

A Dialectics and Aesthetics of Tragic Will and Fate (Freud, Kierkegaard, Macbeth and Lord Jim)

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character is man's destiny

— Heraclitus

all rivers flow into the sea and the sea is not full

— Qohelet

This essay is in two parts. The first identifies a dialectic of “fate” and “will” operating in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and analyses the necessitarian features of that play against, first, the Freudian program, and second, Kierkegaard’s “concept of anxiety”. The second part of the essay builds on the foregoing analysis of necessity, and the “aesthetic of fate” that emerges from the issue of sufficiency in *Macbeth*, to define the terms of a general aesthetic of “tragic will and fate” using as its central text Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*.¹

I

In a little-remembered paper on “Those Wrecked by Success” published in 1916, Sigmund Freud turned his hand to analysing the least Freudian of Shakespeare’s plays—the one most resistant to Freud’s characteristic trick of reducing human character to theoretical premise and human experience to psychological schematics. He turned up a Macbeth “wrecked by success” and fatally motivated by *frustration*.²

The Weird Sisters assured Macbeth that he himself should be king, but to Banquo they promised that his children should succeed to the throne. Macbeth is incensed by this decree of destiny. He is not content with the satisfaction of his own

¹ This essay owes incalculably to the unpublished work of my father, Goodwin Packer, on the connection of Kierkegaard to Shakespeare, especially in regard to Kierkegaard’s conception of “despair”. I would like to thank Rick Benitez and Mark Weblin, without whom the present form of the essay would have been neither written nor published.

² “Those Wrecked By Success”, Part II of *Some Character Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work* (Penguin Freud Library, trans. James Strachey [PFL], ed. Albert Dickson, 14: *Art and Literature*, London: Penguin, 1985), p. 299.

ambition. He wants to found a dynasty—not to have murdered for the benefit of strangers.³

Destiny (Fate) certainly has a pivotal role in *Macbeth*, whether or not Macbeth is “incensed” by its decrees. And since *Macbeth* is a play primarily about *will*, about action in time and the overwriting of Fate, the self of the drama is defined not by Fate *per se* but by where from moment to moment Fate has been *put*. This means that whatever sort of being Macbeth *is*, it will not be definitive, however completely it determines its own next moment.

It is characteristic of Freud’s own attention to “will” that the mechanism of destiny by which Macbeth is brought from “noble captain” to moral nihilist should be confounded with the gut-reaction of a man in the throes of illimitable self-interest (the untrammelled “pleasure-principle” of “satisfied ambition”). Ignoring the very significant role of time and temporal progression (and the “done-ness” of things⁴) in this play, Freud insists that MacDuff’s *ex post facto* utterance (“He has no children!”) lays bare “the deepest motive which ... forces Macbeth to go far beyond his own nature”.⁵ Freud’s usual aesthetic quest is for a paradigmatic formula that will bring drama to account, an “explanation” (like Oedipus’s “complex”) that, true or not, is true for the sake of greater truth. So if everything in Macbeth’s life stands or falls on the “fulfilment” of a wish, the play’s mechanics can be reduced to the “if”, “when” and “but then” of that fulfilment.

The first part of this essay aims to explore some aspects of “temporality”—of the terms of “will” in confrontation with “fate”—in fiction. By turning to *Macbeth* we face one of the more universalised (I dare even say clichéd) texts in which Fate when confronted with Will transforms the world into a place whose straightforwardness is radically compromised; a text, moreover, where Will confronted by Fate throws up a self ultimately (and perversely) so complicit with this transformation that it tends to self-destruction. The “fatefulness” of Macbeth’s situation gives rise—never obviously, but always necessarily—to *anxiety*, not only when he is confronted with the “indeterminate future”, but far more significantly, when everything he “has become” is, or seems, absolutely determined. Anxiety is born in the indeterminacy of a self (where that self is *dialectically* situated between “being” and “becoming”⁶), and *aesthetically*

³ “Those Wrecked By Success”, p. 304.

⁴ E.g., I.vii.1; III. iv. 136; III.ii.11; V.v.49.

⁵ “Those Wrecked By Success”, p. 305.

⁶ Two discussions of “being and becoming” that I have found particularly valuable are those of W.H. Auden, “The Dyer’s Hand”, *Listener* (16 June 1955), abridged in “Macbeth and Oedipus”, in *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. Laurence Lerner (Harmondsworth:

consolidates itself in the determinacy of “having become”, or of being (existentially) determined as no longer a self that *could* become.

Freud commonly turns “anxiety” into something altogether determinate, an orientation towards the future that not only functions in terms of what has already taken place, what has “happened” to the self, but is sublimely unaware that anything has taken place (until informed, perhaps, by its psychoanalyst). So as Angela Richards notes, “more often than not [Freud] uses the word ‘*Angst*’ to denote a state of fear without any reference to the future”.⁷ The famous “castration anxiety”, though it predicates a future of some sort, is founded on a “primal scene” in which “castration” is so overdetermined that movement forward is only possible in terms of movement back. “Castration anxiety” seeks to *overcome* indeterminacy by positing a rather too definite scenario almost as a longing. Freud no doubt distinguishes “realistic” from “neurotic” anxiety,⁸ but if this accounts for the *positing* of “anxiety” by a mind (“ego”), it does not posit what is actually important to the real indeterminacies of human life. These include: a will being “overcome” (changed) by its own acts (will making *itself* indeterminate); and, more simply, the world as a field of indeterminacies such that *the unknown itself* is a legitimate object of “realistic” anxiety.

In other words, the psychoanalytic subject is always and inevitably faced by Anankê, Freud’s favourite Greek goddess (Necessity; the “Reality Principle”) whose “scientific” spirit, on the analysis offered by his precursor Arthur Schopenhauer, aims to lock every event in its causes, to fatalise every human prospect, to fatalise will itself.⁹ “All willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering,” says Schopenhauer. “Fulfilment brings this to an end”.¹⁰ “Will”, here, correlates with Freud’s account of Macbeth’s futurity: his “frustration”. The Schopenhaurian doctrine of “will” is *release* from “the effort of the individual to save

Penguin, 1963), pp. 217-23, and the chapters on *Pincher Martin* and *Free Fall*, in Mark Kinkad-Weekes and Ian Gregor, *William Golding: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1967).

⁷ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, PFL 11, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 282 n1 [Editor’s note].

⁸ “Neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger. Neurotic danger is thus a danger that has still to be discovered.” *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, PFL 10, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 325.

⁹ “. . . from one point of view, which we cannot possibly avoid, because it is established by world-laws valid objectively and therefore *a priori*, the world with everything in it appears as a purposeless, and therefore incomprehensible, play of eternal necessity, an unfathomable and inexorable . . .”

Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. E.J.F. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), II. 319-20.

¹⁰ *World as Will and Idea*, I. 196.

himself",¹¹ and provides philosophical ground for a clinical program whose key terms are "sublimation", "cathexis", and "anxiety".

Psychologically, Macbeth may well be overcoming his anxiety by resorting to "frustration"—by closing down anxiety (the future), reducing the world to a manageable formula. Obviously, in the place Freud cites, frustration is evident. But frustration as the meaning of *Macbeth*? In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* is not "wrecked by success"—he is wrecked by the sacrifice of "honour" (selfhood) to success. This is explicit: "Renown, and grace, is dead". But it is a requirement of the Freudian literary methodology that Necessity be served by the interruption and dissolution of a greater theme. "Macbeth is trapped in existential indeterminacy" becomes "Macbeth is frustrated", "Macbeth's life is closed", "Macbeth has a complex".

What is most obvious through all this is the psychiatric character of Freud's own conception of "anxiety", and the point that needs to be drawn is its dramatic ("existential") limitations. As a "scientific literary methodology", Freud leaves us with a psychologically denuded trafficking in "poetic justice", where Fate is treated in such a way that "success" and "failure" account for every dark corner of human life. If so, Necessity has so tight a rein on Time that Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech literally sums up human existence.

But does it—in this or any other of Shakespeare's plays? Only at the cost of "human existence" itself—including the pathos of any such statements to do with "human existence". For should Necessity *recognise the actual (circumstantial and temporal) terms of human existence*, fate would be comprehended as "entering into" life at every step, rather than overcoming life before any step is taken. Freud has introduced terms of reference into literature that abolish anxiety by annihilating character ("human existence") in the name of Necessity. Which is hardly surprising: as a clinician he was dedicated to abolishing anxiety.

It is true that *Macbeth*'s tragedy begins with some exercise of necessity-inspired will—as Christine Mangala Frost has put it, his impulsion "to take on the challenge of metaphysical dread itself".¹² But this precipitates indeterminacy: it precipitates both anxiety and the drama. The fragmentation of *Macbeth*'s will cannot be a *paradigmatic* fragmentation, cannot install *Macbeth* at the beginning of the play as a "case"—even a case of what he self-diagnoses as "vaulting ambition". The fragmentation casts him into the non-world of "waiting" (a non-world previously self-

¹¹ *World as Will and Idea*, I. 202.

¹² "'Who Dares do More?' *Macbeth* and Metaphysical Dread", in *Sydney Studies in English* (University of Sydney: Department of English, 1985), pp. 57-68 (p. 59).

diagnosed by Hamlet, but now overlaid by “fated certainties” and compressed into a prelude). Macbeth, we might argue, is so deep in his fragmentation that *action* as the solution to indeterminacy is undertaken in order to end both.¹³ Does he enter into a compact with destiny, or does the intolerable *waiting* that destiny has invoked stand to be overthrown? If so, Necessity does have her way, but only in the context of a world in which Necessity is not all that is. A world in which anxiety is *process* as well as *state*, a world in which necessity-inspired will is *enacted*, and allows for the appearance of a form of self-overcoming in which something other than Necessity comes about. For the enacting of a destiny (“success”) certainly produces what Macbeth wants, but it produces at the same time a Macbeth that *he* does not want. Nor can predict, nor bring about, nor overthrow.

For Macbeth’s “change” is as indeterminate as Hamlet’s “resolution”. It does not unfold from a static “world as it is”. It may unfold from his “character”, but when we analyse that character before its fall we find no clue as to what will become of it. As it enters the zone of indeterminacy, on hearing the Sisters’ word, it hesitates on the brink of losing its tomorrow, the forwardness of its life, of being trapped in Fate (MacDuff), and curses tomorrow as an *aesthetic of Fate*. Yet it has itself “willed” this—perhaps incrementally, but singlemindedly throughout, even in the face of “metaphysical dread”.

So, what is metaphysical dread? It begins as determinate choice, ends as the overthrow of the actor, and is impelled by a design to overthrow *indeterminacy*. As Kierkegaard puts it, “freedom ... gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself. In this dizziness freedom succumbs”.¹⁴ On the surface, Macbeth is in thrall to his ambition, to his “black and deep desires”, but these are aspects of the self that merely emphasise the “dizziness”. Macbeth’s ambition “o’erleaps itself”, (I.vii.25); in reflecting on his deed he declares himself strategically *ignorant* (II.ii.73). So far from himself does he *put* himself that he declares, with full knowledge of the subjunctivity of his utterance: “Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time” (II.iii.90). So it is time that occasions *change*; the *facing* of time (overcoming indeterminacy by standing fast by determinacy) both precipitates Macbeth’s change and is the singular mark of his *having* changed.¹⁵ The word Macbeth uses that sums up the process as a whole is “dare”. This word, in a sense, fully

¹³ Here I am addressing the problem of “compulsion” posed by Frost. (“Who Dares”, p. 60. Bradley’s “appalling duty.”)

¹⁴ *The Concept of Dread* [1844], trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 55.

¹⁵ “The moment the murder is committed, Macbeth is plunged into the metaphysical alienation that up till then had remained only a possibility.” Frost, “Who Dares”, p. 63.

rationalises the act. “Dare” is positivity in act, the overcoming of “apprehension”. “Dare” is the overcoming of anxiety, not as a flip paradigm of “general human action”, but as the individuated vehicle into which anxiety pours all its potency. “Dare” stands on determinacy but is fully indeterminate; it stands on strife and uncertainty, but it is the resolved. And having “dared do all that may become a man”,¹⁶ Macbeth *becomes*.

Whereas Freud’s form of literary criticism reduces human life to primal scenes and their production of various forms of determinacy, the object of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Dread* is to discover at what point of a human life that is simultaneously *lived forward* and *understood backwards*, it may be considered determinate.¹⁷ Kierkegaard’s single reference to Macbeth in *The Concept of Dread* may be brief and on the surface barely relevant to what I have been saying—it exemplifies the loss of seriousness, or the attenuation of existence as a consequence of having acted in a certain way¹⁸ —but taken as a whole this book theorises indeterminacy as Macbeth experiences it. Kierkegaard reconciles fate and anxiety by reconciling necessity and chance. Fate, he says,

is precisely the unity of necessity and chance. This is ingeniously expressed by representing fate as blind, for that which walks forward blindly walks just as much by necessity as by chance. A necessity which is not conscious of itself is *eo ipso*, in relation to the next instant, chance. Fate, then, is the nothing of dread.¹⁹

So, for Kierkegaard, the Fall is not a programmatic act of “wilfulness” such as that ascribed to Adam by the God of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. It cannot be *concretely* anticipated. Fate is the “indeterminate” opening into “anxiety”—“sufficient to have stood” (to use Milton’s terminology) is “free to fall”.

... [W]hen it is related in Genesis that God said to Adam, “Only of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat”, it is a matter of course that Adam did not really understand this word. For how could he have understood the difference

¹⁶ I.vii.47. Later, “What man dare I dare” (III.iv.99). Lady Macbeth’s taunt, “Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’” (I.vii.44) perfectly characterizes the “dialectical tension” of the imperative “dare” with the subjunctive (indeterminate) “would”.

¹⁷ Cf. this famous entry in Kierkegaard’s journals of this period (1843-44): “It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it—backwards.” *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, trans. Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 1959), p. 89. Reiterated in *Concept of Dread*, pp. 76-7.

¹⁸ *Concept of Dread*, p. 130.

¹⁹ *Concept of Dread*, p. 87.

between good and evil, seeing that this distinction was in fact consequent upon the enjoyment of the fruit?

When one assumes that the prohibition awakens the desire, one posits a knowledge instead of ignorance; for Adam would have had to have a knowledge of freedom, since his desire was to use it. The explanation therefore anticipates what was subsequent. The prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom. That which passed innocence by as the nothing of dread has now entered into him, and here again it is a nothing, the alarming possibility of *being able*. What it is he is able to do, of that he has no conception; to suppose that he had some conception is to presuppose, as is commonly done, what came later, the distinction between good and evil. There is only the possibility of being able, as a higher form of ignorance, as a heightened expression of dread, because this in a more profound sense is and is not, because in a more profound sense he loves it and flees from it.²⁰

Is anxiety, then, to be “overcome”? What happens when we treat our lives as vehicles for a certain sort of “sufficiency”?—is the will to finalise ourselves tantamount to the defeat of anxiety, or does it create grounds for an increasingly deadly anxiety?

... When one looks back over one’s life, it may certainly appear to be permeated with necessity. On the other hand, if a man on beginning a particular phase of his life merely regards this as a “moment” or factor in the life of one having eternal worth, then he will certainly prevent it from acquiring any significance, for he will want to annul it before it has come into existence, by wanting something which is a present fact to become in his eye something past...

... What philosophy tries to do [... is] to permeate everything with the thought of eternity and necessity, and to do this at the present moment, which is to murder the present with the thought of eternity, and yet keep its life fresh. It wants to see what is happening as if it had happened and yet at the same time as what *is* happening. It wants to know the future as if it were the present and yet at the same time as future.²¹

²⁰ Concept of Dread, p. 40.

²¹ Concept of Dread, p. 126.

Contrasted with Freud's (an anxiety presupposing "sufficient causes"), Kierkegaardian anxiety has a cause "spaced" over various "moments" of the anxiety's occurrence—not mere phases of an emotion, for that engages a *telos*, "presupposes" a whole, *sufficient* emotion. Freudian "denial" may be a source of such an anxiety, but this discloses not an "unconscious" area to be "dealt with" by some conflict in the psyche—rather, the false circumscription and ultimate elimination of whatever indeterminacy characterises as "our moving life".²²

To say that Macbeth is "anxious" is not to simply say that he is, in some unstraightforward sense, afraid. "I had else been perfect;/ Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,/ broad and general as the casing air ..." (III.iv.21) As expressed in the play this attitude epitomises more "dread" than that provoked by the escape of Fleance. Throughout, Macbeth is in a state of *elshness* (self-displacing dread), and it is strange that we should hear him use the simile "founded as the rock" when it is nothing but this elshness that renders him unfounded. He would not be *anxious* but for this mere anxiety! Nor is it *mere* anxiety:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these accursed dreams. (III.ii.16-18)

Still it is "nothing"—Kierkegaard's the "nothing of dread." In Macbeth's case, this "nothing" is a word—the "word" of the Weird Sisters, a word that flickers with meaning, but may never be a lie.²³ Its truth reflects the seriousness of its subject's dread (the depth of his tragedy), even if it summons up sound-bites like "Birnam wood at Dunsinane" or "man not of woman born". These are not tricks of the light, but manifest necessity, the "nothing" Macbeth has imported into his own life by reading too carefully the word of fate. "Words" are temporal ("recorded time" has a "last syllable"; at Lady Macbeth's death, "there should have been *time* for such a word").²⁴ The word-positing Fate inaugurates a temporal order before which existence yellows and "falls into the sere". Life collapses into

²² William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1912), p. 238. Both of James' two extant references to Kierkegaard are just on this general point: the methodology of the dialectics of "becoming". See above, and *Pragmatism* [1907] (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 98. Cf. his "The Dilemma of Determinism" (discussed below) for his analogous treatment of determinacy.

²³ Kierkegaard: "He who has to explain fate must be just as ambiguous as fate is. And this too the *oracle* was. But in turn the oracle might mean exactly the opposite. So the relation of the pagan to the oracle is again dread. In this lies the profound and inexplicable tragic of paganism. The tragic, however, does not lie in the fact that the utterance of the oracle is ambiguous, but in the fact that the pagan could not forebear to take counsel of it. He is in relation to it and dare not refrain from consulting it." *Concept of Dread*, p. 87.

²⁴ As if in response to this language of "the word" in *Macbeth*, Kierkegaard refers to the tragic fall as the overthrow of the hero when he encounters "the doubtful reading of the text" (*Concept of Dread*, p. 90).

history—and “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day”, as anxiety is finally overcome, or in the terms favoured by Nietzschean critics of the play, Macbeth overcomes “himself”.

II

Entering the zone “indeterminacy”, I said earlier, Macbeth’s character hesitates on the brink of losing its tomorrow, the forward-movement of its life, cursing tomorrow as an *aesthetic of Fate*. But can Fate have an “aesthetic”?—can its sustenance of human action to completion (to a “result”) amount to anything more than the human action itself? Kierkegaard, in reflecting on this in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, concretised the issue in terms of the twin images of witch and spider:

In truth, if the greatness of Napoleon rivals the most daring of conceptions, if his entire life is a fairy tale, then there is included in the picture, just as in the fairy tale, still another fabulous figure. It is an old wrinkled witch, gaunt and shrivelled; or it is a spider with a mysterious sign on one of its feelers; this is the Result. And the superhuman hero whom nothing, nothing can withstand, is nevertheless in the power of this little animal. When this animal does not consent, the whole adventure comes to naught, or it becomes the adventure of the spider with the strange sign on one of its feelers.²⁵

In the “mysterious sign” lies the “aesthetic”, and the imprisonment of the self by the “mysterious sign” is the aesthetic *effect*, the “result”:

The humblest and most insignificant of men who humbly devotes himself and all he has to the absolute *telos*—to be sure it will scarcely be an adventure, but neither will it be the adventure of the little animal with the dot on one of its feelers... [T]he simple and loyal resolution of an obscure human being embodies the principle that the plan itself is higher than any result, that its greatness is not dependent upon the result.²⁶

The issue is now not of necessity, but of *sufficiency*, the sufficiency that underwrites the value of a life—as “renown and grace” may be said to have underwritten the “brave captain” Macbeth, they are “sufficiencies”

²⁵ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [1846], trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 356. In *The Concept of Dread* similar passages are found, one of the most striking on p. 90: “[P]recisely at the instant when, humanly speaking, all is won the genius discovers the doubtful reading in the text and then collapses . . .”

²⁶ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 356-7.

subsequently traded for *sufficiency-in-itself*, underwritten in turn by “the fated life”, “the result”.

The tragedy of Macbeth is a tragedy of *fate*, for although Macbeth chooses the form fate will take with his life, fate in the end reappears to summon up forces setting limits on the will that made this choice (true also in the case of the old king in *King Lear*). The dialectic is now expressed as a “mechanics of co-operation”, neatly summed up by William James in his essay on determinism:

... Suppose two men before a chessboard—the one a novice, the other an expert player of the game. The expert intends to beat [*sic*]. But he cannot foresee exactly what any one possible move of his adversary may be. He knows, however, all the *possible* moves of the latter; and he knows in advance how to meet each of them by a move of his own which leads in the direction of victory. And the victory infallibly arrives, after no matter how devious a course, in the one predestined form of check-mate to the novice’s king.

Let now the novice stand for us finite free agents, and the expert for the infinite mind in which the universe lies. Suppose the latter to be thinking out his universe before he actually creates it. Suppose him to say, I will lead things to a certain end, but I will not *now* decide on all the steps thereto. At various points, ambiguous possibilities shall be left open, *either* of which, at a given instant, may become actual. But whichever branch of these bifurcations become real, I know what I shall do at the *next* bifurcation to keep things from drifting away from the final result I intend.²⁷

While this appears to me a completely adequate account of the dialectical mechanics of “necessity” and “free will” (will as defined by *limit*; limit as defined by *balance of wills*), we do not meet here in any direct way the role of “sufficiency” or the movement from a dialectics to what I am calling an *aesthetics* of Fate.

James is concerned with the mechanics of Fate rather than its aesthetics, and would be far more interested in the *psychology* of the Macbeth situation than in the *tragedy* of Macbeth himself. The tragic element is where drama concentrates its energies, and it puts “The Dilemma of Determinism” at a significant remove from dramatic works like *Macbeth*. It is nonetheless possible to use a Jamesian

²⁷ “The Dilemma of Determinism” [1884], in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897; New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 181-2.

analytic to come close to these works as embodiments of the “aesthetic of fate”, as Brian Penton did in a piece on determinism written in 1934:

Only chess players can fully appreciate the pathos of life, which consists in people’s frenzied efforts to get clear of the consequences of some trivial act committed long ago.

You put a pawn in the wrong place in the second move, and you spend the next 222 moves trying to keep yourself out of checkmate as a result.

And all the time you feel: “If I could only get a move ahead I’d be all right.” But you cannot get a move ahead because, enclosed within the present second as inescapably as you are enclosed within your skin, you have just time to make a fumbling adjustment of urgent problems and no more.²⁸

The comical tone of this article should not blind us to Penton’s seriousness on just this point. Whereas James puts the Result into the future of the Main Action (the chess move) and treats it as a *contingent form* of that action, Penton views the Result from the standpoint of each (of the “222”) subsequent actions, so it perversely becomes the “necessity” driving those actions. *They* are not treated as “results” (though they are in fact results) since in the light of “getting ahead” and in the contingency of the “present second” *nothing* antecedent is focused upon as necessary—it is not the antecedent but *its* consequences that are to be overcome.

This, of course, is not a situation Macbeth finds palatable. A man who commands “the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer / Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep / In the affliction of these accursed dreams”, does not intend to “fumble” his way through life, “keeping ahead” of a “mistake” made “222” moves ago. Rather, for Macbeth, the all-annihilating “step” of Marlow’s Kurtz:

He [Kurtz] had summed up—he had judged. “The horror!” ... It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made the last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all wisdom, and all truth, and, all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible.²⁹

²⁸ “Just One Dam Thing After Another,” *Sydney Telegraph* (19 June 1934), p. 8.

²⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1899], ed. Richard Kimbrough, third edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p. 69.

Here we are in a region still further removed from the chess-game of William James: *the aesthetic of fate* is a Result that not only makes fearsomely determinate what never could be imagined as in any way determinate at the “moment of election”; now it wills that determinacy so radically that all other action pales into the “foolishness”, “lies” and “insincerity” Marlow appears to accuse himself of.

Heart of Darkness does not, however, envelop us in the full logic of an “aesthetic of fate”: Marlow can *tell* us of his insufficiency before Kurtz, but Conrad knows we have to take his word for it and for one thing, in the region where Kurtz’s “sufficiency” is taken seriously, the terrain is invariably and necessarily treacherous. “Storyhood” is always and inescapably the vehicle by which Sufficiency and Insufficiency are realised—the only path in fact by which they may be approached—but “the story” is not *itself* inescapable, except in one sense: the story may close on its subject and *create* the terms by which that subject is forced to live. The mechanics of *Heart of Darkness* do not develop enough complexity for such a treatment of Kurtz, but in the subsequent Marlow novel, *Lord Jim*, they are given free reign. *Lord Jim* is fully concerned with the aesthetic of fate, not only as a circumstance of the central character, but as a mode of storyhood defining that character and in terms of which he is, in terms of his past, his present, and his future, utterly trapped.

Jim is neither Macbeth nor Kurtz. As he *wills* so he recedes from the place he wills to be. This no doubt perfectly defines an aesthetic of fate even as it applies to Macbeth or Kurtz, but no such *story* could be told of either of these as to their “remaking” themselves in the light of past results—those “frenzied efforts to get clear of the consequences of some trivial act committed long ago”.³⁰ Hence, no continual rebirth of the past, no incessant *storyhood*. Since *Lord Jim* is a *story about storyhood*, and of the weight placed upon a person’s life-structure by the stories of himself fed into larger social life and back to him, from the larger social life as well as from himself (he is complicit with his larger social life, as, Conrad fundamentally believes, all human beings are), the novel *aestheticises fate at every opportunity*. Jim’s life-structure is distorted (“aesthetically compromised”) at three levels: where stories replace the forward-momentum of his life with their own definitive closures; by Jim himself as a being himself recapitulating any such closure; and by the closure as absolutely enacted whether Jim recapitulates it or not.

Lord Jim’s “stories” are epitomised in Marlow’s encounter with “an elderly French lieutenant” “who remembered the [Patna] affair

³⁰ Penton, “Just One Dam Thing After Another”.

perfectly”.³¹ “Fate” or “inevitability” will throughout this encounter be overtly displaced from the incident itself to the *talking* about it. The French lieutenant, broaching the “story”, can find no point where “cowardice” is sufficiently explained (where Jim’s *failure of sufficiency* is explained) beyond the “usual stories” that constitute the meaning of necessity in ordinary life:

“Man is born a coward (*L’homme est né poltron*). It is a difficulty—*parbleu!* It would be too easy otherwise. But habit—habit—necessity—do you see?—the eye of others—*voilà*. And then the example of others who are no better than yourself, and yet make good countenance ...” (114, ellipses in text)

Pressed, the Frenchman allows the action and its consequences, cowardice itself, to *dissolve in* storyhood (“honour”):

“Allow me ... I intended that one may get on knowing very well that one’s courage does not come of itself (*ne vient pas tout seul*). There’s nothing much in that to get upset about. One truth the more ought not to make life impossible ... But the honour—the honour, monsieur! ... The honour ... that is real—that is! ...” (115, ellipses in text)

“*One’s courage does not come of itself.*” Followed, as if to pull back any slippage of language, by: “*ne vient pas tout seul*” (comes not all of-itself). Courage here has no “of-itself,” no “essential subject”; it is dictated by circumstance. It is part of a greater whole. No problem here, *before the point where one violates the greater whole*—in this case, the storyhood (socially amplified) that reiterates the event *ad infinitum* and so traps the subject (now a *social* being) in a mounting set of recurrences not of his making. The event itself is supplanted by social Anankê (the social overdetermination of the self in view of an act that no-one can properly “see”) but—*que diable!* ...

We need to position ourselves to grasp the formal character of Jim’s act and how it is permitted to distort all the frameworks of the novel to give *Lord Jim* its peculiar, enigmatic distinctiveness. As the French lieutenant in the novel says, this act cannot be reduced (and neither Conrad nor Marlow reduce it) to that Fate which “looked on with her cold-eyed knowledge of the end”.(290)³² Only *stories* have such a “cold-eyed knowledge”, for they

³¹ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* [1900] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 107.

³² Marlow elsewhere states this “Fate” in other and slightly more open terms: “A clean slate, did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock” (143). Of course, the “initial word” is not the final word, but just as importantly, *where is to be found* (in what act or event of the subject will be found) the initial word? Granted it is “somewhere,” but the indeterminacy of that somewhere prisms open Fate and renders inscrutable all fatal “judgments.”

are told in order to serve those judicial ends by which human society gets a handle on its subjects, though the “judicial end” be available for appropriation by *any other subject*—as we see in the case of “gentleman Brown” at the end of the book.

The “stories” take Jim out of Time and put him at the *end* of a process that at the time of its taking-place seems to have no end—for it displaces itself constantly in the dialectical pattern of the Kierkegaardian Adam:

Something had started him off at last, but of the exact moment, of the cause that tore him out of his immobility, he knew no more than the uprooted tree knows of the wind that laid it low.
(87)

But “talk” will not have this. “Talk” *consigns*. It cannot handle “time” or whatever else is beyond consignment. At the close of Marlow’s encounter with the French Lieutenant, there is “the blight of futility that lies in wait for men’s speeches”, and this blight, having “fall[en] upon our conversation”, “made it a thing of empty sounds”. So the Frenchman’s encounter with Time in the face of “social necessity”, “pricks the bubble” of what can be said. “I can offer no opinion. I can offer no opinion—because—monsieur—I know nothing of it” (all 105). He will not *say*. So to Marlow’s chagrin, he refuses to risk the distortion.

The next distortion is that of Jim himself.

“... He was indeed unfortunate, for all his recklessness could not carry him out from under the shadow. There was always a doubt of his courage. The truth seems to be that it is impossible to lay the ghost of a fact. You can face it or shirk it—and I have come across a man or two who could wink at their familiar shades. Obviously Jim was not of the winking sort; but what I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out”. (150)

The “ghost” here is that distortion forced on the life-structure by the equivocal nature of Jim himself as a *consequence* of his act. The significant word is “fact”, for “fact” is temporality in reverse, the “understanding backwards” that cannot evade its act. “Living life forward” creates indeterminacy of *act*, but once the act is resolved only *fate* is determinate if the *self* has slipped into indeterminacy. From his own perspective on the act of “how am I to *overcome this?*” Jim is “not of the winking sort”, and as his indeterminacy encounters only determinacy, it is heightened unbearably. Here again is the self-indeterminacy that nevertheless faces *backwards* in its dealings with the temporal world. Were it to find

determinacy, it would become an archaeology of itself (the man who “winks” perhaps finds as much, and that, suggests Marlow, is his tragedy).

Fact is determination (the determination of an event), whose aesthetic form is further determined by the fact-bearer’s response to that determination, that is, by “accountability”. When we use the word “indeterminate” we are always faced with a *balance* of forces, an equilibrium rather than an evacuation of determinations. Heraclitus uses the word *account* (logos) as his word for whatever is real: in the case of his famous fragment we can translate, “For though what-is-brought-to-account is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding”. This bringing-to-account of things (despite his rather different translation of logos) marks the distinctive form of the ontology of Martin Heidegger, whose “being” of things is not their sheer “thingness” (he has another word for that) but their equally unavoidable, and irreducible, wholeness-through-the-world. When we speak of “fact” in the case of *Lord Jim*, and in the larger case of the “aesthetics” of such a novel, we are to speak of it in this sense. “The truth seems to be,” says Marlow, “that it impossible to lay the ghost of a fact.” “Fact”, here, is not the product of an incidental or phenomenal casting-about. Definitively, it is not subject to epistemic acts or psychological preferences. The *story* of its movements does not spring from a “subject”, but from the “ontological” sense of that which is *across* a subject, or the subject’s being-brought-to-account. The *story* of the subject is “account” in this sense.³³

The final distortion on the life-structure is the *effect* of moral fatality on the ongoing life. In Jim’s case, this is the secret “absence” at the heart of his contingent sufficiencies. It is not “insufficiency” as a paradigm placed upon the life, but the ongoing *insistence* on insufficiency working itself out *in* the life. Stein’s “in the destructive element immerse” recognises this insufficiency as something to be *overcome* (“cured”, 164, 162), to which Marlow replies, “strictly speaking, the question is not to get cured, but to live”.

‘He approved with his head, a little sadly as it seemed. “*Ja! Ja!*
In general, adopting the words of your greatest poet: that is the
question ...” He went on nodding sympathetically ... “How to be!
Ach! How to be!”’.

³³ This paragraph responds to the issue, posed by the referee for *Literature and Aesthetics*, of the relation of “fact” to memory as a narrative unfolds from the state of mind of its protagonist. Conrad’s treatment of narrative illustrates, I think, the extent to which tragedy works *across* psychologies, rather than *in* any given psychology, even of the most “tragic”, “fated” sort. It may be further worth pointing out that the “man who winks” in the face of the “ghost of a fact” is himself not in simple possession of *one* psychology.

Soon after, he reiterates the indeterminacy of what I have called the first distortion of the life-structure:

“... Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nicht wahr?* ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up ...” (163)

So on this account Jim’s “fate” is not to be in a “dream”, unable to “sit still” on his “heap of mud,” but to *sit still*,³⁴ to allow himself to be held aloft by the tides that undermine him (the second distortion of the life-structure—“fact”), so that “the destructive element” will itself be overcome.

But what if Jim is a “romantic”? What if his conception of “sufficiency” is a headlong *attack* upon “the destructive element”, unable, like the butterfly, to “sit still”? What if he would rather “be destroyed” than “sit still”? For the ongoing life that rejects indeterminacy beyond its control, that seeks to overcome “fact” by attempting to rectify the *first* distortion (whose “rectification” is represented by Patusan), plunges itself into a blind repetition of the first distortion and sacrifices itself on the altar of that dream. This springs totally from illusion, but it has a logic: the cessation of the ongoing life by final, implacable immersion in the *fact*. But the *fact* is not to be recognised but to be *annulled*, to be fought and opposed in any connection with the present, to be “rectified”. Rectified, therefore, in terms of *story*, for the story (“honour”), the *finished life*, the first distortion, achieves its greatest negation of the ongoing life—it is that ongoing life’s self-chosen destiny. Insufficiency, reaching towards sufficiency, achieves it *paradigmatically*—as a cancellation of the ongoing life.

The cancellation is not simply “fate”—it is the fatalisation of the life as an *aesthetic*; the bringing to life of its “logical conclusion”, a conclusion only achieved as the *ongoing* life both “creates its own fate” and (in so doing) is (in Marlow’s words in *Heart of Darkness*) brought to its own “extremity” and “summed up”.

³⁴ Cf. T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday* (“Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still”).