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SAMBURAN THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS:  
EAST AND WEST IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S *VICTORY*

In Joseph Conrad's novel *Victory: An Island Tale* (1915), the protagonist Axel Heyst is introduced as the sole inhabitant and proprietor of the remote island of Samburan, "the 'Round Island' of the charts"<sup>1</sup> situated somewhere in the Java Sea two days eastward from Surabaya. Heyst occupies the site of his abandoned coal mine, and his lonely isolation is a subject of comment throughout the first half of the novel: he lives as if he were "cast away on a desert island" (42), like "the man in the moon" (156) or "the original Adam" (173). It therefore comes as something of a surprise to discover almost halfway through the novel (in the first chapter of Part III) that Heyst is not the island's sole inhabitant. He has a Chinese servant named Wang, and Wang has a wife. Moreover, the opposite side of the island is home to a village of "harmless fisher-folk": "Heyst learned presently that Wang had persuaded one of the women of the Alfuro village, on the west shore of the island, beyond the central ridge, to come over to live with him in a remote part of the company's clearing" (179). The corresponding passage in Conrad's original manuscript adds the remark (later deleted in revision) that Heyst's clearing "had been made on the east side preparatory to mining operations."<sup>2</sup> We are told that the Alfuros, overwhelmed by the "sudden invasion of Chinamen" who arrived to work the mine, had withdrawn to the opposite side of the island and even "blocked the path over the ridge by felling a few trees" as a barricade against the invaders (179). These descriptive passages suffice to map the fictional topography of the "Round Island": the Alfuros (with the sole exception of Wang's wife) live in their village "on the west shore" of Samburan, Heyst lives in his clearing on the east side, and the central ridge with its barricade keeps them happily apart. On Samburan, as in Kipling's ballad, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Curiously, in the narrative that follows, these polarities of East and West are *reversed* in all the subsequent descriptions of the play of sunlight on Heyst's compound. We are told that "The bulk of the central ridge of the island cut off the bungalow from sunrises," and that "The dwellers therein were debarred from reading early the fortune of the new-born day. It sprang upon them in its fullness

1. J. Conrad, *Victory: An Island Tale* (London: Dent, 1948), p. 5. All subsequent references are to this edition.

2. MS p. 471, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. I am grateful to Alexandre Fachard for this information.

with a swift retreat of the great shadow when the sun, clearing the ridge, looked down, hot and dry, with a devouring glare like the eye of an enemy" (185). Heyst is shown standing on his verandah enjoying an early respite from the heat when "Alma came out to join him long before the sun, rising above the Samburan ridge, swept the cool shadow of the early morning and the remnant of the night's coolness clear off the roof under which they had dwelt for more than three months already" (186). The equatorial sun rises quickly over Samburan, and presumably from the east, so the play of light and shadow caused by the central ridge indicates that Heyst's clearing and bungalow cannot possibly be on the eastern side of the island, but must be on the western side.

This geographical imperative is confirmed late that same day, when the sun is setting and shadows are long because the sun is visibly low on the western horizon: "Over the clearing the shadows were already lengthening. The sun hung low; a ruddy glare lay on the burnt black patch in front of the bungalow" while the "open sea lay blue and opaque under the sun" (225-26). Part IV opens with a similar description of the morning shadows: "The sun had risen some time before. Already the sparkle of open sea was encroaching rapidly on the dark, cool, early-morning blue of Diamond Bay; but the deep dusk lingered yet under the mighty pillars of the forest" (281). Towards evening, two of the villains take a walk when "the sun had declined sufficiently for the shadows of Mr. Jones and his henchman to be projected towards the bungalow side by side" (328) – an arrangement possible only if Jones and Ricardo are directly west of the bungalow without an intervening central ridge. A final, explicit reference to the westward location of Diamond Bay occurs when Heyst and Lena return to their bungalow from the central ridge as a storm threatens: "she stood still and pointed to the west. [...] Beyond the headland of Diamond Bay, lying black on a purple sea, great masses of cloud stood piled up and bathed in a mist of blood. A crimson crack like an open wound zigzagged between them, with a piece of dark red sun showing at the bottom. [...] Her eyes reflected the sombre and violent hues of the sunset" (355).

The trajectories of Captain Davidson's passages by the island also confirm the western location of Heyst's ruined compound. He first notices Heyst as a "white figure" (28) on the coaling-wharf when his steamer is "coming by from the westward" (27). Davidson "told us that he passed to the north of Samburan on purpose to see what was going on. At first, it looked as if that side of the island had been altogether abandoned" (28) – a further indication that the Alfuro village must be on the opposite, eastern shore. Once he knows that Heyst remains on Samburan, Davidson adds a ten-mile detour to his regular journeys in order to pass within sight of Heyst's compound: "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" (27; cf. 28). Since Davidson's route between Surabaya and Ternate runs roughly from southwest to northeast, this again suggests that Heyst's wharf lies on the west or northwest side of his small round island.

These references to sun and shadow and to the course of Davidson's steamer

are all consistent among themselves, and all support the location of Heyst's compound on the *west* coast of Samburan. The sole exception to this topography is the narrator's initial placement of the Alfuro village on the island's "west shore." If this single word "west" were changed to "east," Samburan's relation to sun and sea would be entirely consistent with respect to the points of the compass.