

On Captain Davidson (In Honour of Professor Yukito Nakano On the Occasion of His Retirement)

Yoshida Tetsuo
九州大学言語文化部

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On Captain Davidson

Tetsuo Yoshida

“Because of the Dollars” with the “scrupulously delicate”¹⁾ Captain Davidson as the principal character was finished while Joseph Conrad was still writing *Victory* with the same captain as a very sympathetic figure to Heyst.²⁾ In *Victory* Captain Davidson is introduced towards the end of Chapter 3, Part One, as a sort of an understanding duplicate successor of Morrison, the “true humanitarian” (p. 12) owner and captain of a trading brig, who dies in Dorsetshire at the beginning of the same chapter; and the captain disappears with the conclusion of Part One where the sceptic character Heyst is described through the eye and mouth of the world, and re-appears in the last two chapters 13 and 14 of the final Part Four as a witness of the death of Lena and the suicide of Heyst. Just as the sympathetic, understanding Marlow is destined to hear Kurtz’s last self-judgement “The horror! The horror!”, the “delicate, humane and regular” (p. 52) Davidson is to hear Heyst’s self-revealing last words — “Ah, Davidson, woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love — and to put its trust in life!” (p. 410).

The anxiety that his impulsive proposal of help might have been responsible for Morrison’s death and the influence of his father’s precept

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- 1) “Because of the Dollars”, *Within the Tides*, p. 171. All page references to Conrad’s works are to Dent’s Collected Edition (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946-1955). Subsequent citations in text.
 - 2) In the letter to John Galsworthy dated 25 July, 1914, Conrad writes, referring to the completion of *Victory*, “Twenty months actual working time. I achieved the marvellous feat on the 28th June” (G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters* [London: William Heineman Ltd., 1927], II, 156); and at the end of the short story the author adds the date of its completion, “Jan., 1914”.

that he should “look on—make no sound” (p. 175) compel Heyst to detach himself from human society, and when within it, he tries to wear the mask of polish and refinement. Of this Heystian manner the first-person narrator remarks that “Except that he stood drinks to people on suitable occasions, like any other man, this observer of facts seemed to have no connection with earthly affairs and passions. The very courtesy of his manner, the flavour of playfulness in the voice set him apart” (p. 60). Captain Davidson, who is described as “a fellow of fine feeling”, also perceives in Heyst something stand-offish, and says to the narrator, “He isn’t the sort of man one can speak familiarly to. There’s something in him. One doesn’t care to” (p. 28). However, Davidson’s delicate goodness and humanity incline himself to become curiously interested in Heyst who lives like a hermit in the remote island of Samburan, and to drop in on him just to see how he is; the captain running the *Sissie* without any sort of company on board is well able to understand how strongly loneliness affects.

While listening to Davidson’s talk about the interview with Heyst in the island, the first-person narrator describes the captain’s delicate character:

Davidson, a good, simple fellow in his way, was strangely affected. It is to be noted that he knew very little of Heyst. He was one of those whom Heyst’s finished courtesy of attitude and intonation most strongly disconcerted. He himself was a fellow of fine feeling, I think, though of course he had no more polish than the rest of us. We were naturally a hail-fellow-well-met crowd, with standards of our own—no worse, I daresay, than other people’s; but polish was not one of them. Davidson’s fineness was real enough to alter the course of the steamer he commanded. Instead of passing to the south of Samburan, he made it his practice to take the passage along the north shore, within about a mile of the wharf. (p. 29)

This passage helps us to understand Davidson’s position in the structure of the novel. He is one of “us” in that he shares “standards of our own”

and has no polish, but he has got that “fineness” which is not shared by any other man we encounter, and not even by the friendly narrator himself, which is suggested at the beginning of Chapter 6 of the first part where the narrator feels amusement at Davidson’s “wonderful delicacy”. This “fineness” entitles him to obtain the privilege to hear Heyst’s confession, as the narrator says “Not one of us—with the probable exception of Morrison, who was dead—had ever heard so much of his history” (p. 32), and leads him to develop “the affection of a self-appointed protector towards Heyst” (p. 36).³⁾

Captain Davidson’s “fineness” takes us back to Heyst’s generous impulse in which he has offered money for Morrison to recover his brig from the Portuguese authorities and his delicate tenderness that induces him to accept Morrison’s proposal of partnership for the Tropical Belt Coal Company. Davidson duplicates the sympathy and delicacy of Heyst, and his protector-like attitude towards the solitary protagonist reminds us of Marlow’s parental one to Jim. It is true that Heyst is similar to Marlow in his characteristic inclination for self-introspection, as Daniel Schwarz points out:

Heyst, the mature, temperamentally sympathetic man who responds empathetically to another person’s difficulties, recalls Marlow. Heyst’s introspective self-analysis suggests Marlow. Like Marlow, his values undergo profound change as a result of his experience. Like Marlow he sees himself as a detached ‘independent spectator’ even while he cannot resist involvement.⁴⁾

However, Heyst has more kinship with Jim, which is obviously shown

3) Davidson’s delicate goodness and its consequent protector attitude are explicitly expressed in “Because of the Dollars”: “His pity for Laughing Anne was no more than her case deserved. But his goodness was of a particularly delicate sort. He realised how these people were dependent on him, . . .” (*Within the Tides*, p. 190).

4) *Conrad: The Later Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), p. 63.

when his island is invaded by the villainous trio whose leader Jones is an allegorical duplicate of Gentleman Brown; and just as Marlow gets the information of Jim's crisis and death, Davidson is informed of Heyst's involvement with the world which is represented by the trio and meets his end. Captain Davidson plays the same sympathetic and understanding role as Marlow in their respective relations to the protagonists; both captains are a sort of link between the world and the isolated idealists.

As with Jim, Heyst's detachment from white society is vulnerable; he cannot help feeling his human desire to have himself understood by some sympathetic person of his own kind. That is the reason why he tells his own history to Davidson, of which the narrator makes this ironic comment: "It looks as if the experience of hermit life had the power to loosen one's tongue, doesn't it?" (p. 32). The inadequacy of Heyst's self-imposed isolation is suggested by his self-contradictory appreciation of Davidson's kindness. At the end of the two days' passage from Samburan to Sourabaya, Heyst declares to Davidson, seizing the captain by the hand, "I am touched by your humanity. Believe me, I am profoundly aware of having been an object of it" (p. 33). This remark tells us clearly that Heyst cannot become a complete hermit who is able to shut out any human relationship. Davidson's reaction to Heyst's confession of his history is described in this way: "He was interested not because the hints were exciting but because of that innate curiosity about our fellows which is a trait of human nature" (p. 33). Davidson's sympathetic curiosity is deliberately contrasted with Schomberg's malicious one: "You see we had on the whole liked him [Heyst] well enough. And liking is not sufficient to keep going the interest one takes in a human being. With hatred, apparently, it is otherwise" (p. 26). It is natural that Schomberg does not like Davidson; the hotel-keeper is "baffled by the natural placidity" (p. 45) of the captain, just as he feels bitter to Heyst's polished manner as showing off superiority.

Captain Davidson's part as a really understanding character for Heyst sheds as much light on the latter's problems as Morrison's does as a protégé. On these two captains C. B. Cox makes the following com-

ment:

Morrison is a kind-hearted man who supplies the natives with food for which he is rarely paid. Like Davidson, who appears later, he is a person of delicate feelings, with a true humanitarian impulse. These sailors represent an ideal of service to the community in direct contrast to Heyst's negative philosophy.⁵⁾

This interesting remark sums up the characteristics of both captains, but is not wholly true. Morrison, who, "bursting with gratitude" (p. 20), tries to force the embarrassing "part of heavenly messenger" (p. 19) upon Heyst, cannot be "a person of delicate feelings"; and as for Davidson, there is no mention of his service to the community, while Morrison's service is referred to as "too much altruism" (p. 10). Conrad is not so optimistic as to allow the two captains to lead invulnerable lives as a representation of "an ideal of service". As I have discussed, Davidson's delicate sympathy brings to light the incompleteness and vulnerability of Heyst's philosophy of detachment, but at the same time Conrad suggests that delicate sympathy might also lead the captain himself to a disturbing situation.

When Mrs Schomberg tells Davidson that there has been one young English girl in Zangiacomo's ladies' orchestra, the captain says he is sorry for her. Then the narrator adds, in a tone of subtle irony, "He was easily sorry for people" (p. 41). The remark is made for the second time here; the first utterance is made two pages earlier: "He was easily sorry for people. It seemed rude not to take any notice of her [Mrs Schomberg]" (p. 39). It is obvious that through the emotionally sympathetic response of Davidson for the unhappy women Conrad prepares us for Heyst's impulse of compassion which is to be dealt with in detail in the first two chapters of Part Two, and the recurrent phrase "easily sorry" suggests

5) *Joseph Conrad: The Modern Imagination* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1974), pp. 128-29.

the possibility of Captain Davidson's being trapped in the same kind of trouble as Heyst is. In the short story "Because of the Dollars" Conrad presents a double for Heyst in the new protagonist Davidson.

In introducing Captain Davidson as the protagonist of the story, Conrad uses the same surroundings as in *Victory*, such as the ship, the employer, and the crew. In both tales Davidson's steamer is named *Sissie*. In the short story the *Sissie* is referred to at first as "that biggish dark-green steamer: 'Sissie — Glasgow'", but immediately below we are told that the captain has commanded the first *Sissie* which is "about half the length of this one" (*Within the Tides*, p. 170). The steamer which Davidson commands in *Victory* must be the first one, because it has been called "the little *Sissie*" (p. 34). And her crew are Kalashes: in "Because of the Dollars" Hollis, friend of the first-person narrator, says "His [Davidson's] pacific Kalashes were not to be thought of as against white men" (p. 195); in *Victory* Davidson says to a high official, referring to the suicide of Heyst, "Later, about five in the morning, some of my calashes came running to me, yelling that there was a fire ashore" (p. 410).

In both tales Captain Davidson's employer is a Chinaman, but there is a slight difference in the description of the employer; in the novel he is "small", and in the short story he is "portly". The first-person narrator of *Victory* talks about a Chinese as an employer in this way:

His [Davidson's] owner had a face like an ancient lemon. He was small and wizened—which was strange, because generally a Chinaman, as he grows in prosperity, puts on inches of girth and stature. To serve a Chinese firm is not so bad. Once they become convinced you deal straight by them, their confidence becomes unlimited. You can do no wrong. (p. 30)

The employer of "Because of the Dollars" is properly fitted into this general description of a prosperous Chinaman: "She [the *Sissie* — Glasgow] belonged to a portly Chinaman resembling a mandarin in a picture-

book, with goggles and thin drooping moustaches, and as dignified as only a Celestial knows how to be" (p. 170). Conrad allows Hollis, real narrator of the tragic episode of Captain Davidson, to repeat a similar general comment on Chinese employers: "Once they become convinced that you are a straight man, they give you their unbounded confidence" (p. 170). Captain Davidson is given such "unlimited" and "unbounded" confidence when he can alter the course of the *Sissie* to have a view of the part of the island where Heyst lives and he can visit Laughing Anne at the Mirrah Settlement. In the short story Conrad makes the best use of the compassionate favour of the Chinaman in order to emphasize Davidson's genuine goodness and desolate solitude; the employer declares "Captain Davidson is a good man", and then the epithet is popularly used in referring to the captain, and the second new *Sissie* is "really meant to comfort poor Davidson" (p. 170).

Apart from the above similarities, Conrad makes a great change in presenting Davidson as a protagonist of the story: "his more obvious distinction consisted in this, that he was married" (p. 175). The introduction of the hardhearted wife is a necessary factor for Conrad to consummate the pitiful story of the warmhearted captain. Towards the end of the episode, without any sympathy and understanding for the husband the wife tells him that she cannot stand him, and he is not able to assert himself: "Davidson, with his scrupulous delicacy of feeling, was not the man to assert his rights over a woman who could not bear the sight of him" (p. 210). In *Victory*, however, there is no mention of Davidson's marriage, but the captain makes general remarks on women in a rather warning way to Heyst;

"There's a lot of unexpectedness about women", he generalized with a didactic aim which seemed to miss its mark. (p. 55);

"Oh, the women, the women! You don't know what there may be in the quietest of them." (p. 56)

Ironically the captain in the short story is fated to "go downhill without

a single human affection near him" (*Within the Tides*, p. 211) because of the bitter feeling of his wife against his sympathy for Laughing Anne and her child whom the wife suspects to be his own.

A subtle misogynistic tone in the above general remarks on women made by Captain Davidson in *Victory* can be noticed in those made by Hollis in "Because of the Dollars". In referring to the coldness of Davidson's wife, Hollis says to the first-person narrator, "Women are loved for all sorts of reasons and even for characteristics which one would think repellent" (p. 209), and one page below, "A stupid woman with a sense of grievance is worse than an unchained devil" (p. 210). There is no doubt about Conrad's design, in writing the story while engaged in *Victory*, that Hollis should be to Davidson what Davidson is to Heyst; Hollis is meant to be as sympathetic to Captain Davidson as the latter to Heyst, and to understand his delicacy as well. When Hollis explains how humane and good the captain is "with a shade of particular refinement" (p. 171), the first-person narrator observes "I knew from old that Hollis was a firm believer in the final value of shades" (p. 171). Just as Davidson is given the privilege to hear Heyst's own personal history, Hollis, "the one who saw most of the Davidsons at home" (p. 176), is told by Davidson himself the disturbing episode which has spoiled his smile. It is a structural pattern in Conrad to introduce a sympathetic narrator to the protagonist. "The Partner", another story in *Within the Tides*, presents "the most imposing old ruffian" narrator whose only object seems to be "the vindication of Captain Harry from the charge of suicide" (p. 128). Marlow in *Lord Jim*, "Heart of Darkness" and *Chance* is the very representative of such sympathetic narrators. With Captain Davidson Conrad develops his use of a sympathetic narrator so far as we may call it a duplicate use.

Conrad places Captain Davidson in the same disconcerting situation as Heyst has found himself in; three desperadoes are trying to rob them of either real or supposed money, and the respective protagonists have to face the death of the two women whom they have meant to protect. Regarding the relationship between the protagonists and the villains we

notice that *Victory* gives emphasis on Heyst's feeling that the lawless trio are "the envoys of the outer world" (p. 329) to overthrow his detached attitude of living; on the other hand, in "Because of the Dollars", though the captain feels angry, unlike Heyst, with the ruffians, he cannot believe that they plan to attack his ship, since such a criminal goal does not suit his delicate humane sensitivity. The most conspicuous feeling that Davidson shows against them is "contempt", which is the opposite to his particular compassion and sensitive humanity. Even when Laughing Anne warns him of their creeping on board the *Sissie* to steal the collected old dollars, "still Davidson could not accept it somehow; his contempt for these men was too great" (p. 198). While keeping vigil over the ship, he cannot convince himself of the whole situation: "He was almost ashamed of this ridiculous vigil in a boat" (p. 200), and when he hears Anne's warning silvery laugh, his sense of absurdity is too great not to regard it as an illusion. Hollis never observes that Davidson is responsible for Anne's death, but the captain himself cannot but feel self-reproach:

He ought to have handled the warning she had given him in another way. He was convinced now that a simple display of watchfulness would have been enough to restrain that vile and cowardly crew. But the fact was that he had not quite believed that anything would be attempted." (p. 207)

It requires nice diplomacy to cope with the devilish maimed Frenchman, but Davidson is too "scrupulously delicate" to be diplomatic, which holds true with Heyst. If Conrad had described the process that the protagonist copes with the ruffians in a practical way, we could have found an adventurous story, which either *Victory* or "Because of the Dollars" is not. In the face of the evil Davidson's delicacy is too far from practicability to direct him to think of any effective countermeasure. The gap between his sense of reality and reality itself is too great for him to help feeling absurd. This is the real issue which the author offers through Davidson's tragic episode.

In "Author's Note" to *Within the Tides* Conrad makes the following remark about "the romantic feeling of reality":

This in itself may be a curse but when disciplined by a sense of personal responsibility and a recognition of the hard facts of existence shared with the rest of mankind becomes but a point of view from which the very shadows of life appear endowed with an internal glow. And such romanticism is not a sin. It is none the worse for the knowledge of truth. It only tries to make the best of it, hard as it may be; and in this hardness discovers a certain aspect of beauty.
(pp. v-vi)

However, what Conrad actually describes in the characterization of protagonists, such as Heyst and Captain Davidson, or Captain Anthony in *Chance*, is their lack of a disciplined feeling of reality. Conrad demonstrates that they have not developed an enlightened point of view.