, like evil or truth” (55). *Nostromo*, occupied with the process and consequences of the “conquest of the earth” in the context of modernity, capitalism, state formation and mining in Latin America, also scrutinizes the “spirits of good and evil that hover near every concealed treasure of the earth” (501). Of all Conrad’s works, however, the language of *Victory* is most determined to draw overtly, and rather sensationally, upon dichotomies of good and evil. The novel offers various interrogations of Heyst’s view that “this world is evil upon the whole” (54), presenting a setting filled with “God-forsaken villages

up dark creeks and obscure bays” (10) and the enchanted and spectral figures of Heyst and Jones who both, rather biblically, have been stretching the respective shanks of detachment and criminality by “coming and going up and down the earth” (317-18). All this transpires, as Schomberg notes, with “a volcano in full blast near that island – enough to guide almost a blind man. What more do you want? An active volcano to steer by!” (168-69); advice suggesting an interpretative guide to a novel that occupies a position on the fault line of works tracing Conrad’s literary decline.

Victory places a potent symbol of natural disaster in the midst of a fiction that simultaneously draws attention to melodramatic incarnations of evil in its principal villains, with the novel offering a specific embodiment of natural disaster – what would formerly have been considered an instance of natural evil – to complement its ambiguous and stylized treatment of moral evil. While Neiman sees a divergence after the Lisbon Earthquake into a clear distinction between natural and moral evil, discussions of the volcanic in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries demonstrate the continued presence of traces of pre-Enlightenment attitudes to natural disaster alongside scientific inquiry into the natural world, all of which makes the volcano in *Victory* a suggestive source for further critical investigation.

Contemporary writing about eruptions and their devastation reveals geological thought incorporating the language of earlier treatments of horror and evil to account for destructive natural phenomena. Whereas Charles Darwin’s *Geological Observations on the Volcanic Islands* (1844) deals rather dryly with the subject, one of Conrad’s sources for *Victory*, Alfred Russel Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), offers an expansive and evocative geological and social exploration, examining “the whole region occupied by this vast line of volcanoes” (1869: 6). In his travels through the region that would become the setting for *Victory*, Wallace notes that natural disaster formed “the chronological epochs of the native inhabitants, by the aid of which the ages of their children are remembered, and the dates of many important events are determined. I can only briefly allude to the many fearful eruptions that have taken place in this region. In the amount of injury to life

and property, and in the magnitude of their effects, they have not been surpassed by any upon record” (7).

For Wallace, volcanoes, often classically understood as the gateway to the underworld, or in modern fiction as the beginning of a journey to the centre of the earth, stood as ambiguous portals to incongruous but not wholly incompatible ways of understanding disaster and suffering:

It is only when actually gazing on an active volcano that one can fully realize its awfulness and grandeur. Whence comes that inexhaustible fire whose dense and sulphureous smoke forever issues from this bare and desolate peak? Whence the mighty forces that produced that peak, and still from time to time exhibit themselves in the earthquakes that always occur in the vicinity of volcanic vents? The knowledge from childhood, of the fact that volcanoes and earthquakes exist, has taken away somewhat of the strange and exceptional character that really belongs to them. [. . .] A volcano is . . . a fact of so awful a character that, if it were the rule instead of the exception, it would make the earth uninhabitable; a fact so strange and unaccountable that we may be sure it would not be believed on any human testimony, if presented to us now for the first time, as a natural phenomenon happening in a distant country (450-51).

Wallace’s writing attests to the power of volcanos to evoke the subject not only of disastrous ends, but also that of distant origins and creation, a topic explored historically in the contrast between Vulcanism and Neptunism in considerations of the origins of the earth, and which often incorporated contrasting views of volcanoes – benign or evil – in natural science. According to D’Holbach, “Volcanoes are . . . a kindness of nature; they provide a free passage to fire and air; they stop them from pushing their ravages beyond certain limits, and from completely disrupting the face of our globe” (Ashburn Miller 2011: 144). In addition to their capacity to evoke terror and the power of the sublime, volcanoes were often simultaneously regarded as “hypothetical sources of both community and technology, essential to both natural equilibrium and human progress” (Ashburn Miller 2011: 146).

Undoubtedly, however, the most compelling appeal of the volcanic lies in its enduring connection to the subjects of geological instability and environmental annihilation. As Mark D. Anderson has noted, “Before the nuclear era, at least, volcanic eruptions embodied the nearest thing to total annihilation that humans could envision” (2011: 107). The association of the volcanic with the apocalyptically destructive features notably in Conrad’s writing, with the explosion of the Palestine in “Youth” wholly inexplicable until it comes to Marlow’s mind that such immediate devastation might be volcanic in origin:

I seemed somehow to be in the air. I heard all round me like a pent-up breath released – as if a thousand giants simultaneously had said Phoo! – and felt a dull concussion which made my ribs ache suddenly. No doubt about it – I was in the air, and my body was describing a short parabola. But short as it was, I had the time to think several thoughts in, as far as I can remember, the following order: ‘This can’t be the carpenter – What is it? – Some accident – Submarine volcano? – Coals, gas! – By Jove! we are being blown up — Everybody’s dead . . .’ (25)

Whereas in *The Rover*, Peyrol has “learned from childhood to suppress every sign of wonder before . . . the most alarming phenomena of nature (as manifested, for instance, in the violence of volcanoes or the fury of human beings)” (24), the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries devoted much attention to expressing wonder at the destructive force of the volcanic. The journey of the Palestine in “Youth,” derived from Conrad’s real-life experience on the *Judea*, occurred in 1883, the year in which Krakatoa saw its famously cataclysmic eruption in the Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra. While Conrad happened to be in Poland on a visit to family when the eruption occurred, the event devastated the real-world environ of Conrad’s early fiction and gained instant fame and notoriety. As Simon Winchester notes, “The word *Krakatoa*, despite being a word misspelled and mangled by the imperfect arts of Victorian telegraphy and journalism, became in one awful ear-

splitting moment a byname for cataclysm, paroxysm, death and disaster” (2004: 7).

Krakatoa informs the fiction of authors working in the tradition of adventure writing frequently associated with Conrad’s work. R. M. Ballantyne’s *Blown to Bits, or The Lonely Man of Rakata: A Tale of the Malay Archipelago* (1889), centres on the eruption, bringing European travellers to the East and to the site of the volcano. In his preface to the novel, Ballantyne explained:

The extremely violent nature of the volcanic eruption in Krakatoa in 1883, the peculiar beauty of those parts of the eastern seas where the event occurred, the wide-spread influences of the accompanying phenomena, and the tremendous devastation which resulted, have all inspired me . . . (1889: iii)

Not unlike *Victory*, *Blown to Bits* includes a reclusive figure living in the shadow of imminent disaster; a Mr Van der Kemp, known as the Hermit of Rakata, who resides on “Krakatoa — destined so soon to play a thrilling part in the world’s history; to change the aspect of the heavens everywhere; to attract the wondering gaze of nearly all nations” (59-60). This wondering gaze directly informed the representational arts in the late-nineteenth century, with the elemental backdrops to paintings such as Edward Munch’s *The Scream* frequently understood to be influenced by transformative changes in sunsets across the world resulting from the fallout of the eruption of Krakatoa. Such effects are best seen in the colour sketches of English artist William Ashcroft (1832-1914), whose *Twilight and Chromatic Afterglow, Chelsea* (1883-86) recorded the twilight skies near London in the aftermath of the eruption (See Hamilton 2012: 129-41). The mood of such works can be read as part of the wider late nineteenth-century culture that had a shaping atmospheric influence on Conrad’s writing. Volcanic eruptions and their widespread consequences informed, and often directly created, a climate in which, as Cedric Watts has noted, “thoughts of *la fin de siècle* led to thoughts of *la fin du globe*” (1993:83).

Similarly connected to the geography of Conrad’s early travels, and equally devastating in terms of loss of life and destructive

force, was the eruption in 1902 of Mt. Pelée in St. Pierre in Martinique, where Conrad had experienced an extended stay as a young sailor in 1875-76, drawing later on aspects of the geography of the location in his descriptions of Sulaco in *Nostramo*. The eruption completely destroyed St Pierre, the “pearl of the West Indies,” causing close to 30,000 deaths in about three minutes on the morning of 8 May, as a result of pyroclastic flows.

Responding to the largest loss of life of any volcanic disaster of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt described it as “One of the greatest calamities in history” (Zebrowski 2002: 6). One eyewitness to the destruction, Captain Edward William Freeman, writing in *Pearson’s Magazine* in 1902, described it as “the most terrible, the most horrible event that ever happened in the history of the world”:

I have read of the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, how the Lord rained brimstone and fire upon them out of Heaven – of Pompeii – of great earthquakes like Port Royal, Lisbon, Yeddo – of how Krakatoa erupted and changed the face of Java – of the mighty wave that engulfed Galveston – but nothing that I have read of these things equals the horror of St. Pierre’s doom. I think that the Flood, though it destroyed every living thing on the face of the earth, was less, for drowning is pleasant. This thing was a living picture of hell. (1902: 313)

In addition to individual and journalistic responses to such contemporary volcanic catastrophes, most of which engage with the power of volcanoes to bring about cataclysmic doom and to wake the dormant spirit of natural evil, a major strand of the volcanic in the nineteenth-century imagination lies in the artistic reworking of historically famous eruptions. The most celebrated of these relates to the writing of Singleton’s favourite author, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whose hugely popular *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) captured the sudden eclipse of civilization, with the subject featuring frequently in various adapted forms in nineteenth-century art (See Daly 2011). Bulwer-Lytton’s novel was itself inspired by Russian artist Karl Briullov’s 1833 painting *The Last Day of Pompeii*,

and both contemporary and classical eruptions of Vesuvius were treated in painting throughout the century, most notably by J. M. W. Turner, John Martin, Frédéric-Henri Schopin and James Hamilton (See Hamilton 2012).

This culture is registered in “Il Conde,” from *A Set of Six*, where the narrator first meets the eponymous Count “in the National Museum in Naples, in the rooms on the ground floor containing the famous collection of bronzes from Herculaneum and Pompeii: that marvellous legacy of antique art whose delicate perfection has been preserved for us by the catastrophic fury of a volcano” (269). In *Victory*, when Heyst and Lena’s romantic stroll on Samburan quickly turns to “the vision of a world destroyed” (191), both recall having seen Vesuvius, the Ur-site of historical volcanic catastrophe in European culture and imagination. If, as Robert Hampson notes, the “terms of Lena’s life are those of romantic melodrama” (2002: 250), then, here, *Victory* harnesses the melodramatic resonances of Pompeii and Vesuvius as treated in painting and popular literature in sight of the modern-day “ruins” (*Victory*: 195) of the Tropical Belt Coal Company.

Given the distinct stylistic shifts of *Victory*, from its initial realist narrative mode to its subsequent gestures towards the allegorical, it is worth noting that in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) Walter Benjamin associated the ruin with the allegorical mode: “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (1998: 177-78). Heyst, a former proponent of “the great stride forward” (9), fittingly lives amidst a volcano and ruins, two highly allegorical elements of landscape, both of which feature as important backdrops that silently complement the allegorical transformation of the narrative.

As Davidson searches for Heyst on Samburan at the end of *Victory*, he finds only “ashes . . . he and the girl together” (410), with Heyst’s suicide beneath the volcano in sight of the ruins of the settlement becoming a parodic, much-diminished, latter day Pompeii. Looming over the “desolation of the headquarters of the Tropical Belt Coal Company” and “the decaying bones of that once sanguine enterprise” (173) is the volcano. Earlier, in *Lord Jim*, the

successful operations of industrial production are equated with volcanic activity, where Jim observes “the factory chimneys . . . belching out smoke like a volcano” (11). In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* (1755), Rousseau saw metallurgy as the result of “the extraordinary circumstance of some volcano that, vomiting fused metallic matter, would have given to observers the idea of imitating this operation of nature” (Ashburn Miller 2011: 146). Therefore, if, as Daniel R. Schwarz notes, the surviving volcano in *Victory* “surrealistically mocks the former inhabitant’s own habits and temperament” (1982: 78), it also offers fiery evidence of its own consistent internal industry and production in contrast to the failed enterprise of the Tropical Belt Coal Company.

However, volcanoes did not simply embody the potential to evoke the destroyed civilizations of the past; they could also play a direct role in shaping the fate of emerging nations in the present, influencing flows of international capital, and deciding the location of major engineering feats of modernity with their frequently transformative power over nature. One measure of natural disasters and their disruptive capacities lay in their ability to disrupt lines of global communication, such as the telegraph; those manifestations of technological modernity that the narrator of *Victory* sees emanating out from the Tropical Belt Coal Company map: “Heavy lines radiated from it in all directions through the tropics” (23). As Mark D. Anderson observes, “More than the disasters engendered by the volcanic eruptions themselves, it is the potentiality of eruption that inscribes volcanic geography with such powerful cultural symbolism” (2011: 108). Volcanoes played an important cameo role in the case of deciding the location of the engineering wonder of the age, the Panama Canal, the political circumstances of which greatly inform *Nostramo*. Nicaragua lost out to Panama (then a region of Colombia) when Frenchman Philippe Bunau-Varilla, working for the United States and the cause of the Colombian route, sent a one centavo Nicaraguan stamp with Momotombo in eruption in the background to each member of the US Congress shortly before the deciding vote. Momotombo, a volcanic star in literary history that appears as the subject of poems by Victor Hugo

and Rubén Darío, emerged as symbolic of Nicaragua's uncertain geological and economic stability.

Bunau-Varilla included underneath each stamp the words "An official witness of the volcanic activity on the isthmus of Nicaragua." In an earlier pamphlet on the subject of the route of the canal, he had written: "Young nations like to put on their coats of arms what best symbolizes their moral domain or characterizes their native soil. What have Nicaraguans chosen to characterize their country on their coat of arms, on their postage stamps? Volcanoes!" (McCullough 1977: 323). However, while the volcanic here stands opposed to the ordered evolution of technology and capitalism, it elsewhere in the period characterizes the eruptive processes of political and economic modernity themselves. Where Theodore Roosevelt saw the eruption of Mt Pelée in Martinique as calamity, Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, observing the emerging power of the US in Latin America in his poem "To Roosevelt," addressed the US president, saying: "You think that life is one big fire, / that progress is just eruption / that wherever you put bullets, / you put the future, too" (2005: 119).

The Volcano in *Victory*

Chekhov famously wrote of the craft and technique of literary art, advising that "If in Act I you have a pistol hanging on the wall, then it must fire in the last act" (Rayfield 1997: 203). Equally, one might say, if you offer a volcano to your reader at the outset, then by the end of the story, it should certainly erupt. This attitude informed H. L. Mencken's review of *Victory* in *Smart Set* in April 1915. Mencken first pondered whether Conrad was colluding in the plot to make his own fiction, and not coal, the "supreme commodity of the age" (*Victory*: 3). Aghast at the transparent nature of the novel, he asked: "Does he actually lend a covert hand to those . . . who advertise him as if he were some new brand of breakfast food or touring car." *Victory* presented "damning evidence," constituting "a yarn as swift and compact as the veriest piece of trade goods, a fiction that even a tired business man might

conceivably enjoy and understand” (*Contemporary Reviews III*: 450). For Mencken, additionally, the volcano was problematic:

The one obvious blemish upon it [*Victory*] is an omission. Why does Conrad forget the volcano, that glowering symbol of the whole sordid drama? One hears a good deal of it at the start. It dominates and menaces Heyst’s lonely island; it is the beacon that brings Jones and Ricardo to the crazy jetty. And then, unaccountably, one hears of it no more (*Contemporary Reviews III*: 453).

Conrad criticism has long been occupied with determining, like Mencken, whether *Victory* is a commoditized Conrad, representing a work exemplary of his later “decline” as a writer. The volcano, however, sees the novel refuse the most obvious commoditized version of possible events relating to the unfolding of the volcanic disaster narrative. As Nicholas Daly has noted of Bulwer-Lytton and nineteenth-century volcanic disaster fiction more generally, the “readerly pleasure” of such a symbol and setting “is always predicated on our knowledge that it is about to end,” which becomes “the crucial aspect of volcano narrative as commodity-experience” (2011: 272). While the evidence of “Youth” reveals Conrad was not averse to allowing smoldering events to run to their natural explosive conclusion, in *Victory* Conrad gestures toward such fulfilment, while also refusing the commodity of the conventional disaster narrative.

Given the overtly philosophical backdrop to *Victory*, it is worth looking elsewhere for volcanic contexts in nineteenth century literary and philosophical culture to help expand upon the volcano and its allusiveness. Heyst’s father is generally understood to be a Schopenhauerian thinker, and a recurring figure in Schopenhauer’s work (and likewise that of Nietzsche) is the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, the legend of whose death is linked to his suicide by leaping into Mt. Etna. Heyst’s father achieved through writing and thinking what Empedocles sought in physical destruction: he had “considered the universal nothingness! He had plunged into it headlong,” and like Empedocles dared “descend into the abyss of infernal regions” (219). Indeed, in the volcanically

titled “Storm and Dust” (219), Heyst’s father’s philosophy sought the effect of natural disaster and “ought to have withered this globe” (196) and “filled heaven and earth with ruins” (175). Heyst, the uneasy inheritor of this philosophical legacy, emerges as a variation of the Empedoclean self of nineteenth and early twentieth-century literary culture, a figure best represented in Matthew Arnold’s “Empedocles on Etna” (1852). Arnold’s Empedocles is a “wanderer” (1852: 44) who reflects on his physical and philosophical engagement with body and mind: “Slave of Sense / I have in no wise been: but slave of Thought?” (66). Perceived as an outcast, “most men say, he is half mad/ With exile” (4), a figure who “canst not live with men nor with thyself” (46).

Susan E. Lorsch notes that Arnold’s Empedocles “represents a conscious rejection of the products of the mind and a disgust with the mind itself – as if the mind had caused his separation from nature” (1983: 127). For Lionel Trilling, the misery of Arnold’s Empedocles was “chiefly the misery of a man facing a cosmic fact he cannot endure,” while he also “cannot endure the social world” (1955: 103). The suicide of Empedocles in the poem is rendered as a final embrace of the elemental, an abstrusely triumphant return to physical substance through self-destruction undertaken with conviction as a corrective to intellectual detachment:

And therefore, ye Elements, I know –
 Ye know it too — it hath been granted me
 Not to die wholly, not to be all enslav’d.
 I feel it in this hour. The numbing cloud
 Mounts off my soul: I feel it, I breathe free.

(Arnold 1852: 66-67)

In *Victory*, however, while Heyst’s “volcano was company to him in the shades of the night” (4), it does not become his companion in the shades of death, thereby making him a dispossessed descendant of earlier thinkers capable of a wholesale volcanic commitment. Formerly “Enchanted Heyst,” he is latterly, in rather Weberian fashion, “suffering from thorough disenchantment” (65), denied a

classical model of volcanic self-destruction associated with Empedocles. Meanwhile, the volcano successfully takes up the philosophy of Heyst senior's dying words: it looks on over Samburan and Heyst's demise, making not a sound.

As a novel replete with explicit references to evil, it is not surprising that *Victory* deals in various ways with the subject of origins. Heyst's personal connection with paternity is reflected in what Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan has described as the "baffling range of texts all claiming to be the literary progenitors of this work" (1991: 180). However, as Terry Collits notes, "the planting of [literary and] mythical allusions in the text is a narrative strategy whose effect is to obfuscate rather than illuminate" (2005: 163). This obfuscation operates in the symbolism of evil in the novel. *Victory* ostensibly presents a Schopenhauerian world in that it sees that "egoism, cunning, malice are . . . always the order of the day" (Dews 2012: 130). It also concurs with Nietzsche's view of the futility of seeking the origins of evil "beyond the world" (Dews 2012: 141). Nevertheless, despite Heyst's belief that "There must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all" (173), he also disclaims knowledge of origins: "It's like prying into inscrutable mysteries which are not worth scrutinising" (197). Even Ricardo, habitually alert to the contingent, is given to "marvelling inwardly at the amazing elections, conjunctions and associations of events which influence man's pilgrimage on this earth" (128), and *Victory* ironizes David Hume's famous treatment of first causes and billiard balls in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Ever restless, Ricardo goes one stage further, from billiard balls to the structure of the playing table itself, discussing how to deal with the sublime boredom of Mr. Jones: "I couldn't make this billiard table move an inch if I talked to it from now till the end of days – could I? Well, the governor is like that, too, when the fits are on him" (150).

In *Victory*, the obvious symbols of evil, whether it be the formerly-understood potential for natural evil in the volcano, or the "embodied evil" (298) of Jones and Ricardo, either fail to fulfil their function, or are the uncomplicatedly pragmatic masquerading as impenetrably radical evil. So, while Heyst assuredly tells Lena: "Appearances — what more, what better can you ask for? In fact

you can't have better. You can't have anything else" (204), the novel suggests you cannot even have those. The spectral and ostensibly evil Jones and Ricardo are ultimately just "deluded bandits" (384). The closest the novel comes to isolating evil is, ultimately, in Lena's vision of "evil incarnate" (207) in the figure of Schomberg, who fittingly works in hotel management. In place of the consolations of a recognizably absolute transcendental evil, the "bewildered travellers" who constitute modernity's drifters must congregate at "garish, unrestful hotel" (3) of the present, languishing in the company of a proprietor who is the malicious "originator" (20) of "evil report[s]" (21).

Victory opens with a consideration of the "very unnatural physics" of capitalism, and the economic and financial transformations of "evaporation" and "liquidation" (3) are reflected in the modes of writing. From the concrete specificity of the realistic to the airy abstractions of the allegorical, the novel deals with origins, mutability and death. If "History is the time between Genesis and Apocalypse" (González Echeverría 1988: 112), then it offers the promise of progress and the threat of disaster. However, whereas Walter Benjamin's Angel of History drifts towards the future while gazing from a privileged vantage point upon the ruins of progress, Conrad's "Author's Note" to *Victory*, which abounds with references to the Last Judgement, catastrophe, and earthquakes, instead celebrates the "power of endurance" of the "unchanging Man of history" (000), a symbol of those whose burden it is to face perpetual eruptions of misfortune and tragedy.

Conrad, of course, started writing *Victory* at the time of one of the twentieth century's most famous calamities of progress, the sinking of the *Titanic*. Elaborating on the "the miserable greatness of that disaster" (*Notes on Life and Letters*: 175) in "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*" (1912), he noted that "if ever a loss at sea fell under the definition in terms of a bill of lading, of Act of God, this one does, in its magnitude, suddenness and severity; and in the chastening influence it should have on the self-confidence of mankind" (167). Distancing himself from theodicy, however, Conrad asserted that "I have neither the competence nor the wish to take a theological view of this great misfortune, sending so many

souls to their last account” (167). In Conrad’s view, the disaster revealed a shift from traditional theodicy to a theodicy of progress. In modernity, progress itself became inscrutable, promoted, as he subsequently explained in “Certain Aspects of the Admirable Inquiry into the Loss of the *Titanic*” (1912), by “the high priests of the modern cult of perfected material and of mechanical appliances [who] would fain forbid the profane from enquiring into its mysteries” (180).

What particularly struck Conrad about the disaster was the incongruous meeting of the technology of modernity and that of the classical world. The sinking of the *Titanic* created a sudden hole in space and time in which the dismal termination of contemporary narratives of progress initiated an anachronistic encounter with those of historical and literary origins:

Doesn’t it strike you as absurd that in this age of mechanical propulsion, of generated power, the boats of such ultra-modern ships are fitted with oars and sails, implements more than three thousand years old? Old as the siege of Troy. Older! . . . (190)

Written in the wake of this exemplary disaster of progress, *Victory* also reflects on evil and suffering, delineating modernity while drawing on the symbolism and literary modes of the past. Heyst, not unlike the novel itself, is emblematic of those figures who, as Frank Kermode observes, are born into the middle of things, oppressed by the symbols of beginnings and ends, and alienated by an inability to join them (2000: 4). The volcano, variously symbolic of such struggles, embodies the capacity for eruptive destruction and self-elimination – a force that destroys others while destroying itself – but also for self-origination and self-perpetuation.

A frequent motif in the treatment of the volcanic is that “the environment and the self are seen as sharing as their essential characteristic the potential for violent eruption” (Anderson 2011: 108). In “On Nature” (1874), John Stuart Mill observed that “Everything, in short, which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetrated on a larger scale by natural agents” (1874: 30), while in *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche observed that

“we are, all of us, growing volcanoes that approach the hour of their eruption; but how near or distant that is, nobody knows – not even God” (1974: 84). On the one hand, the frequently interpreted Nihilistic ending of the novel – Davidson’s “Nothing” – might be regarded as Heyst’s victory in uniting ends and origins. If the world emerged *ex-nihilo*, then the final word of the novel returns us circuitously to the substance, or lack of substance, from which the world was created.

However, in a post-Nietzschean world, and especially considering “the relationship which Conrad saw between the world of *Victory* and the larger context of post-Enlightenment Europe” (Geddes 1980: 58), it might be more fruitful to avert our gaze from the self-made conflagration that engulfs Heyst in the shadow of the volcano. While a source of potential catastrophe and suffering, *Victory*’s volcano also distributes enriching ash over the landscape of Samburan. An alternative approach to death and disaster lies in the Enlightenment response of Wang, who “could be observed breaking the ground near his hut,” using the fertile volcanic soil for “the growing of vegetables” (181), thereby candidly cultivating his garden, alert to “unexpected possibilities of good and evil, which had to be watched for with prudence and care” (184).

In *Under the Volcano* (1947) a novel in which where volcanoes also fail to produce any especially dramatic action, Malcolm Lowry observed that “It was not for nothing the ancients had placed Tartarus under Mt Aetna” (1969: 340). Likewise, as this essay has suggested, it is not for nothing that the volcano looms silently over Samburan and the destructive unfolding of Conrad’s *Victory*.

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