

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Experiments in Solitude: The Island Fictions of August Strindberg, Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence

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Abstract:

This paper applies A. R. Wallace's distinction between 'continental' and 'oceanic' islands to the analysis of three tragic island fictions, August Strindberg's *By the Open Sea (I Havsbandet)*, Joseph Conrad's *Victory* and D. H. Lawrence's 'The Man Who Loved Islands'. In each text, the mythological ideas of the utopian island and the island of the dead are seen to complement the novelists' concerns with intellectual and moral survival in a state of deliberately sought isolation. Strindberg's and Conrad's protagonists rehearse the defeat of late nineteenth-century rationalism, while Lawrence's more allegorical tale crystallises many of the themes found in the earlier novels. In each story the island figures, however briefly, as a historical microcosm offering 'a pictorial history of the world'; but with the failure of their utopian projects, the protagonists' underlying misanthropy and social disconnection becomes increasingly evident. Strindberg's Axel Borg, Conrad's Axel Heyst and Lawrence's Cathcart become ghost-ridden hermits on islands which provide no lasting sanctuary. Each story ends with a catastrophic loss of identity, and with actual or imminent death. In terms of island biogeography, each text maps a progression from 'continental' affiliations to 'oceanic' nothingness.

Keywords: island; utopia; *Toteninsel*; rationalism; Darwinism; biogeography.

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Jan. No man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*;

John Donne, *Devotions* xvii (Donne 1967: 538)

What is a literary island? How does the imaginative geography of islands differ from their scientific geography? When islands are represented in literary fiction, the metaphorical and allegorical dimensions of islandhood – as seen, for example, in Donne’s famous sermon – turn out to be virtually inescapable. A literary island must be either inhabited or, at least, perceived by a consciousness that experiences its separation from the mainland. This separation, and the conditions of ‘isolation’ to which it leads, may in themselves be wholly or partially fictional. David Balfour in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* (1886) suffers agonies of despair when he believes himself to be marooned on what he eventually discovers is only a tidal islet. A more extreme case is J. G. Ballard’s rewriting of the story of Robinson Crusoe in *Concrete Island* (1974), where the ‘island’ is simply an oasis of derelict urban land in the middle of a motorway junction. The aspects of islandhood that novelists explore may be aptly summed up in the title of Michel Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* [*La Possibilité d’une île*] (2005).

Islands held a rich mythological significance long before their representation in literary fiction. For example, the idea of the utopian island may be traced back to the legends of the Fortunate Isles, to which D. H. Lawrence briefly alludes in *The Man Who Loved Islands* (1927). A very different legend, that of an island to which the souls of the departed are ferried, is curiously pervasive in European mythology.

At the height of the Celtic and Teutonic revivals of the late nineteenth century, this legend was reflected in Arnold Böcklin’s vastly popular painting *The Island of the Dead* [‘Die Toteninsel’] (1886). In the three tragic island fictions compared in this paper, the notions of the utopian island and the island of the dead will be shown to complement the novelists’ explicit concerns with intellectual, moral and spiritual survival in a state of deliberately sought isolation. August Strindberg’s *By the Open Sea* [*I Havsbandet*] (1889), Joseph Conrad’s *Victory: An Island Tale* (1915), and Lawrence’s *The Man Who Loved Islands* portray the island as a kind of experimental laboratory, a setting for utopian initiatives at the social or individual level. But the protagonists’ utopian experiments necessarily fail, and they themselves become ghost-ridden hermits on islands which provide no lasting sanctuary. Strindberg’s and Conrad’s heroes rehearse the defeat of late nineteenth-century rationalism, while Lawrence’s more allegorical island tale serves to crystallise many of the themes found in solution in the earlier novels. Each story ends with a catastrophic loss of identity and with actual, or imminent, death.¹

Continental and oceanic islands

As an introduction to these three texts and the affinities between them, it will be helpful to return to the distinction between literary and scientific modes of cognition. The

classificatory systems of geographers and biogeographers are relevant to literary criticism even though they cannot be directly applied to fictional or imaginary spaces. This is true of the fundamental distinction between ‘continental’ and ‘oceanic’ islands, first put forward by Alfred Russel Wallace and more recently endorsed in David Quammen’s scientific polemic *The Song of the Dodo* (1996). As Wallace explains in *Island Life*, islands have either been ‘separated from continents of which they are but detached fragments’, or they have originated in the ocean and ‘have never formed part of a continent or any large mass of land’. Whilst continental islands are situated on ‘submerged banks’ connecting them with a mainland, oceanic islands are of volcanic or coralline formation and are separated from continents by ‘very deep sea’ (Wallace 1880: 234-5). It was Charles Darwin’s observations in the Galapagos archipelago that had first drawn attention to the geological and biological significance of oceanic islands, and Wallace went on to map the differences between the faunas and floras of continental and oceanic islands in great detail. The problem of applying this distinction to fictional texts is that most literary islands, including those of Strindberg, Conrad and Lawrence, reveal an artful mixture of ‘continental’ and ‘oceanic’ characteristics. For example, Prospero’s island in *The Tempest* is at once close to the Mediterranean sea-lanes and utterly removed from Europe: a domain of monsters and sprites that becomes a world of its own under the control of Shakespeare’s master-magician. Similarly, H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) is set on a Pacific island which in biogeographical terms is very clearly oceanic. Its origins are volcanic, Dr Moreau has chosen it for its remoteness, and it has almost no indigenous mammalian life. Nevertheless, the island portrayed in the novel no longer has an oceanic fauna since its ‘Beast Folk’, not to mention its European inhabitants, are all imported. Wells, who had a degree in biology, was clearly familiar with Wallace’s categories but chose to override them with a vision of a new, artificial biogeography. What is true both for his work and for the texts to be considered below is that the relationships between ‘island’ and ‘mainland’ (rather than with any one particular continent), and between ‘island’ and ‘ocean’ provide the keys to the nature of the literary island.

Although *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is formally a castaway narrative, its focus on Dr Moreau and his use of the island as an experimental station links Wells’s novel to *By the Open Sea*, *Victory* and *The Man Who Loved Islands*, at least at the thematic level. But, in terms of Wallace’s classification, the protagonists of Strindberg, Conrad and Lawrence all choose to reside on what are, strictly speaking, continental rather than oceanic islands. *By the Open Sea* begins with the protagonist Axel Borg making a perilously rough crossing to Österskär, which (as its name indicates) is one of the easternmost islands of the Stockholm Archipelago. It is on the outer fringe of an island chain leading from the Swedish mainland to the open Baltic. Similarly, Conrad’s island of Samburan is surrounded, we are told, by ‘a tepid, shallow sea; a passionless offshoot of the great waters which embrace the continents of the globe’ (Conrad 1963: 19). Samburan is several days’ sailing from the nearest European settlement, the port of Sourabaya in Java, but is within sight of another, volcanic islet. Yet to Conrad’s heroine Lena the view from

the island is one of 'empty space', 'the abomination of desolation' (162). Already the island begins to escape from Wallace's classifications. In Lawrence's tale (notoriously based on the life of his fellow-novelist Compton Mackenzie), the protagonist owns a succession of three islands, each smaller and more remote than its predecessor. The first two islands are 'quite near at home' in the 'Celtic sea', corresponding to Mackenzie's two homes in the Channel Islands between England and France (Lawrence 1960: 97, 110). The third island is apparently in the Hebrides but, though Lawrence writes that it rises 'low out of the great ocean', it is not truly oceanic. It is 'on the outer fringe of the isles' and is regularly passed by a steamer going to islands still further out (115, 116). The movement from continental to near-oceanic in *The Man Who Loved Islands* echoes the conclusion of Strindberg's novel, where the protagonist sets out to sea in an open boat with no prospect of return. And all three texts end with an 'abomination of desolation' reflecting the despair and nothingness that Conrad's heroine associates with an empty ocean.

By the Open Sea and the failure of a new species

In Strindberg's earlier island novel *The Natives of Hemsö* [*Hemsöborna*] (1967/1887), Carlsson, a farmer from the mainland, moves to a lushly pastoral island which, by the end, becomes the setting for a hopeless struggle against the elements in the middle of winter. The same movement from utopian summer to deathly winter dominates *By the Open Sea*, but the protagonist is no longer a specimen of common humanity but an advanced intellectual whose consciousness of his own superiority becomes his undoing. Axel Borg is a scientist and a Social Darwinist, and the novel, unlike Conrad's and Lawrence's fictions, takes the form of an intellectual biography. The action, however, is confined to a period of eight months between his arrival on Österskär and his descent into insanity and apparent death.

Like Conrad's Axel Heyst, Borg is the son of a dominant father, a successful canal and railway engineer whose achievements may be taken to suggest a Swedish I. K. Brunel. But Borg's conviction of his own genius, of his status as a 'future pioneer' and even as the 'founder of a new species' of human beings (Strindberg 1987: 37, 169) has been with him since his schooldays. He was a loner and, almost, a social pariah long before he came to the Baltic. He arrives on Österskär as a government fisheries inspector, having obtained a civil service post after a long period of foreign travel. His superiors send him out to the archipelago because, we are told, 'people did not want him near at hand' (47-8). From the start, the islanders view the new inspector with a suspicion and hostility that Borg does nothing to alleviate.

From his youth, Borg has seen himself as both a moderniser and a utopian thinker. His rationalist beliefs tell him that the present is 'the best and greatest of all eras', the one in which civilisation has reached its highest state. But there are higher things still to come, and as a student he has already sketched out a markedly autocratic new constitution for the Swedish nation. His official mission on Österskär is to try to save the

islanders' livelihood which is being ruined by overfishing of the Baltic herring. Borg's expertise in marine biology gives him a clear insight into what needs to be done, but his advice is treated with contempt. The island community instinctively mistrusts an advanced intellectual who regards them as the remnants of a primitive, hunter-gatherer's way of life which ought to be swept away in the cause of progress. It seems, moreover, that Borg's one remaining utopian project is himself. He is trying 'to create out of himself a perfect type of human being' (Strindberg 1987: 40), and what he seeks in the islands is the opportunity to work in solitude. But things are soon complicated by the arrival of two more outsiders, the 34-year-old Maria and her mother who come to Österskär as summer visitors. Borg is manifestly attracted to the unmarried Maria, and she returns his interest.

Borg has set up home in the attic room of a cottage, which serves both as his bedroom and his official laboratory. Here he tests the sea-bed samples that he collects on survey trips around the islands, and calculates that the herring will not return in the coming season due to lack of food. His advocacy of trawling for herring in deeper waters and with different equipment is met with ridicule, so that he keeps his second proposal – that the islanders should switch to salmon-fishing – to himself. When both methods finally prove to be successful, he gets no credit. Meanwhile he is also working intermittently on a personal project, a major study of the ethnography of contemporary Europe. His studies are interrupted by the arrival of Maria, who makes constant demands on his attention and, he fears, embodies a female cunning that will drag him down from his own supposedly higher state to what he perceives as her lower intellectual level. Instead, he decides to make her his experimental subject, planning to 'raise her up' (Strindberg 1987: 76) by careful training and indoctrination so that she may become his perfect mate. This is meant to be done without her knowledge but, needless to say, the misogynistic project backfires.

As their relationship dissolves into mutual recriminations, Borg sees himself as Prometheus (the first scientist) and Maria as Pandora, the misery-laden 'Eve of antiquity' who was sent down to Earth by the gods as revenge for Prometheus's theft of fire (Strindberg 1987: 132). At their last encounter before she leaves the island, Maria makes 'the ultimate concession' (160) to Borg, leaving open the possibility that he has made her pregnant. (If so, she must doubtless have informed him of the fact in the letter that she subsequently writes and which he burns unread.) As summer turns to autumn, Borg shuts himself up in his island solitude, but there are further surprises in store. Whether or not he has fathered a child with Maria, he belatedly experiences the desire to reproduce his own, supposedly superior kind, and – in what is one of the most astonishing scientific scenes in the whole of nineteenth-century fiction – he secretly obtains the 'seed of a human being', uses his own sperm to fertilise it, and watches the result under the microscope in his laboratory. This act of genetic engineering is no more successful than his earlier attempts to establish psychological domination over Maria. A foetus is born, but its brain has no time to develop: 'He dreamed that he saw this seat of thought arching beautifully, experienced a second of pride over this, his creation, which had

solved the problem of the homunculus, when suddenly a movement of the screw caused the albumen to curdle and the spark of life to die away' (178-9). Having failed to control a female partner, Borg has now destroyed his own offspring with a clumsy movement of the microscope. His dream of the rational reconstruction of human life is over.

The fact that, shortly before this last experiment, Borg has returned to his ethnographic project should remind us that this project too is fundamentally unsound. The evidence for this is present in the novel, despite Strindberg's own notorious susceptibility to intellectual fads.² Borg collects data on bodily and cranial measurements from all over Europe, seeking, evidently, for further evidence of the 'chain' of human life in which he, the scientific intellectual, is the 'highest link' (Strindberg 1987: 30). The islanders, he believes, are among the lowest links. What he overlooks, though with another part of his brain he knows it very well, is that the economics of the fishing industry have been transformed in the previous generation, turning it into a highly capitalised and 'fiercely competitive' business (16). Both the islands and the fishing-grounds are owned by outside interests, so that the islanders whom Borg sees as primitive hunter-gatherers might be more properly described as part of a rural proletariat. This puts their resistance to outside interference by the government fisheries inspector in a rather different light. The islanders are, arguably, as essential to modern society as Borg himself is; living on Österskär as a virtual hermit, he lets himself be taken in by an intellectual mirage. One sign of this is that during his courtship of Maria he becomes diverted into an elaborate attempt to produce a real mirage.

Borg has first encountered Maria not on Österskär itself, but on the nearby uninhabited islet of Svärholm. As the main island came to seem like a cell or 'prison' (Strindberg 1987: 129), he had begun to explore the neighbouring skerries, finding on Svärholm, with its varied scenery, something of a natural paradise. Nevertheless, as a birthday surprise for Maria he uses paints, a saw, a crowbar and even dynamite cartridges to convert the landscape of Svärholm into an artificial stage-set which, seen at a distance on a sunny morning when a mirage effect is produced, is meant to resemble a classic Italian vista of 'marble villas and stone-pines' (87). The effect, however, is badly miscalculated, and the mirage that appears on the appointed morning shows 'swimming on the surface of the sea, in the middle of a clear sunny morning, a colossal moon, deathly white, rising over a churchyard of black cypresses' (114). While there is no mention of Arnold Böcklin in the text, many of the novel's original readers are likely to have picked up this scene's manifest affinity to the painting of 'The Island of the Dead' which had first been exhibited three years earlier. Like Borg's misdirected landscaping exercise, 'The Island of the Dead' portrays a rocky island with a graveyard overshadowed by a cypress grove.

We know that Böcklin's painting had a special significance for August Strindberg, since in 1907 he was to commission copies of 'The Island of the Dead' and its sister-piece 'The Island of the Living' to decorate the sides of the proscenium arch of his Intimate Theatre (Prideaux 2012: 275). His 'chamber play' *The Ghost Sonata*, produced in the same year, ends with the stage empty and a spotlight trained on Böcklin's painting.

He also left an unfinished drama with the same title, 'Toten Insel'. This is just a small aspect of the extraordinary cultural afterlife of 'The Island of the Dead': Lenin in exile had a reproduction of it over his bed, Freud had one in his waiting room, whilst Adolf Hitler 'owned one of the five originals' (275). In the context of *By the Open Sea*, Borg's production of a failed illusion is a dramatic irony signalling both the failure of all his projects on the island, and his own eventual death.

Borg's attempt to transform the appearance of Svärholm has no lasting effect, apart from prompting one of the fishermen to comment that "Of course we've seen that someone's been [and] mucked things up out there" (Strindberg 1987: 173). When he first arrived in the archipelago, Borg revelled in its scenery, above all the shapes made by packed-up ice-floes which reminded him of Greek temples, Roman aqueducts and a medieval castle. The landscape offered a 'living picture of the creation', in which 'you could travel through a pictorial history of the world in a few hours and end up with yourself' (30). Borg's sense of being at the centre of a microcosm of human history is essentially solipsistic, so it is no surprise that his private name for the Baltic is the 'great solitude' (49). His relationships with the island community, with Maria and her mother, and with two other incomers – his own assistant and an evangelical preacher – are, in the end, no more than distractions from his chosen existence as a hermit in a place that for him represents 'the end of the world' (17). His attempt to create life in the laboratory implies that he alone is a suitable progenitor for the next generation. Shortly afterwards, in what is perhaps the novel's most fantastic scene, he adopts a cargo of Christmas dolls washed ashore from a shipwreck as if they were his own children. Maddened by his 'sorrow for his lost child' (179), he at last feels that he has 'something to live for, something to take care of, on which to bestow his compassion' (183). Borg by this time is close to death from starvation, but he retains the mental strength for one last initiative, stealing a boat in the middle of winter and setting out to sea. His open boat may be understood as the Viking 'ship of death', but Strindberg presents his journey as a mystical return to the source of life in the 'womb of creation', a womb that is both creative and destructive, being indifferent to what it creates. In the novel's final words, 'He steered his course out [. . .] over the sea, the mother of all, in whose womb the first spark of life was lit, the inexhaustible well of fertility and love, life's source, and life's enemy' (185). The sea is at once the culmination of Borg's journey and – as an 'inexhaustible well of fertility and love' – the negation of the intellectual rationalism that brought him to live in defiant solitude on an island that became his prison.

Victory and the twilight of reason

Conrad's *Victory*, like *By the Open Sea*, is overshadowed by the militant rationalism of the late nineteenth century, but here the dominant creed is one of scepticism and nihilism rather than Social Darwinism and the doctrine of progress. The novel's intellectual figurehead, moreover, is not the Swedish Baron Heyst but his dead father. The older Heyst was a moral philosopher whose disillusioned outlook has dominated his son's life

and turned him into a restless and apparently aimless wanderer. The father's last book, we are told, 'claimed for mankind that right to absolute moral and intellectual liberty of which [the author] no longer believed them worthy' (Conrad 1963: 87). We might think that it is in order to escape the legacy of his father's crushing negotiations that Axel Heyst eventually settles down on a remote island on the other side of the world; yet he fills his tropical bungalow with his father's books and heavy Victorian furniture shipped out from London, and hangs his father's portrait on the wall. We do not know whether Axel Heyst is alluding to his father or, perhaps, quoting from one of his books when he says to his companion Lena that 'Here I am on a Shadow inhabited by Shades' (282).

Heyst, however, has initially come to Samburan not as a fugitive but as, to all appearance, an ardent moderniser. Since Conrad offers a multiplicity of perspectives in contrast to Strindberg's unfailingly direct third-person narration, we only catch sight of the modernising Heyst by hearsay. Thus we are told that 'He was heard by more than a hundred persons in the islands talking of a "great stride forward for these regions"' (Conrad 1963: 21). This progress will be brought about by the Tropical Belt Coal Company, a European venture which establishes its base on Samburan. Conrad's narrator also tells us that in the Malay Archipelago 'There was no danger of anyone taking seriously [Heyst's] dream of tropical coal' (21), and this, presumably, is why Heyst is somewhat cynically described as a 'Utopist, a pursuer of chimeras' or fantasies (23).

As part of its appeal to investors, the coal company issues a map in which Samburan, the site of its first and only coal-mine, is represented as 'the central spot of the Eastern Hemisphere', with lines of communication radiating out in all directions (Conrad 1963: 34). The implication must be that the tropical island is not just a source of raw materials, but a future industrial hub. Just why investors may have been tempted to underwrite the extraction of coal at such a distance, when it was already abundant in the major industrial nations themselves, is never explained. Unsurprisingly, the mine on Samburan is a failure, and its imported Chinese workers are forced to depart. Only Heyst, the manager, and Wang, a single Chinese, stay on in the increasingly ruined settlement. Heyst is now reputedly 'alone on the island' (152), even though it also contains an 'Alfuro village, on the west shore of the island, beyond the central ridge' (153). Conrad's description of this indigenous Malay population (who remain invisible for most of the novel) is apparently derived from Alfred Russel Wallace's 1869 study of *The Malay Archipelago* (see Moore 2007). Samburan can be plausibly identified with Halmahera (formerly Gilolo) bordering the Pacific Ocean between the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, which in Wallace's time housed a fort on its west side with a small Dutch garrison. This was sharply separated from the native settlements, in Wallace's account:

The true indigenes of Gilolo, 'Alfuros' as they are here called, live on the eastern coast, or in the interior of the northern peninsula. The distance across the isthmus at this place is only two miles, and there is a good path, along which rice and sago are brought from the eastern villages. The whole isthmus is very rugged, though

not high, being a succession of little abrupt hills and valleys, with angular masses of limestone rock everywhere projecting, and often almost blocking up the pathway. Most of it is virgin forest, very luxuriant and picturesque [. . .] (Wallace 1922: 241)

In terms of physical geography this strongly resembles Samburan in *Victory*, although Conrad has reversed the east-west axis. Moreover, his Alfuros are not agriculturalists but ‘mild’ and ‘harmless fisher-folk’ (Conrad 1963: 154) who are, nevertheless, armed with spears. They have blocked the path across the island’s central ridge with an apparently impenetrable wooden barricade, put up as protection against the ‘invasion of Chinamen’ who came to work the coal-mine; this fence is described by Heyst as a ‘barrier against the march of civilization’, but it is also crucial to his own illusion of living in solitude (154, 277). But Heyst’s supposed solitude, already compromised when he returns to the island with Lena as his companion, is finally destroyed by a second invasion of modernity in the shape of a gang of murderous and ruthless criminals. If the coal-mine represented the first stage of colonial capitalism, the arrival of Mr Jones and his party suggests its degeneration into a kind of neo-colonial kleptocracy which can only end in wholesale destruction. Conrad reduces Western imperialism to a process of lawless commercial exploitation, eliminating the presence of a colonial army and its garrison – consisting, according to Wallace’s account of Gilolo, of ‘a Dutch corporal and four Javanese soldiers’ (Wallace 1922: 241) – representing the political authority of the European metropolis.

Heyst’s commitment to the Malay Archipelago is announced in one of his earliest reported statements, his confession that ‘I am enchanted with these islands!’ (Conrad 1963: 21). The 800-mile radius of a circle drawn around a point in North Borneo is, the narrator tells us, his ‘magic circle’ (22). Douglas Kerr has drawn attention to the repeated use of the circle metaphor in *Victory*, where Heyst’s domain is narrowed down first to Samburan itself (also known as Round Island), and finally to the confines of his own skull. These concentric circles have ‘two main and partly contradictory functions, those of sanctuary and futility’ (Kerr 2003: 355).

The question why Heyst decided to remain on Samburan once the coal-mine had closed is repeatedly raised in *Victory*, and answered in different ways. To his enemies, it shows that he must be a miser sitting on a pile of hidden wealth. Heyst thinks of Samburan as a place of ‘invincible’, ‘undefiled peace’ (Conrad 1963: 205). Supposedly detached from the rest of the world, it is a fitting home for what Conrad in his 1920 ‘Author’s Note’ describes as ‘the man of universal detachment’ (12). When Lena asks Heyst why he has come there, Heyst, after some prevarication, begins to speak of his father: “‘I am he, all but the genius’”. The implication is that his life on Samburan is a philosophical experiment in cutting off all ties, since “‘I only know that he who forms a tie is lost. The germ of corruption has entered his soul.’” (169) Heyst here is self-condemned, since on two occasions when his charitable feelings were aroused (‘compassion’ may be too strong a word) he has formed a tie. The first was to Morrison, who became his partner in the coal company, and the second is to Lena whom he

rescues from a miserable life as a travelling musician. Lena falls in love with Heyst, but she will never possess his soul and her love is only partially returned. The arrival of Mr Jones and his party brings a sudden end to the relationship between Heyst and Lena, which retains an aura of high romance although the reader senses its fragility.

Since Heyst has chosen Samburan as a kind of laboratory for his practice of philosophical detachment, it is ironic that – while the island is hardly ‘the central spot of the Eastern Hemisphere’ – his presence there does act as a magnet for others. Wang decides to stay on as his servant, and brings his Alfuro wife to live in the European compound; Captain Davidson, the master of a long-distance trading vessel, takes a friendly interest every time he sails past; Lena willingly allows herself to be abducted to Samburan; and Mr Jones and his associates go there intent on plunder and, if necessary, murder. The futility of Heyst’s attempt to find sanctuary is thus heavily underlined. When, towards the end of the novel, he has to share the ruined settlement with no less than five other incomers, an extraordinary (and heavily racialised) historical conspectus of humanity is presented. At the ‘lower’ extreme is Jones’s South American servant (or rather slave), the ‘simian’ Pedro who is regarded by all the others, including Wang, as no better than a ‘prehistoric ape’ (Conrad 1963: 288). On the ‘highest’ level are the two so-called gentlemen, the lordly, crooked and (as Conrad strongly hints) homosexual Mr Jones, and the upright Baron Heyst who tells Lena that he is “‘a man of the last hour – or is it the hour before the last?’” (289). Heyst thus distances himself from Lena, telling her that she is either “‘a little child’” or “‘something as old as the world’” (289). Where they differ, apparently, is that he feels no impulse, let alone having the ability, to defend himself against violent aggression. When he asks himself if he is capable of using his only remaining weapon, a crowbar, against his enemies, he reflects that “‘No, it is not in me. I date too late.’” (290) Thanks to his philosophical inheritance, he has come to represent the final decadence of human civilisation, being little better, Conrad seems to imply, than the degenerate Jones. It is significant that – though the details reported by Captain Davidson are left somewhat vague – both men seem finally to commit suicide. By this time, the events on Samburan may be said to symbolise the whole, ruinous course of civilised development, a course whose futility has been amply underlined by the older Heyst’s philosophy. Davidson is left with the final word in the novel, and that word is “‘Nothing!’” (328).

And yet the title of the novel is *Victory*. Surely this is something more than an irony at the expense of Heyst’s misdirected and pointless (if in the end uncompromised) idealism? Does it refer to Lena, and to the self-sacrificing heroism with which she tries to protect a man who does not really love her? She, at least, will never be disillusioned, and will never have to face up to Heyst’s all too evident despair. There are other perspectives, too, at the end of Conrad’s complex novel. After the deaths of those whom Davidson calls the ‘white people’ – a roll-call that apparently includes Pedro (Conrad 1963: 325) – the island is left once more to the Alfuros whose home should, presumably, have never been invaded. Then there is the pragmatism of Wang, who steals Heyst’s revolver and uses it to shoot Pedro; and the sympathetic presence of mind of Davidson himself, who

lands on the island in time to witness Lena's death from a gunshot wound, and also (we are told) to hear Heyst's final confession. But Davidson cannot prevent Heyst from committing suicide. Conrad's protagonist lights a funeral pyre for his dead lover only to throw himself into the flames as well. The fire connects Heyst to his presumed Viking roots and hence to the conclusion of Strindberg's tale with its 'ship of death'. Captain Davidson explains Heyst's immolation with the statement that 'fire purifies everything' (327). Fire brings about purification, we may say, by removing all distinctions and reducing everything to ashes. The collapse of all distinctions, the reduction of nature in its variety to its undifferentiated origins, is also what terminates the life of another island solitary, Lawrence's protagonist in 'The Man Who Loved Islands'.

'An island is a nest which holds one egg, and one only'

Set beside the novels of Strindberg and Conrad, Lawrence's tale (which is too short even to qualify as a novella) has a deceptively simple, parabolic air. The casual, conversational style of the opening paragraphs becomes the vehicle for a direct statement about the psychogeography of islands, a statement that sums up much that was already implicit in *By the Open Sea* and *Victory*:

There was a man who loved islands. He was born on one, but it didn't suit him, as there were too many other people on it, besides himself. He wanted an island all of his own: not necessarily to be alone on it, but to make it a world of his own.

An island, if it is big enough, is no better than a continent. It has to be really quite small, before it *feels* like an island; and this story will show how tiny it has to be, before you can presume to fill it with your own personality [. . .] an island is a nest which holds one egg, and one only. This egg is the islander himself. (Lawrence 1960: 97)

Since Compton Mackenzie (the model for Lawrence's protagonist Cathcart) was born in County Durham, Lawrence is suggesting that Great Britain, for example, is too large to 'feel like an island'. A literary islander is one who 'presumes' to fill the island with his or her own personality, and for Lawrence, as for Strindberg and Conrad, this presumption is likely to end in disaster. Moreover, since an 'island is a nest which holds [only] one egg', the islander ought to break off all ties with others who might challenge this supremacy. While this does not prevent Cathcart, like Borg and Heyst, from entering into a sexual relationship, he finds in it no more than 'the automatism of sex' (Lawrence 1960: 113) and clearly does not regard his partner as an equal. Nor does he wish to be remembered as the progenitor of an island dynasty.

Cathcart, however, is not a self-conscious intellectual like Borg and Heyst. He is, instead, a more traditional scholar, a classicist and botanist, who only gradually becomes aware of what he is actually seeking. The story tells of his life on three, progressively smaller islands, only the last of which may be called a hermitage. A gentleman and a

landowner, he sets out on his first island to create an ideal pastoral community, a ‘minute world of pure perfection, made by man himself’ (Lawrence 1960: 100), over which he presides and where he is known as ‘the Master’. But his farming is amateurish, his employees swindle him, and he rapidly loses money. So he moves to the second island with a single family of servants, one of whom becomes his lover. (Since he is a botanist, she is appropriately named Flora.) It is when Flora gives birth to a daughter that Cathcart deserts her, moving to the third, uninhabited island which is hundreds of miles away. Cathcart’s progress from overseeing an artificial, supposedly self-sufficient farming community to solitude is, as Stefania Michelucci has argued, a kind of *reduction ad absurdum* of utopian ambitions as well as an ‘allegory of human isolation’ (Michelucci 2000: 318; Michelucci 2002: 130). The allegorical nature of Lawrence’s tale becomes particularly evident when we see how Cathcart retraces, in crucial respects, the trajectories earlier followed by Heyst and Borg.

Cathcart’s first island is, once again, presented as a microcosm of human history. In the past, it has been occupied by invaders from Gaul, by druids, by the first Christian priests and later by pirates. For Cathcart, these dead souls retain a ghostly presence – ‘The souls of all the dead are alive again, and pulsating actively around you’ – and the experience takes on a mystical dimension in which the ‘island was a universe, infinite and old as the darkness; not an island at all, but an infinite dark world where all the souls from all the other bygone nights lived on, and the infinite distance was near’ (Lawrence 1960: 99). This experience is ominous, however, for as Lawrence puts it ‘This is the danger of becoming an islander’: the island ‘has dwindled, like a jumping-off place, into nothingness, for you have jumped off, you know not how, into the dark wide mystery of time, where the past is vastly alive, and the future is not separated off’ (99). This is the island where Cathcart believes he is constructing the ‘Happy Isle’, ‘the last small isle of the Hesperides’ (100); but, set in what Lawrence calls the ‘Celtic sea’, it seems more closely akin to the ‘island of the dead’ of Celtic tradition and the Viking ship burials. And, if the island is a ‘jumping-off place’ to nothingness, this foreshadows Cathcart’s progress towards a third island in which, by the end, geography and temporality have both collapsed.

His second island lies close to the first one, ‘like the calf of the cow’ (Lawrence 1960: 98). But, in its smallness, it no longer serves as a microcosm. ‘The island was no longer a “world”. It was a sort of refuge.’ (111). But Cathcart flees from this refuge, and from the family he has started, to his third island, an isolated rock inhabited only by sheep. As summer on the island turns to winter, Cathcart turns in on himself and hardly leaves his cabin. Then come a series of bleak Hebridean blizzards, blanketing the island with snow until it has become ‘foreign’ and ‘unrecognizable’, with few marks of distinction left between land and sea. His island is ‘gone’, its shape changed by the snowdrifts (123). In a final effort, ‘like a wraith’ – he himself has become ghostlike – he climbs to the top of a snow-covered hill, where he feels the heat of the sun and tells himself that “‘It is summer, [. . .] and the time of leaves”” (124). A moment later, however, he becomes aware of another blizzard rolling in from the sea. His delusions

may be taken to suggest the last stages of hypothermia, although Michelucci is technically incorrect in claiming that the story ends with his death (Michelucci 2000: 318). Instead, his ending parallels that of Borg in *By the Open Sea*. Not only is further survival apparently impossible but, far from filling his islands with his personality and making them his own, Cathcart has suffered a mental collapse into nothingness, a loss of both intellectual and topographical identity. As he looks out ‘stupidly over the whiteness of his foreign island’ (Lawrence 1960: 124), he is no longer consciously an islander at all.

Conclusion

Ironically, what defeats the protagonists of Strindberg, Conrad and Lawrence is achieved by their stories. From the reader’s perspective, the literary islands that we have considered are indeed filled by the personalities of Borg, Heyst and Cathcart respectively. If, by the end, these islands have turned into ‘islands of the dead’, then the shades of the protagonists who sought sanctuary there will continue to haunt them.

Although the three texts brought together in this paper are very different, each maps a progression from ‘continental’ affiliations to ‘oceanic’ nothingness. *By the Open Sea*, *Victory* and ‘The Man Who Loved Islands’ are distinguished from castaway narratives by the fact that the protagonists choose to live on their islands, using them as a setting for utopian experiments. In each story the island figures, however briefly, as a historical microcosm offering a ‘pictorial history of the world’ – both its past and (in Strindberg and Conrad) its possible future. With the failure of their utopian projects, the underlying misanthropy and social disconnection of Borg, Heyst and Cathcart becomes increasingly evident. This, we realise, is the real reason for their ‘love of islands’, but not even island life can finally sustain them. It is not enough to say that island fiction necessarily ends up by drawing the moral put forward in John Donne’s sermon, since the proposition that ‘every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*’ seems intrinsic to literary narrative itself. What Strindberg, Conrad and Lawrence offer are dramatisations of the moral defeat and ultimate mental collapse of those representatives of the modern rational intellect whom Lawrence calls ‘islanders’.

Notes

¹ Although I argue for strong affinities between the three chosen texts, the question of mutual awareness or mutual influence remains open. Strindberg’s novel made its first appearance in English in the year before Conrad finished writing *Victory* (see Strindberg 1913). It is not known how many copies of this woodenly-translated ‘Authorized edition’, published in Cincinnati, may have been imported into the United Kingdom. Strindberg’s main character is Axel Borg. The fact that Conrad’s protagonist, Axel Heyst, is also a Swede, and that in an early draft of the novel he was named Berg, is a striking coincidence, if no more.

² Ethnography was one of these fads, since Strindberg spent much of 1886 engaged in studies of the French and German peasantry (Prideaux 2012: 129, 141).

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