

While the World Burns: Joseph Conrad and the Delayed Decoding of Catastrophe

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How do you sail a ship that is on fire? This question lies at the heart of Joseph Conrad's 'Youth', published in *Blackwood's* in 1898 and bound in the same collection as 'Heart of Darkness', and related by Marlow to the same group of professional auditors — the Accountant, Lawyer, and Director of Companies — who listen to his Congo tale, this time around a polished mahogany table laden with glasses of brandy and port. The narrative is frequently interrupted by requests to 'pass the bottle'.¹ If 'Heart of Darkness' offers a 'parable of modern environmental history', wrapped up in a formative document of modernism, 'Youth' appears a far simpler story and has received comparatively scant critical attention.² However, the story provides a glimpse into Conrad's Earth system poetics; the way his writing integrates geophysical with cognitive systems, ocean currents with economic flows, literary form with the world it models. It does so at a vital point within the ongoing convergence between the capitalist world system and the Earth system that we now recognize to be formative of the Anthropocene; namely, the transition from sail to steam that both accelerated and standardized global trade, transportation, and communication networks in the late nineteenth century.³ In this reading, the smoke billowing from the *Judea's* hold does not merely herald a localized, shipboard disaster, but becomes a symptom of the global shift to fossil fuels, and hence of the emergence of the Anthropocene as a planetary condition defined by combustion.

'Youth' recounts a voyage from London to Bangkok ('Bankok' in Conrad's spelling), Marlow's first as an officer and his first voyage to the 'East', romantic fantasies of which exert a powerful pull on his imagination throughout the story. Marlow himself suggests that the voyage is 'ordered for the illustration of life' and might 'stand as a symbol of existence' (p. 11),

¹ Joseph Conrad, 'Youth', in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, ed. by Owen Knowles, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 11–42 (p. 11).

² Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave, 2015), p. 57.

³ Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 352.

an admittedly grandiose phrase that I would like to interpret not in its metaphysical sense, but rather as an exercise in Earth system poetics; namely, the modelling of the planet as a single, interconnected system, and thus the ultimate condition of earthly existence. The ship, *Judea*, is based on the *Palestine*, upon which Conrad himself sailed under similar circumstances from September 1881 to April 1883. Its cargo is 600 tons of coal, which must first be collected in Newcastle. Their journey thus runs from the heart of global capital (London) to the site of energy extraction (Newcastle) to an uncolonized and exotic destination (Bangkok) at the edge of the world system's expanding frontier. In tracking the global shipment of coal the story exposes the 'ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use' to which that world system is anchored, with calamitous consequences.⁴ Viewed in terms of its energy systems, the story's central irony is as much that of the elder Marlow-as-narrator's reflection on his youthful naivety, as it is the irony of 'an old rattle-trap' sailing vessel 'carting about the world a lot of coal for freight' (p. 18) in order to fuel the steam-powered fleet of mail, passenger, and naval ships that accelerated the expansion of imperial capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. 'Youth' stages the shift from sail to steam, and its implications, more vividly than any other work in Conrad's oeuvre, precisely because it highlights, both structurally and thematically, the messiness of the transition from one energy regime to another, in which the new remains intractably bound up with the old.

The Anthropocene is an age of acceleration. This is true at the level of the new speeds enabled by fossil-fuelled technology, from the mill to the railway and steamship to the jet on which this article was partly composed (while flying above a vista filled with smoke from numerous forest fires). It is also true at the levels of accelerating capital accumulation, social change, literary production, and even historical time.⁵ And it is true at the even larger scale of the planet's accelerating absorption of solar radiation and, with it, the promise of ever more extreme weather events, melting glaciers, and sudden geological shifts. In contrast to the almost clichéd opposition between Holocene stability and Anthropocene chaos, a more accurate distinction may lie in the changing *speed* of geomorphological activity.⁶ The Earth system was never static, but it is speeding up. In this context,

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2009), 197–222 (p. 208).

⁵ See Derek Woods, 'Accelerated Reading: Fossil Fuels, Infowhelm, and Archival Life', in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017), pp. 202–19.

⁶ Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 187; Tobias Menely, 'Late Holocene Poetics: Genre and Geohistory in *Beachy Head*', *European Romantic Review*, 28 (2017), 307–14.

it is particularly telling that much of the narrative tension of ‘Youth’ is produced by slowness.

The plot hinges on the differential speed of sailing ships compared with steamers, including their greater vulnerability to weather. Upon leaving London for Newcastle, the *Judea* is beset by extreme weather, ‘the famous October gale of twenty-two years ago’, which leaves them with ‘smashed bulwarks and a flooded deck’, struggling to redistribute their ballast of sand around the hold to right the ship (p. 13). When they arrive in Newcastle sixteen days later, they have missed their loading schedule, resulting in an extra month’s delay. Once finally loaded and ready to depart, the *Judea* is struck by an errant ‘fool of a steamer’ on its way out of the harbour. The damage ‘wasn’t much, but it delayed us three weeks’ (p. 15). They finally set sail in January, already ‘three months out of London’, only to be hit by a furious gale that blows ‘without interval, without mercy, without rest’ until ‘the world was nothing but an immensity of great foaming waves rushing at us, under a sky low enough to touch with the hand and dirty like a smoked ceiling’ (p. 16). The collapsing ‘world’ that is the sailors’ perceptual field is thus defined by forces that entirely exceed that field, entangling it within what William E. Connolly would call the ‘force fields’ of the planetary.⁷ Day in, day out, they man the pumps:

There was for us no sky, there were for us no stars, no sun, no universe — nothing but angry clouds and an infuriated sea. We pumped watch and watch, for dear life; and it seemed to last for months, for years, for all eternity, as though we had been dead and gone to a hell for sailors. (p. 17)

Eventually, the ship is overmatched. They turn for the nearest port, pumping the whole way because ‘a bad leak is an inhuman thing’ (p. 19). Four months out, en route from London to Bangkok, they put in at Falmouth. The ship is repaired and they put back out to sea only to discover leaks and return to port. This happens three times, and they gradually become both familiar features and the laughing stocks of the town, their voyage a proverbial joke: ‘People pointed us out to visitors as “that ’ere barque that’s going to Bankok — has been here six months — put back three times”’ (p. 20). All the while, steamers come and go. They cannot go anywhere without being passed, pre-empted, or (as we have seen) run over by a steamship. The joke is only partly at Marlow’s expense, however.

The interminable delays not only expose the futility of the effort to which Marlow has invested his youthful illusions, but also the intractable inefficiencies of the capitalist world system. This too is rendered explicit:

⁷ William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 4.

‘Meantime the owner, the underwriters, and the charterers squabbled amongst themselves in London, and our pay went on’ (p. 20). From an investor’s point of view, it is easy to see the superiority of the steamers, which circumnavigate the globe with alacrity and (most importantly) calculable regularity, to Marlow’s beleaguered old barque. However, that ostensible superiority belies the fact that steamers are themselves the occasion for the *Judea*’s voyage. Without coal shipped by sail, the steamers are going nowhere. Hence, the economic (and imperial) acceleration promised by the transition to steam at the end of the nineteenth century remained tethered to the ‘old rattle-trap’ — the steamers were too inefficient to transport their own fuel and a surplus of coal as cargo. It would have been too expensive to ship coal to Bangkok via steamer, just as oil is not transported around the globe by jet today; indeed, the need for coaling stations was one of the primary limiting factors on the transition to steam for long-haul shipping (coupled with the cost of fuel).⁸ Recall that Marlow’s listening audience consists of those professionals best positioned to situate the narrative within the dynamics of global capitalism. Thus, when the captain takes the train from Falmouth up to London to meet the underwriters, Marlow’s auditors fully understand the economic implications of not only the repairs but, even more significantly, of the delay itself. Hence, the entire first half of the story dramatizes both the limitations imposed on global commerce by sail technology and the intransigence of those limits even within the shift to fossil fuels. Modernity has yet to escape the constraints placed upon it by wind, weather, and ocean (as anyone who has waited for a weather-delayed flight well knows).

As the story approaches its climax, the capacity of fossil fuels to ignite disaster comes to the fore. The *Judea* is unloaded, dry-docked, ‘recaulked, new coppered and made as tight as a bottle’, sealing both her seams and her fate (p. 21). Seaworthy again, they have just begun to reload when the rats abandon ship. Marlow and the first mate jokingly disparage their rodent castaways, observing that the ‘wisdom of rats has been grossly overrated, being in fact no greater than that of men’ (p. 21). It is easy to fault this heavy-handed foreshadowing as clumsy — evidence of Conrad’s own ‘youth’ within his craft as a writer. You literally cannot miss the symbolism. However, to my mind its obviousness is precisely the point. It is imperative that Marlow’s listening audience (and Conrad’s reader) understand not only that he is setting out on a doomed ship, but also that he (like Ishmael) has been warned. *Sans* rats, the *Judea* finally puts back to sea, and enjoys a smooth passage (at a steady three miles an hour!) around the Horn of Africa and into the Indian Ocean on its way to Bangkok. And then comes the fire.

⁸ Douglas R. Burgess Jr, *Engines of Empire: Steamships and the Victorian Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 37.

The disaster begins with a ‘frightful’ smell emanating from the hold: ‘One would have thought hundreds of paraffin lamps had been flaring and smoking in that hole for days’ (p. 22). Marlow investigates by putting his head down a ventilator:

As I lifted the lid a visible breath, something like a thin fog, a puff of faint haze, rose from the opening. [...] I had one sniff and put the lid down gently. It was no use choking myself. The cargo was on fire. (p. 22)

As he will soon explain,

it was to be expected, for though the coal was of a safe kind, that cargo had been so handled, so broken up with handling, that it looked more like smithy coal than anything else. Then it had been wetted — more than once. It rained all the time we were taking it back from the hulk, and now with this long passage it got heated, and there was another case of spontaneous combustion. (p. 22)

In other words, the jostling produced by the accumulated delays, storms, collisions, soakings, and dryings of their interminable, tempestuous journey has been at work on the coal as well as on the men and the ship, producing an energy conversion sufficient, eventually, to set it on fire. Anna Tsing’s reflections on the ‘friction’ produced by global connectivity could not find a more literal exemplar.⁹ ‘Another case of spontaneous combustion’ is not just an allusion to Dickens (*Bleak House* was one of Conrad’s favourite books); it also suggests the event’s actual plausibility. Anyone might anticipate the fire in the hold under such circumstances, Marlow implies, because it has happened before.

Rather than putting in to the closest port (in Australia) for yet another delay, the captain decides to push on and fight the fire, first attempting to ‘stifle this ’ere damned combustion by want of air’ (p. 23). Despite their best efforts in sealing the hold, ‘the smoke kept coming out through imperceptible crevices’, pervading the ship ‘in an incomprehensible manner’ (p. 23). From the cabin to the forecabin, ‘it poisoned the sheltered places on the deck’ (p. 23). The smoke calls attention to the ship as not merely a vessel afloat upon the water, but a space of imperfectly contained atmosphere: ‘if the smoke came out, the air came in’ (p. 23). ‘It was’, Marlow suggests, ‘disheartening’ (p. 23). Next they try water, opening the hatches to reveal ‘enormous volumes of smoke’ which gradually clear until ‘the poisonous cloud blew away, and we went back to work in a smoke that was no thicker than that of an ordinary factory chimney’ (p. 23), a detail

⁹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

which firmly embeds the events within the labour regimes of what Andreas Malm calls ‘fossil capitalism’.¹⁰ Again they pump, this time sending water into the hold instead of out of it:

It was our fate to pump in that ship, to pump out of her, to pump into her; and after keeping water out of her to save ourselves from being drowned, we frantically poured water into her to save ourselves from being burnt. (p. 23)

All the while, ‘of course we saw no fire’ because ‘the cargo smouldered at the bottom somewhere’ (p. 23). Hence, if the coal in the hold represents the ‘fossil fuel base’ upon which modernity rests, this hidden fire speaks to that base’s combustive capacity to annihilate the whole.

The symbolic relevance of ‘Youth’ to the Anthropocene rests not only on such figurative alignment between the ship and the world, but also on Conrad’s dramatization of the cognitive imperviousness Marlow and his companions exhibit in the face of disaster. Here too the seemingly heavy-handed irony is crucial in expanding the disconnect between the events as they occur and the moment in which they are narrated, which, in turn, opens the story to symbolic interpretation. The first mate reflects that ‘if she would only spring a tidy leak — like that time when we first left the Channel — it would put a stopper on this fire’, to which Marlow responds, ‘Do you remember the rats?’ (pp. 23–24). The irony, like the symbolism, is clear. Conrad renders it obvious to an uncharacteristic degree, which is precisely why critics often object to ‘Youth’ as an immature work. However, that very obviousness takes us into the lived experience of a sublimated catastrophe, in which warning signs are systematically ignored until the sailors’ ‘world’ goes up in flames. ‘Youth’ thus offers a vivid dramatization of what Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz call the ‘modernizing unconscious’: learned obliviousness to modernity’s ecological consequences.¹¹ As Marlow explains, ‘We fought the fire and sailed the ship too as carefully as though nothing had been the matter’ (p. 24). In that pairing of twin labours, fighting the fire and sailing the ship *as though nothing had been the matter*, lies the story’s symbolic relevance to life in the early Anthropocene, wherein we sail our respective ships as though nothing is the matter, actively suppressing an ever more present awareness that the world is (both literally and figuratively) on fire. After all, we have not yet seen the blaze, even if we understand full well its conditions of possibility and have even begun to smell the smoke.

¹⁰ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016).

¹¹ Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. by David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2015), p. 199.

To understand the dramatization of the modernizing unconscious in 'Youth', we must turn to its most stylistically innovative feature, namely what Ian Watt calls 'delayed decoding'. In Watt's account, delayed decoding 'combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive processes of making out their meaning'.¹² Watt's 'fullest example' of this principle occurs when we find Marlow leaning against the carpenter's bench, smoking his pipe and chatting with the carpenter:

He remarked, 'I think we have done very well, haven't we?' and then I perceived with annoyance that the fool was trying to tilt the bench. I said curtly 'Don't, Chips,' and immediately became aware of a queer sensation, of an absurd delusion — I seemed somehow to be in the air. I heard all round me like a pent up breath released — as if a thousand giants simultaneously had said Phoo! — and felt a dull concussion which made my ribs ache suddenly. No doubt about it — I was in the air, and my body was describing a short parabola. But short as it was, I had the time to think several thoughts in, as far as I can remember, the following order: 'This can't be the carpenter — What is it? — Some accident — Submarine volcano? — Coals, gas! — By Jove! we are being blown up — Everybody's dead — I am falling into the after-hatch — I see fire in it!'. (p. 25)

The abruptness of the explosion is at odds with the obsessive slowness that has become the hallmark of their journey, with its endless sequence of interruptions and delays, an incongruity that is here rendered all the more acute because, rather than speeding up, the narration actually slows down in order to dramatize the acceleration of events. Furthermore, this perceptual delay occurs even though Marlow already has the necessary information to process, and indeed anticipate, what is happening. He knows about the smoke, he knows about the coal, he knows about the tight, pressure-containing seals on the hold. He even knows about the plausibility of 'spontaneous combustion' arising from the interaction of those forces, and indeed has little trouble coming to the immediate realization that 'the cargo was on fire' upon opening the hatch. He even knows about the rats. Nonetheless, he cannot initially process the logical consequence of that interaction in the moment of the explosion, turning first to the equally possible, but far less plausible, explanation of a 'submarine volcano' — a telling mistake in that it conflates the shipboard disaster with a geological event (p. 25). What this moment dramatizes, in other words, is the unthinkability of an entirely foreseeable catastrophe.

¹² Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 175.

Conrad extends and formalizes the cognitive difficulty of accepting that catastrophe has struck, despite having positioned it as both inevitable and predictable. What could be less surprising than an explosion on a ship laden with 600 tons of coal known to be on fire in a tightly contained space? The event is also thoroughly and explicitly foreshadowed. As Marlow himself quips: ‘Do you remember the rats?’ (p. 24). The explanation, then, lies in the active suppression of knowledge. You cannot fight the fire and sail the ship as if nothing is the matter unless you separate those two spheres of action, actively turning off the part of your mind that would connect your labours and view the ship, cargo, smoke, wind, water, friction, labour, and pressure as part of a single system, the interactions of which have the potential to annihilate the whole. ‘Youth’ is a study in denial.

Taken in isolation, Marlow’s delayed decoding of the explosion might be understood as a realistic dramatization of the encounter with a traumatizing event. However, the story presents this encounter as a ‘symbol of all existence’, a phrase that invites (and perhaps even forces) us to treat it more expansively (p. 17). Because the Earth system both exceeds and conditions human existence at every turn, it can only be apprehended from the inside out, via internal models that are perforce contained by (and entangled with) the larger systems they render visible. Following Marlow’s injunction to interpret the events symbolically then, I suggest that ‘Youth’ offers a way of approaching planetary processes as entangled within a single system that is, itself, the ultimate context of existence. To exist is to exist within the Earth system; to lose sight of that fact is to court disaster.

Conrad himself invites such a reading at numerous points. Nidesh Lawtoo describes Conrad’s ‘The Secret Sharer’ as ‘not simply a representation of a local disaster, but an allegory of a global catastrophe’.¹³ He writes, ‘in Conrad’s nautical fictions storms do not simply threaten individuals, or the microcosm of the ship; they also represent, via a synecdochal extension, a larger menace to the “planet” or “world” as a whole’ (p. 46). The distinction between metaphor and synecdoche is crucial here. The ship does not merely resemble the planet, it is a part of it. Tracking this ‘synecdochal extension’ involves tracing the many nested spheres that surround the ship: from the global networks of shipping, trade, and capital, to wind and weather. However, it also shifts within, to the physiochemical interactions at work on the coal as it is soaked, jostled, and heated by the rays of the tropical sun concentrated within the hold of the ship, and ignited by friction as the broken pieces rub against one another until the dust finally ignites and explodes. ‘Spontaneous combustion’ coalesces planetary systems at once human, oceanic, climatological, and physical, its timescales spanning the interminable delays of the voyage, the compaction

¹³ Nidesh Lawtoo, *Conrad’s Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), p. 50.

of solar energy stored up by carboniferous plants into the coal itself, the energy transition between sail and steam, the captain's urgency in (finally) pushing on towards Bangkok in hopes of salvaging some profit from the voyage. Finally, the combustive instant itself is, in turn, protracted through the delayed decoding of Marlow's consciousness, and hence his sensory and cognitive apparatus and his capacity to share that experience through narrative as a storytelling animal. The story asks to be read as a 'symbol for all existence' because it registers these divergent geo-temporal scales and interlocking systems, modelling them from within.

Reading 'Youth' as a scale model of the Anthropocenic predicament also helps make sense of the moment immediately after the explosion, when Marlow surveys the ruins of his world. Immediately upon landing in the smoking crater that remains of the deck, Marlow is able to give a more coherent explanation: 'the coal-dust suspended in the air of the hold had glowed dull-red at the moment of the explosion', which had transpired 'in an infinitesimal fraction of a second since the first tilt of the bench' (p. 25). Scrambling out of the hold, Marlow finds the deck to be 'a wilderness of smashed timber, lying crosswise like trees in a wood after a hurricane' (p. 25). Shortly thereafter, he will again survey the destruction: 'masts rose from that chaos like big trees above a matted undergrowth. [...] The smoke of the invisible fire was coming up again, was trailing, like a poisonous thick mist in some valley choked with dead wood' (p. 27). These turns to the language of wilderness (forest, hurricane) to characterize the ship in the aftermath of the explosion echo his initial impression, that the explosion is the work of a 'submarine volcano'. In each instance, he turns to what Nigel Clark would call 'inhuman nature' to describe an anthropogenic catastrophe.¹⁴ Taking these figurations seriously suggests that in the full force of their occurrence the events cannot be comprehended in human terms. It is only in *misidentifying* them that the sensations they occasion can be articulated. In this regard, the apprehension of the explosion as akin to a volcano or hurricane aligns with the introduction of the human as 'geophysical force' that Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies as a new mode of human being, a 'form of collective existence that has no ontological dimension' because it operates as pure, indifferent, force.¹⁵

The emergence of the 'Anthropos' as a force within the Earth system is an inherently global, indeed planetary, event, whereas the explosion of the *Judea* is purely local. However, as Lawtoo suggests, 'Conrad wants his readers to think global first, before turning to evaluate local ethical actions' (p. 59). Marlow's invitation to treat the story symbolically suggests precisely

¹⁴ Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (Washington DC: Sage, 2011).

¹⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change', *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), 1–18 (p. 13).

such a move, simplifying and reducing the complexity of the whole to make it comprehensible. Furthermore, the dynamics responsible for introducing this new planetary force provide the explicit context for ‘Youth’: the transport of fossil fuels around the world as a constitutive feature of the expansion and acceleration of imperial-industrial capitalism and modernization, operating within biophysical processes of the weather and ocean, under the baking heat of a tropical sun whose energy is absorbed within terrestrial systems, all of which is filtered through the human consciousness reflecting upon it. In the context of ‘Youth’, all of these systems exceed the events in question (even human cognition, since Marlow is reflecting on and unpacking the events from a position of elder wisdom). Meanwhile, the Anthropocene operates at a planetary scale that exceeds them all, both spatially and temporally. After all, the term Anthropocene was not available to Conrad (or Marlow), and hence becomes legible as a relevant context for his writing only in retrospect. However, that predicament is always true of the Anthropocene, an epoch that has only just begun, which will become legible only from the vantage of some far distant future. For the time being, it can only be perceived from the inside out, *in medias res*, via models that are internal to it. This means, in turn, that even if the event of the *Judea*’s destruction does not rise to the scale of the Anthropocene as such, its relation in narrative nonetheless provides a small-scale model by which the broader systemic condition can be understood.

Following the explosion, the story begins to slant towards the farcical. Yet another steamer shows up (a mail boat) and offers to take them on board, but Marlow’s captain refuses to abandon the ship. The mail boat agrees to tow them to port, where they can ‘extinguish the fire by scuttling and then proceed on our voyage — to Bangkok!’ (p. 28). Before long, however, the ‘speed of the towing had fanned the smouldering destruction’, giving them their first glimpse of the actual fire (p. 29). Lest the entire ship go up in flames, they cut the tow rope, at which point the steamer captain offers to take them to Singapore if they will only come aboard, but Marlow’s captain refuses on the grounds that ‘it was part of our duty to save for the underwriters as much as we could of the ship’s gear’ (p. 30). The steamer, meanwhile, cannot wait: “Mails — you know”, and thus proceeds on its way, promising to report them in Singapore (p. 30). Meanwhile, Marlow and company stick to the burning ship, doing their utmost to transfer anything of possible value to the boats: ‘What didn’t we save? An old barometer fixed with an absurd quantity of screws nearly cost me my life’ (p. 30). As the long boats are nearly loaded, Marlow, who has been wondering why the rest of the crew is not leaving the ship, returns to the deck to find them ‘eating bread and cheese and drinking bottled stout’ with a ‘background of flames twisting in fierce tongues above their heads’ and reflects that ‘they seemed at home like salamanders and looked like a band of desperate pirates’ (p. 32). The captain is asleep. In these final

moments, the sailors have ceased to be. This last scene on board completes the disturbance produced by the explosion, in which the sailors' coherent, instrumental role, hitherto organized entirely around labour, dissolves into a brief, almost utopian space of respite in which they can eat, drink, and sleep. It is, in other words, a return to the basic processes of life that they almost sacrificed in rescuing a few scraps of value from the ship.

They eventually abandon the *Judea* to her fate, but not before watching the final conflagration:

Between the darkness of earth and heaven she was burning fiercely upon a disc of purple sea shot by the blood-red play of gleams; upon a disc of water glittering and sinister. A high clear flame, an immense and lonely flame ascended from the ocean, and from its summit the black smoke poured continuously at the sky. She burned furiously, mournful and imposing like a funeral pile kindled in the night, surrounded by the sea, watched over by the stars. A magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward to that old ship at the end of her laborious days. The surrender of her weary ghost to the keeping of stars and sea was stirring like the sight of a glorious triumph. The masts fell just before daybreak, and for a moment there was a burst and turmoil of sparks that seemed to fill with flying fire the night patient and watchful, the vast night lying silent upon the sea. And at daylight she was only a charred shell, floating still under a cloud of smoke and bearing a glowing mass of coals within. (p. 34)

Marlow's eulogy for the dying ship offers a sharp contrast to his narration of the initial explosion. In place of confusion it offers a coherent, vivid image; in place of disjointed fragments strung together with dashes, it offers lyrically composed sentences with the compounding adjectives and descriptive clauses that are hallmarks of Conrad's style. That shift corresponds to Marlow's position: he is no longer on board the ship; the *Judea* no longer constitutes his world but rather an external object to be observed 'between earth and heaven', its flame ascending from ocean to sky (p. 34). And yet this description is also partial, working by simile and approximation that again invites symbolic interpretation, suggesting that the scene's significance lies in its capacity to be freighted with expansive meaning, not least because it offers important contextualization that can be read back against the preceding narrative. Marlow outlines concentric circles, from the 'disc of ocean', to the atmosphere, to the stars, all of which offers the reminder that each sphere is nested within another, extending out into the universe of earth's beyond.

If the *Judea* demarcated a world, here we see that world end in flames: 'magnificent death had come like a grace, like a gift, like a reward

to that old ship at the end of her laborious days.’ Throughout his oeuvre, Conrad describes ships — at least sailing ships — as living things. Indeed, in ‘The End of the Tether’ (bound in the same volume with ‘Youth’ and ‘Heart of Darkness’) he draws a sharp distinction between sailing ships and steamers by explaining that ‘a sailing-ship somehow seems always ready to spring into life with the breath of incorruptible heaven’, whereas an unfired steamer is ‘a dead thing [...] as cold and still and pulseless as a corpse’.¹⁶ Here, the *Judea* is annihilated by the combustive energy regime that will replace the age of sail. The burning of the *Judea* is thus at once a funeral pyre and a signal fire, heralding the Promethean epoch to come, when human existence will fill with ‘flying fire the night patient and watchful, the vast night lying silent upon the sea’. What was once a sudden, unexpected catastrophe has become a delayed, slow burning disaster; the foreseeable consequence of everyday modernity.

I began this article thinking that the symbolic relevance of ‘Youth’ for the Anthropocene lay in its staging of denial: the ways in which we sail our respective ships as though nothing is the matter, attempting to deny the ominous burning smell arising from below decks. Sanity demands that we all act like climate deniers at least some of the time. However, the calamity’s aftermath may provide the more instructive image: a desperate captain ordering a misfit crew to salvage the last scraps of value from a burning coal ship for some distant, faceless investors, then snatching a nap, some bread and cheese, and a bottle of stout before their world follows its anchors on ‘200 fathom of red hot chain’ to the bottom (p. 32).

Pass the bottle.

¹⁶ ‘The End of the Tether’, in *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, ed. by Knowles, p. 214.