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In the second volume of his autobiography, Leonard Woolf describes how his wedding to the then Virginia Stephen was disrupted by her sister Vanessa:

“[O]ur wedding ceremony was provided with an element of comic relief (quite unintended) characteristic of the Stephens. In the middle of the proceedings Vanessa interrupted the Registrar, saying: “Excuse me interrupting; I have just remembered: we registered my son—he is two years old—in the name of Clement, and now we want to change his name to Quentin—can you tell me what I have to do?” There was a moment of astonished silence in the room as we all looked round sympathetically and saw the serious, slightly puzzled look on Vanessa’s face. There was a pause while the Registrar stared at her with his mouth open. Then he said severely: “One thing at a time, please, Madam.” (Woolf 1964, 70)

“One thing at a time” sums up the fundamental constraint imposed by convention not just on marriage ceremonies but also on narratives. However much we experience life as did Leonard Woolf—as multiplicity, interruption, and even astonished silence—our narratives must transpose this complexity into a unilinear succession of signs of some sort or another. In the quoted passage,
on the level of the sjužet, we do indeed get “one thing at a time”; on the level of the fabula, however, we experience simultaneity and rupture—a rupture mirrored in the jerky syntax of Vanessa’s interruption.

Our sense of an already lived life, whether it is our own life or someone else’s, frequently takes the form of a narrative. While we live, unself-consciously, we seem to be swimming around in a sea of events, feelings, and thoughts. But as soon as we come to represent the progress of a life we typically choose the model of a linear progression from one point to another. The English language does not lack for metaphors to depict our sense of life as a linear and unidirectional progression from a beginning to an end: “Life’s rocky road,” “the story of my life,” “my journey from childhood to understanding,” “the final full-stop of his death.” The road, the story, the journey and the sentence—all can be made to model aspects of our experience of life by representing temporal succession (“one thing after another”) by means of spatial movement (“from one place to another”). Certain narratives make use of such culturally familiar parallels without exploring—or exploiting—their limitations. John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress does not draw the attention of the reader to the ways in which becoming a Christian and reaching heaven is not like making a journey through difficult terrain.

Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf typically attempt to expose and foreground the contrast between living, and representing, a life. In the case of Woolf she explicitly theorizes this contrast in her essays, and in her fiction she consistently draws attention to the way in which such organizing metaphors impose an order upon experience that misrepresents its actuality. Her first published novel, The Voyage Out (1915), famously has no voyage back for its heroine, whose death interrupts a return that both she and Woolf’s reader might have expected. For Woolf’s admired predecessor Joseph Conrad, the voyage from A to B may represent a convenient metaphor for a phase of life in his earlier fiction, but its too neat misrepresentation of life’s digressions, interruptions, false starts, and unexpected endings is the focus of Conrad’s overt critique in his later work. Thus, whereas The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1896) opens as the ship sets sail and ends soon after the completion of its voyage, The Shadow-Line (1917) begins with the narrator unexpectedly leaving his ship, and terminates in mid-voyage, with the narrator planning to sail further on the following day, thus presenting the reader with a mismatch between the structuring logic of the “life-as-voyage” metaphor and the more messy reality of the many lives that it maps.

However, if Conrad’s early novels individually present the reader with more conventional forward-moving chronologies, taken together they display some decidedly unconventional attitudes toward temporal progression.
Conrad’s “Malay trilogy”—Almayer’s Folly (1895), An Outcast of the Islands (1896), and The Rescue (published 1919–20 but begun 1896) share common characters and the same fictional world, but their story chronology is the reverse of their publication chronology. An Outcast of the Islands details events that occur before those narrated in Almayer’s Folly, while The Rescue details events that occur before those narrated in An Outcast of the Islands. If the deferral of closure is, by common consent, a standard element in modernist fiction, right from the start of his writing career Conrad seems intent on establishing that all openings, all beginnings, are provisional.

And indeed, Conrad’s second published novel contains a foregrounding of the inadequacy of those conventional metaphors that invite us to see a life as a road, a journey, a sentence—or even a narrative. In An Outcast of the Islands it is in part by displaying the differences between certain of these varied life-metaphors—the path, the sentence, the narrative—that such foregrounding takes place. The reader of An Outcast of the Islands is recurrently led to expect that the life of the outcast, Peter Willems, will be presented by means of a number of well-known analogues—travel along (or away from) a path or road, the construction of a sentence, or the reading of a narrative (a “tale”)—only to find that these different analogues interrogate and expose one another’s limitations and shortcomings. What is more, the fact that Willems’s life is compared to a tale introduces a self-referential element into the novel that forces the reader to relate the experience of his or her reading of the text of An Outcast of the Islands to Willems’s living of his life—and also to Conrad’s writing of the novel.

In a short article on Guy de Maupassant that Conrad wrote to introduce a selection of the Frenchman’s tales translated into English by Ada Galsworthy (it is reprinted in Notes on Life and Letters [1904]), Conrad draws admiring attention to Maupassant’s ability to resist the temptation to leave the path of unilinear narrative development. “The inherent greatness of the man consists in this, that he will let none of the fascinations that beset a writer working in loneliness turn him away from the straight path, from the vouchsafed vision of excellence. He will not be led into perdition by the seductions of sentiment, of eloquence, of humour, of pathos; of all that splendid pageant of faults that pass between the writer and his probity on the blank sheet of paper, like the glittering cortège of deadly sins before the austere anchorite in the desert air of Thebaide” (2004, 26).

Conrad’s religious terminology here may remind us that lurking in the shadows of his early fiction another related metaphor for life—that of the “book of life” written prior to one’s birth—is often to be found. In all of Conrad’s fiction this phrase appears only in An Outcast of the Islands. The first time
it is used in a semisecular context. At the start of chapter 2 in Part 1 of the novel there is mention of the “old sea,” “whose servants were devoted slaves and went from youth to age or to a sudden grave without needing to open the book of life, because they could look at eternity reflected on the element that gave the life and dealt the death” (Conrad [1896] 2002, 14). But in the chapter following, Willems finds things in the book of life that have been written by the Devil himself. There is, moreover, what Conrad may intend as a more specifically Islamic sense of the book that is associated with characters such as Babalatchi and Abdulla. At the start of chapter 3 in Part 2 of the novel, for example, we are told that for “upwards of forty years Abdulla had walked in the way of his Lord,” and that later on “it became clear that the book of his destiny contained the programme of a wandering life” (85). But a firm sense of predestination and the fact that he “bore himself with the humility becoming a Believer, who never forgets, even for one moment of his waking life, that he is the servant of the Most High” (85–86) do not prevent “his ability, his will—strong to obstinacy—his wisdom beyond his years” from forcing his family to recognize him as its leader (85). Whereas Abdulla displays tenacity and determination while walking along a road he believes to be mapped out in advance in the divinely written book of his life, Willems is convinced that he is showing initiative and independence in leaving the path of his peculiar honesty but is, actually, incapable of any form of independent, creative endeavor.

The opposition between the “straight path” and the “seductions” that lead to “perdition” that Conrad details in the essay on Maupassant is in An Outcast of the Islands applied not to the writer but to Willems, the eponymous “outcast.” The novel opens as follows. “When he stepped off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty, it was with an inward assertion of unflinching resolve to fall back again into the monotonous but safe stride of virtue as soon as his little excursion into the wayside quagmires had produced the desired effect. It was going to be a short episode—a sentence in brackets, so to speak—in the flowing tale of his life: a thing of no moment, to be done unwillingly, yet neatly, and to be quickly forgotten” (7). These opening words present us with a complex double-metaphor that establishes links and associations that persist and are amplified throughout the length of the work. Even though the “path” referred to in the novel’s first sentence is that of the as-yet unnamed protagonist’s “peculiar honesty” (a collocation that undercuts itself: honesty is not honesty if it is peculiar to an individual), the metaphor feeds off a long tradition of representing an individual’s temporal progression through life, or his or her adherence to a code of moral behavior, as physical movement along a path or road—in other words a transposing of the dimension of experience-in-time to that of movement-in-space.
While the novel’s opening sentence describes the protagonist’s life of “peculiar honesty” in terms of the physical movement of an individual along a defined path, the sentence that follows extends this metaphor so as to associate a stepping aside from this path with the temporary abandonment of straightforward narrative progression: “It was going to be a short episode—a sentence in brackets, so to speak—in the flowing tale of his life.” Here the imaginary bracketed sentence performs a function comparable to that performed within a tale by an episode, or within a single sentence by an appositional noun phrase; it betokens a break in unilinear progression. This second sentence has a curiously disorienting effect on the reader as he or she experiences the tenor of the second metaphorical association not only being evoked but also—almost—demonstrated. In this sentence the words that are enclosed by the two dashes do not technically form a bracketed sentence but an appositional noun phrase; nevertheless, they effect what the critic F. R. Leavis was wont to dub an “enacting” of the semantic force of the words. Where dashes are used to mark the insertion of such a phrase, they must, like brackets, be used in pairs. The first dash or bracket thus implies the unavoidable use of a second one, and accordingly brings with it a sense of formal inevitability. The reader associates this sense of formal inevitability with what the man who we later learn is named Willems assumes: that his life will inevitably return to its established “path” once his brief trip through the wayside quagmires has “produced the desired effect”—although it is presumably the narrator rather than Willems himself to whose ironic vision we must attribute the term “peculiar honesty.”

But what Willems considers to be the “flowing tale” of his life, unlike the linear progression of the sentence’s syntactical structure, is actually never resumed or brought to (for him) a satisfactory conclusion. As Willems remarks to himself toward the end of the novel: “I am a lost man” (260). The “sentence in brackets” of his dishonesty closes only with his death and he never clambers out of the wayside quagmires and back on to the path. The “episode” takes over the “tale” and, as we and he are to learn, it is a tale that is not authored by himself. According to Eric Partridge (1958) there are interesting etymological links between the words “path” and “episode.” He points out that words such as episode, exodus, method, and synod all derive from the Greek hodos, a way, a road, hence a journey, accordingly also a way, manner, means of doing something. The etymology of “episode” thus involves the sense of “a coming in besides,” although Willems’s episode is more a “going off to the side.”

Willems understands too late that the human control represented by either a unilinear progression governed by the geography of a path, or the syntax of a sentence, has been replaced by a solitary backwards-and-forwards drifting
movement far away from the helpful markers of a preordained order. “He had
a terrible vision of shadowless horizons where the blue sky and the blue sea
met; of a circular and blazing emptiness where a dead tree and a dead man
drifted together, endlessly, up and down, upon the brilliant undulations of the
straits. No ships there. Only death. And the river led to it” (253). A dead tree
in a river may be hindered or delayed, but it cannot of its own volition change
its movement.

The two opening sentences of An Outcast of the Islands, then, introduce
four different examples of unilinear progression: travel along a predetermined
physical route (path, road, or river); the writing or reading of a sentence; the
living of a life; and the writing or reading of a narrative—“the flowing tale of
his life” (my emphasis—and note how “flowing” brings with it the idea of a
river). The inserted phrase in the novel’s second sentence is thus richly sug-
gestive, as its arresting and unsettling stylistic force provides the reader with
an interruption to the straightforward linear progression that represents what
Willems hopes will be like his own interruption to his linear progression along
the path of his “peculiar honesty”: temporary. The sentence does indeed move
back from completed noun phrase to conclude its dominant syntactical pat-
ttern, but Willems finds that the sentence in brackets of his dishonesty cannot
be concluded to allow a return to the desired tale of his life. The “sentence in
brackets” swallows up the tale of his life.

Used as a model for the temporal progress of a human life, the act of com-
posing a sentence draws attention to different aspects of living a life from those
highlighted by the metaphor of walking along a path. The act of composing or
reading a sentence, like reading a narrative, can proceed only in one direction,
whereas a path can be walked along in both directions, or abandoned. More-
over, a path is there already: the traveler has choice only to the extent that he or
she chooses either to follow or to abandon it—or to mark out a new one.

Writing a sentence involves a succession of determining and irreversible
choices: each word that is chosen closes off some possibilities and opens up
others. Instead, then, of a single path, there is a network of verbal possibilities
spreading out like a family tree from every word chosen. We can usually see
where a path goes, but knowing which life choices one should make is not
normally so obvious. Comparing the syntactical generation of a sentence to a
succession of life choices is better: each syntactical choice changes the options
available for the next choice, whereas a path stays there whether one sticks to
it or crashes off into the undergrowth. Furthermore, paths do peter out—a
fact of which, as we shall see, other characters are more aware than is Willems.
The novel contains no examples of Willems’s “cutting” or “charting” a new
path; when he leaves literal and metaphorical paths and encounters wayside
quagmires or brambles, he is incapable of maintaining an ordered progression but instead abandons himself to their disorder. In chapter 6, Part I, Willems can leave his canoe and follow “chopped-out pathways,” but when the path that he has chosen ends “abruptly in the discouragement of thorny thickets” (52), he gives up.

In *An Outcast of the Islands* the collapse of what Willems thinks of as the flowing tale of his life is reflected at the end of the novel in the collapse of syntactical order, both for himself and for the object of his desire, Aïssa. While Aïssa is begging Lingard to display mercy toward Willems in the closing pages of the novel, her speech seems to dissolve like a river flowing into uncharted sea. Willems’s “sentence in brackets” has swallowed up more than the tale of his own life. “The fragments of her supplicating sentences were as if tossed on the crest of her sobs; of sobs long, rolling, and deep like the waves of the open sea under the tormenting breath of strong winds; the miserable wreckage of her passion, her thoughts, her desires rising and falling and beating, black, sinister and torn up, in the white foam at the foot of hard rocks that belong to the solid and motionless earth” (194). Instead of the unilinear sentence we have utterances dissolving into fragments that are at the mercy of the waves of her preverbal sobs, no longer under her control, and powerless in the face of hard realities that she cannot influence. Instead of the finite linear path of the sentence, with a formal structure that includes a beginning and an end, we have the repetitive and unending motion of the sea and the fragments of sentences that are tossed about on her sobs like flotsam.

Because a sentence and a narrative must both conventionally be completed, while a road may be abandoned before its end, sentences, narratives, and roads have a different metaphorical force when used to represent a single life. Conrad indeed draws ironic attention to the fact that roads can be abandoned, when he writes of Willems: “In his conviction of having made her happiness in the full satisfaction of all material wants he never doubted for a moment that she was ready to keep him company on no matter how hard and stony a road” (23). The introduction of all of these metaphors in *An Outcast of the Islands* has two important effects on the reader’s experience of the text. First, the differences between them make it impossible for the reader to view any single one of them as a full and unproblematic model of what living a life is like. (If the syntax of a life is like the syntax of a sentence, then it cannot be quite the same as walking along a road.) But, second, because these different metaphors are presented in the narrative that is *An Outcast of the Islands*, and one of these metaphors is that of a tale, or narrative, the reader’s experience of reading the novel is made more self-conscious, and is enriched and interrogated by other models of unilinear progression. Most important, the reader’s passivity and
sense of predestination ("the novel has already been written, neither I nor anyone else can change the text") is undermined by a sense of how Willems’s belief in his own predestined success turns out to be confounded. In a manner that we have learned to view as typically modernist, the novel undermines the reader’s security by repeatedly making it clear that the predictabilities of the conventional realist novel stand in contrast to the unpredictabilities involved in living a life.

Throughout *An Outcast of the Islands* the reader is forced to confront a binary opposition that is linked to the metaphor of travel along a road: on the one hand, predictability = safety (keeping to the straight and narrow); on the other hand, unpredictability = excitement (wandering off the beaten track). For a long while the reader comfortably assumes that the novel is underwriting the former coupling, only to discover that it opens up the possibility that the latter pairing is perhaps to be preferred. The novel’s ambivalence here seems to represent an ambivalence with regard to narrative itself on the part of its author: on the one hand “straightforward and under control” and on the other hand “seduced into abandonment and life.” Thus in a letter to Carlo Placci of 26 October 1911, Conrad writes: “In that involved form of narrative which so often seduces me away from the straight path what I am looking for is the effect of the living word. That quest fascinates me against my better judgement. And yet you who know my work with such completeness—you know that I can also do the other thing. What leads me astray is the ineradicable conviction that it is in the living word que l’on saisit le mieux la forme du rêve” (Karl and Davies 1990, 494; original emphasis). Here the word “seduces,” like “seductions” in the essay on Maupassant, implies that an abandonment of unilinear narrative represents a moral failing on the part of the writer of fiction, almost as if the narratorially meandering Conrad is in some ways guilty of a lapse equivalent to that of the morally meandering Willems when he steps off the straight and narrow path of his peculiar honesty.

The most important model of unilinear progression in *An Outcast of the Islands* is that of progression along a path and road. But this metaphor is itself undercut by making it clear—and on the first page of the novel—that there are other worlds beyond the edges of the road. In this novel examples of predefined linear progression associated with the dimension of space—the road, the path, the track, the safe route up a river that is the basis of Lingard’s fortune—are repetitively set against forms of physical spatiality that confront, negate, or threaten such ordered forms of progress: the virgin forest, the sea, the uncharted river; lush vegetation consisting not of a single line but of creepers, tendrils, tangled undergrowth, mazes of branches, “the wild luxuriance of riverside thickets” that make linear progression impossible. Against the hard
surface of the road are contrasted surfaces that do not sustain an ordered forward progression but that trap and engulf the would-be traveler: mud, slime, swamp. Against the restraint and control symbolized by progression along a preordained path that is fixed, is set the luxuriance of the forest in which growth and change are permanent, and in which a man—and especially a white man—can become entangled or even lose himself. And if the “seductions” that threaten the writer are metaphorical, those that tempt Peter Willems are very literal and erotic.

In Willems’s case the loss of self is also literal: on repeated occasions throughout the novel he observes himself as if he were witnessing another person—a stranger. Early on in the narrative, Willems shouts “hooray!” and then asks, “Who shouted hooray?” (11). After being sacked by Hudig, Willems considers his indiscretion: “He did not recognise himself there” (21). Looking back on his assault on his wife’s relative, Willems thinks “It was some other man. Another man was coming back. A man without a past, without a future, yet full of pain and shame and anger” (26). After meeting Aïssa for the first time Willems experiences a rush of emotions, including that of “the flight of one’s old self” (54). Lying in Aïssa’s arms he sees another man: “There was something familiar about that figure. Why! Himself!” (112). Perhaps most dramatically Willems even experiences his own death as happening to another man: “His mouth was full of something salt and warm. He tried to cough; spat out. . . . Who shrieks: In the name of God, he dies!—he dies!—Who dies?—Must pick up—Night!—What? . . . Night already. . . . ” (275). If the loss of a unitary self is a commonplace of modernist fiction, Conrad importantly associates this loss with the condition of being an outcast—with the abandonment of the group in terms of which a self is defined.

Given that the opening of the novel has explicitly compared progress along a path with progress along a tale or narrative, the reader must stop to consider whether his or her own moments of mental wandering in the fiction’s created world after the book is laid down and the pages stop being turned are like Willems’s abandonment of his peculiar honesty, or are like leaving a safe path for the seductive and luxuriant but dangerous thickets. And as we stop to think such thoughts, we realize that the very act of thinking them is itself what we are thinking about: an abandonment of forward unilinear progression for a more meandering abandonment to marginal seductions. Although a narrative may involve strict unilinear progression, reading a narrative is punctuated by bursts of extralinear exploration as the reader muses about the narrated events. This geography of the reading experience is mirrored by the geography of An Outcast of the Islands.

The rice clearing within which Lakamba lives is “framed on three sides
by the impenetrable and tangled growth of the untouched forest, and on the fourth came down to the muddy river bank” (40), and the denial of linear progression represented by this tangled growth is symbolically reproduced in a wisp of Willems’s wife’s hair and then, as he is overcome by his desire for Aïssa, by his own “long, tangled hair that stuck in wisps on his perspiring forehead and straggled over his eyes” (69). (Recall Marlow’s comment in Lord Jim: “Woe to the stragglers!” [(1900) 2002, 162].) Willems’s entrapment within the uncharted and nonlinear entanglement of the forest is shared by his fellow victim Aïssa who, although she “followed as well as she could,” at times feels “lost like one strayed in the thickets of tangled undergrowth of a great forest” (190).

Mikhail Bakhtin has traced the “chronotope” of the road back to The Golden Ass of Apuleius, noting that it is “specific, organic and deeply infused with folklore motifs” (Bakhtin 1981, 120). He further notes that “[t]he concreteness of this chronotope of the road permits everyday life to be realized within it. But this life is, so to speak, spread out along the edge of the road itself, and along the sideroads. The main protagonist and the major turning points of his life are to be found outside everyday life. He merely observes this life, meddles in it now and then as an alien force” (120–21). The key difference between Conrad’s novel and the fiction with which Bakhtin is here concerned is that Conrad is writing about a reality transformed by colonialism. One of the metaphorical “roads” that Willems leaves is not just that of everyday life, but the life of the privileged European settler. Indeed, as he steps off this particular road there is a sense in which Willems steps in to another “everyday life”—the everyday life of the colonized. Willems becomes an “alien force” in not just one everyday life but in two: the everyday life of Europeans that he has abandoned, and the everyday life of the colonized that he has entered—but entered as an outsider. European control does not replace “native” topography: it forces the “native” to recede, but never to disappear. On either side of the European road the conquered but still fertile past waits for European victims to stray into its kingdom.

Peter J. Rabinowitz has suggested that the narratological distinction between story and discourse (in another terminology, fabula and sjužet) needs to be supplemented by a third term: path. Rabinowitz’s “path” metaphorically represents the order in which a protagonist experiences events, as against (i) the order in which events happen (story or fabula) or (ii) the order in which a narrator presents events (discourse or sjužet) (2005, 182–83). Conrad’s An Outcast of the Islands provides a neat illustration of the usefulness of Rabinowitz’s distinction; as the first sentence of the novel tells the reader, the path of Willems’s honesty is peculiar to him, it is not common to any community. But
Conrad’s novel further suggests that the limitation of “path” as a metaphor for the narrative of a life is that it implies a looking-back perspective; it assumes that the path is complete. As Rabinowitz’s article makes clear, “path” is a useful way of modeling a character’s experience of events from the perspective of an observer looking at that experience once it is completed. Such an observer might well be, for example, a narratologist analyzing a given fictional narrative. But to the character him- or herself in the middle of the novel—just as to any one of us at any point in our lives apart from that point before an imminent and perceived death—what we see is a path behind us and waste ground ahead on and through which a path must be constructed.

One of the key things that we learn about Peter Willems at the start of An Outcast of the Islands is that he thinks that a road exists that will carry him forward to a happy and successful future. A few pages into the novel we follow him on his way home from a successful game of billiards, unaware of the calamity that awaits him: “He walked faster, jingling his winnings, and thinking of the white stone days that had marked the path of his existence” (10). Here each day is a milestone, pointing the way forward along the metaphorical path of the man’s existence. But the form of the verb—“had marked”—has an ominous ring to it: the white markers do not spread out along the path that leads into the future. Later on in the novel Aïssa—the “native” woman with whom the man we come to know as Willems will become besotted—is portrayed watching her father’s servant Babalatchi. “Aïssa looked with respect on that wise and brave man—she was accustomed to see at her father’s side as long as she could remember—sitting alone and thoughtful in the silent night by the dying fire, his body motionless and his mind wandering in the land of memories, or—who knows?—perhaps groping for a road in the waste spaces of the uncertain future” (47). The final observation is an example of hypothetical focalization, and attributing it to a particular consciousness is not easy; it could be either that of Aïssa, Babalatchi, or an extradiegetic narrative consciousness associated with the novel’s third-person narrator. But it bears witness to a belief that the future is not marked out by helpful white stone days: it is a succession of “waste spaces” on and through which a road has to be built, not found. Willems is later to learn what Aïssa and her father appear to know, that our futures are not mapped out for us by convenient markers. When the cunning Babalatchi tells Willems that he, Babalatchi, has the power to remove Aïssa so that Willems will have to live without her, Willems “gasped and started back like a confident wayfarer who, pursuing a path he thinks safe, should see just in time a bottomless chasm under his feet” (97). It is at such points that An Outcast of the Islands is at its most modernist, jolting the reader into an appreciation of the fact that if one of the comforts of reading a novel is
that of following the living of a life without having to make any hard or decisive choices, actually living a life is not like this. The reader knows that for him or her, Willems’s life is mapped to its conclusion not by white stone days but by white pages. But the reader is also made to realize that from the perspective of Willems’s understanding—from his “path” in Rabinowitz’s sense—this life has to be lived through unmarked waste spaces.

One of the most striking examples of the metaphor of a path used to represent the willed, or unthinking, progression of an individual life in this novel involves not Willems but Captain Lingard. Although the following passage starts by generalizing its message to apply to “men,” it shades almost imperceptibly into discussion of “the man of purpose,” and is succeeded by a paragraph that opens with the sentence: “Lingard had never hesitated in his life.” Retrospectively, therefore, we read the paragraph not as a description of all men, but as a description of men who, unlike Willems, have not stepped off the straight and narrow path of their honesty. After all, if the description applied to all men, how could we look over the hedges at “other human beings”?

Consciously or unconsciously, men are proud of their firmness, steadfastness of purpose, directness of aim. They go straight towards their desire, to the accomplishment of virtue—sometimes of crime—in an uplifting persuasion of their firmness. They walk the road of life, the road fenced in by their tastes, prejudices, disdains or enthusiasms, generally honest, invariably stupid, and are proud of never losing their way. If they do stop, it is to look for a moment over the hedges that make them safe, to look at the misty valleys, at the distant peaks, at cliffs and morasses, at the dark forests and the hazy plains where other human beings grope their days painfully away, stumbling over the bones of the wise, over the unburied remains of their predecessors who died alone, in gloom or in sunshine, half-way from anywhere. The man of purpose does not understand, and goes on, full of contempt. He never loses his way. He knows where he is going and what he wants. Travelling on, he achieves great length without any breadth, and battered, besmirched, and weary, he touches the goal at last; he grasps the reward of his perseverance, of his virtue, of his healthy optimism: an untruthful tombstone over a dark and soon forgotten grave. (152)

If the reader anticipates a positive presentation of the life of those who, unlike Willems, do not lose their way, he or she is disappointed. So far as staying between the hedges that make us safe is concerned, the final quoted sentence suggests that we are damned if we do and damned if we don’t.

In one sense this is a puzzling passage, one that seems to undercut the
novel’s consistent criticism of Willems for his abandonment of the path of his own peculiar honesty. It is possible that the passage represents one of those pessimistic and despairing outbursts that Conrad indulges frequently in his letters and occasionally in his fiction. Whatever the case, the puzzlement that the passage induces in the reader adds to the novel’s consistent sabotaging of the reader’s sense of comfortable security and thus to its modernist ability to disturb the reader’s preconceptions. If the early pages of the novel lull the reader into a sense of smug superiority (“Willems is a fool, the narrator and I view his conceited dishonesty with contempt, I would never do what he does”), this passage causes us to wonder whether our conventional refusal to leave the straight and narrow may guarantee us no better life than that obtained by Willems (“Lingard and I stick to the straight and narrow while people like Willems have all the fun”).

According to Milan Kundera, “since its very beginnings, the novel has tried to escape the unilinear, to open rifts in the continuous narration of a story,” and he notes that although Cervantes’s Don Quixote travels on a linear journey, he meets other characters who tell their own stories, thus allowing the reader to step outside the novel’s linear framework (Kundera 1988, 74). Of course, although narrative digressions allow the reader to step aside from the unilinear progression of the story of Don Quixote’s life, he or she is not able to step aside from the unilinear progression that is the narrative of the work of fiction Don Quixote. But the tension between these two sorts of unilinear progression can be aesthetically productive, not least in An Outcast of the Islands. In this novel we keep being reminded that while the reader of a novel must conventionally move from word to word, sentence to sentence, and chapter to chapter in sequential progression along a route that has already been written (it is after all recounted), the progressive living of a life does not involve movement along a predetermined sequence of events, but movement from choice to choice, a progression that is by no means predetermined or inevitable. As I have suggested, such a movement from choice to choice is far more like that involved in the production of grammatical utterances or the writing of a novel, where each successive choice constrains what may follow.

The reader is given a symbolic warning early on in the novel that Willems has not fully understood this difference.

The billiard balls stood still as if listening also, under the vivid brilliance of the shaded oil lamps hung low over the cloth; while away in the shadows of the big room the Chinaman marker would lean wearily against the wall, the blank mask of his face looking pale under the mahogany marking-board; his eyelids dropped in the drowsy fatigue of late hours and in the
buzzing monotony of the unintelligible stream of words poured out by
the white man. In a sudden pause of the talk the game would recommence
with a sharp click and go on for a time in the flowing soft whirr and the
subdued thuds as the balls rolled zig-zagging towards the inevitably suc-
cessful cannon. (9)

Willems considers his own success to be as as inevitable as that of the path
of the balls that he impels on their zigzag course, a devious trajectory that
reflects his own confident pursuit of a detour from the "straight and narrow
path." The parallel is underlined a page later: “How glorious! How good was
life for those that were on the winning side! He had won the game of life; also
the game of billiards” (10).

But Willems has forgotten at this point that he has stepped off the path
ordained by the winning side of Europeans. And victory in games of chance
is no more inevitable than is progression along what one imagines to be the
path of one’s existence.

A run of bad luck at cards, the failure of a small speculation undertaken on
his own account, an unexpected demand for money from one or another
member of the Da Souza family—and almost before he was well aware of
it he was off the path of his peculiar honesty. It was such a faint and ill-
defined track that it took him some time to find out how far he had strayed
amongst the brambles of the dangerous wilderness he had been skirting
for so many years, without any other guide than his own convenience and
that doctrine of success which he had found for himself in the book of
life—in those interesting chapters that the Devil has been permitted to
write in it, to test the sharpness of men’s eyesight and the steadfastness of
their hearts. For one short, dark and solitary moment he was dismayed,
but he had that courage that will not scale heights, yet will wade bravely
through the mud—if there be no other road. (20)

Once again we have a bringing together of different sorts of unilinear pro-
gression: the path, the life, the book. But now the path is but a “faint and
ill-defined track” that may lead into mud (or quagmires), and the book has
chapters that are written not by Willems himself or by a friendly author but
by the Devil. (Recall Conrad’s assertion that Maupassant will not be led into
“perdition” by turning away from the straight path of narrative.) If at the start
of the novel Willems implicitly believes that he is destined to drop like a bil-
liard ball into the pocket of victory, by the end of the novel “it seemed to him
that he was peering into a sombre hollow, into a deep black hole full of decay
and of whitened bones; into an immense and inevitable grave full of corruption where sooner or later he must, unavoidably, fall” (259). Rebecca Stott sees parallels between the fall of Willems and that of Kurtz, as the latter is observed and narrated by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. For Stott, Willems’s progress mirrors that of Conrad’s reader.

[Willems] is led inexorably towards that “deep, black hole full of decay” into which he must inevitably fall. As Conrad’s readers, this, too, is our fate: to follow the “capricious promise of the track” (the text), to move through the textual jungle (language itself) toward the deep black hole into which we and Marlow and Willems must all inevitably fall (the textual void). It is not just, then, that the prose describes the process of dissolution, but that the prose is continually dissolving and reconstituting itself, offering the reader glimpses of his/her destination and of a tantalising object toward which the text moves, and simultaneously dissolving that object and that centre. (Stott 1995, 133)

The argued parallel is an intriguing one; in both cases, we may note, the reader’s confidence that he or she is observing a deserved fall from a safe distance is suddenly undercut by the suggestion that perhaps in some way the character who falls should be admired rather than pitied by the man who, like Marlow, only “peeped over the edge” (178). For Marlow, Kurtz’s final cry “The horror! The horror!” represents “an affirmation, a moral victory” that causes Marlow to remain “loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond” (179). In the earlier work, too, the reader’s initial smugness about being unlike the doomed Willems is undercut by the sudden realization that this smugness ironically aligns us with, rather than distances us from, him.

Conrad’s first two novels have often been dismissed as apprentice pieces that display little of the narrative originality and experimentation that are universally attributed to the works that were to follow them, starting with *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and *Heart of Darkness*. But *An Outcast of the Islands* is a more complex novel than such a judgment would suggest. Life-metaphors such as the sentence, the path or the river, or the narrative, all arrange and present the lived progression of a single human existence differently. A person can step off a path. It is possible to walk in either direction along a path or a road, but the current in a stream or a river (like the aging process) carries even a totally passive person in one direction (although it is possible to fight one’s way upstream, and it is revealing that in *An Outcast of the Islands* the man who does so in a literal sense is Lingard). A narrative may contain a number of intersecting stories. If a story proceeds in stern chronological progression,
a plot—especially if it is constructed by Joseph Conrad—need not. There may be a fork in a path, but written sentences and narratives cannot conventionally force a reader to choose between alternative ways forward. Such variations between these differing forms of linear progression allow Conrad to point to unlike aspects of what I have termed “the lived progression of a single human existence.” But they also allow the reader to use the actual formal structure of the narrative that he or she is reading—the novel *An Outcast of the Islands*—as an example of unilinear progression with which the unilinear progression of a life can be compared and contrasted. One of the effects of this strategy of making these patterns overt is that the reader has a sense of the ways in which living a life is both like and unlike the process of reading a book—especially with regard to issues of choice and moral responsibility. Life is unilinear because we must go forward in time and cannot go backward. But it is not like reading a book because—for those of us who do not believe that the whole book of our life is written before we are born—while we are living, the “last page” has not yet been written. Indeed, as Conrad would have realized perhaps better than his readers, living a life has rather more in common with the process of writing a book than it has with the process of reading one. In Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, published a few short years after *An Outcast of the Islands*, Marlow comments that “besides, the last word is not said—probably never shall be said. Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention?” (163). A novel has a beginning and an end, a life has a beginning and an end, but the last word about a person or a life is, paradoxically, never said. Moreover, in the case of *An Outcast of the Islands* the first words of the novel describe events that follow the last word of Conrad’s next novel, while the last words of the novel describe events that occur prior to those with which Conrad’s previously published novel begins. Here as elsewhere in his fiction we are reminded of the extent to which Conrad is what we can term an implicit narrative theorist in his fiction. And he is this, I would argue, right from the very start of his career as a novelist.
Works Cited


