Joseph Conrad

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This essay will explore the relation between such spots of insight into an often undesirable truth and Conrad’s “journey beyond nihilism toward a poetry of reality” (Miller 1965, 1). It will consider Conrad’s case as an illustration of one of the most radical alterations brought by modernist writers to the art of fiction. The “moment” is an accident which imposes a different tempo, a jerky rhythm generating relations between motion and pause which modify the significance of narrative progression. This exploration will also take us beyond what is commonly called “literary impressionism” since the reality in question contains its own kernel of darkness: its name in modern theory is the Lacanian real for which the closest image would be “a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life . . . the presymbolic substance in its abhorrent vitality” (Žižek 1991, 14). The flash makes a slash in the narrative fabric “like a twist of lightning that admits the eye for an instant in the secret convolutions of a cloud” (LJ, 74)—another thing of grey and formless mist. And this slash is not without consequences for the economy of Conrad’s narratives where the usual semblances of fiction—plot, setting, character—lose consistency: the story presents itself less as an enigma to be solved than as
an opaque mystery. As we shall see in this essay, for the artist devoted to “the perfect blending of form and substance” (The Nigger of the “Narcissus” [hereinafter TNN], 146), this is the price to be paid for transmitting the memory of such points of contact with the “real thing” at the core of the modern moment.

Virginia Woolf detected in Conrad’s character-narrator Charles Marlow the ability to experience what she also considered as the source of her own writing impulse: “He had a habit of opening his eyes suddenly and looking—at a rubbish heap, at a port, at a shop counter—and then complete in its burning ring of light that thing is flashed bright upon the mysterious background” (1984, 226; my emphasis). The burning ring sets into relief an object detached from its usual web of relations, as if the gap between subject and object were suddenly bridged. Concentrating on the early fiction, I will explore the narrative consequences of the impact of the thing beneath semblances which it is the privilege of a Kurtz or a Jim to encounter.¹

The moment is a thing of moment to Conrad’s art and the word can also be taken in its physical sense of momentum, an energy—a drive—whose variations inform three distinct narrative layers: first, the story where it marks the encounter with a disruptive cause which brings motion to a stop, affecting Jim and his likes with a syndrome, a variant of the Joycean paralysis of the will—a zero degree of energy in a suspended moment of awakening to the “spirit of perdition” which Marlow identifies as the source of Jim’s predicament. Second, we shall see how Marlow’s response to such an encounter affects his own narrative where the Conradian moment writes itself like a symptom, recognizable through an original treatment of the sublime, and the omnipresence of melancholy, related to a spectral gaze or voice effect; the last layer is that of sinthom, on the textual level of literary aesthetics and ethics. Neither the Lacanian symptom nor its later version, the sinthom,² are to be sought primarily on the level of the narrative content because of their constitutive opacity. As Slavoj Žižek explains in Enjoy Your Symptom, the Freudian symptom is a formation whereby the subject gets back in the form of a ciphered message the truth about some betrayed desire, the purpose of the cure being to decipher, then dissolve the symptom. It is through Joyce that Lacan begins to deal with the symptom as “a particular signifying formation which

¹. In his Epiphany in the Modern Novel, Morris Beja reads Lord Jim as “a story developed by epiphany” (Beja 1971, 53) and much the same can be argued for “Youth” and Heart of Darkness.

². Lacan’s reference to the Greek spelling sinthoma in relation to Joyce is the occasion for a pun on Saint Thomas d’Aquin, the key reference of Joyce’s aesthetics, on sin in the context of Catholic Ireland and the father’s “sin,” etc.
confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to enjoyment (jouissance) [. . . ]” (Žižek 2001, 155). The passage from symptom to sinthom, a language formation loaded with affective intensities is a question of the creative use which the subject, in particular the artist, can make of the symptom: this time, the energy is not blocked—on the contrary, it is liberated and becomes as it were radioactive. Žižek takes the example of the stains that “are” the yellow sky in Van Gogh, or the water or grass in Munch: their “uncanny massiveness” pertains to a kind of intermediate spectral domain, a “spiritual corporeality” radiating jouissance, *enjoy-meant* (Žižek 2004, 199). Such traces of affective intensities in the work’s texture also designate the limit of interpretation. It is worth quoting another example from Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible* where the motif of the thunderous explosion of rage

assumes different guises, from the thunderstorm itself to the explosions of uncontrolled fury. Although it may at first appear to be an expression of Ivan’s psyche, its sound detaches itself from Ivan and starts to float around, passing from one to another person or to a state not attributable to any diegetic person. This motif should be interpreted not as an allegory with a fixed “deeper meaning” but as a pure “mechanic” intensity beyond meaning . . . such a motif even seems to have no meaning at all, instead just floating as a provocation, as a challenge to find the meaning that could tame its sheer provocative power. (2004, 5)

Eisenstein called this process “naked transfer.” As we shall see, there are analogies to be drawn with Conrad’s “Kurtz the Terrible,” with the ways in which the “thunderous explosion” of his last cry produces waves which, if they resist interpretation, do not lack provocative power.3

We shall also see what “sinthomatic” use Conrad can make of the “inspiring secret” of his fiction through a creative use of repetition, by grouping characters around the figures of Jim or Kurtz, and above all by exploiting the acoustic and graphic aspects of language. All these elements are already part of the method exposed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, to which we shall now turn.

3. “We are dealing here with the level of material signs that resists meaning and establishes connections not grounded in narrative symbolic structures: they just relate in a kind of pre-symbolic cross-resonance. They are not signifiers, neither the famous Hitchcockian stains but elements of what, a decade or two ago, one would have called cinematic writing, écriture” (Žižek 2001, 199).
A Passionate Preface

Ian Watt reads the Preface as a rather anomalous contribution to the criticism of fiction which “says nothing about such hallowed matters as plot or character” (Watt 1981, 85) but a lot about what Conrad calls “temperament”: “Fiction—if it at all aspires to be art—appeals to temperament. . . . [T]he artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions” (TNN, 146).

We know that Conrad wrote the Preface just after reading Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, an important work in the history of epiphany (Beja 1971, 39). Conrad’s emphasis on the present moment of intensity, however, aims less at Epicurean enjoyment than at the transmission of a whole range of affects: the artist’s appeal is not to the senses, but through the senses. The question for him is to present the fragment’s vibration, color or form, to “dis-close its inspiring secret,” so that “at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity” (TNN, 147).

It is indeed possible to read the Preface against the background of what Žižek calls the “authentic twentieth-century passion for penetrating the Real Thing (ultimately, the destructive Void) through the cobweb of semblances which constitutes our reality” (2002, 12). This passion is a response both to nineteenth-century utopian or positivist projects for the future and to the major epistemic break which opened the twentieth century, laying bare the inconsistency of the divine or socially symbolic Other—the loss of transcendence.  

Conrad’s own writing is contemporary with the birth of modern physics out of abstract mathematics, with the rise of what Žižek, in a recent book on Gilles Deleuze, calls a new “transcendental empiricism” whose field is “an impersonal pre-reflexive consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without self” (2004, 4). The least that can be said is that Conrad’s

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4. I am referring here to the Lacanian distinction between the other with a small o (my fellow being in the social mirror, the stranger who is like me but not me, who has a physical presence and whom I meet in social intercourse) and the Other with a capital O, an invisible presence which functions exclusively at a symbolic or imaginary level. I cannot touch it—it is the place of radical alterity whose equivalent in the realm of language is the unconscious: no one has access to it, no one has ever seen it, and yet some say that it is the source and master of the subject’s desire. Any human being may be construed as a figure (imaginary) of this Other, like Big Brother, or Big Mother who, as is well known, is watching us. All forms of deities—including totalitarian ones—can be candidates to the place of the Other and may compete to fill that position of unlimited power over the destinies of human beings. But as soon as the Other assumes a human shape, we enter the realm of paranoia and violent power relations.

5. “In contrast to the standard notion of the transcendental as the formal conceptual
conception of art in the Preface is also physical: it is an attempt to find “in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential—their one illuminating and convincing quality” (TNN, 146). When he speaks elsewhere of “waves whose varied vibrations are at the bottom of all states of consciousness,” composed of the same matter, “that thing of inconceivable tenuity” giving birth to “our sensations—then emotions—then thought” (The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad [hereinafter CLJC] 2:94–95), we are not very far from the empiricism of quantum theory which treats the real as a set of virtual possibilities out of which one reality is actualized:

What matters to Deleuze is not virtual reality but the reality of the virtual (which, in Lacanian terms, is the Real) [. . . ] as such, for its real effects and consequences. [. . . ] Perhaps, the ontological difference between the Virtual and the Actual is best captured by the shift in the way quantum physics conceives of the relationship between particles and their interactions: in an initial moment it appears as if first (ontologically, at least) there are particles interacting in the mode of waves, oscillations and so forth; then, in a second moment we are forced to enact a radical shift of perspective—the primordial ontological fact are the waves themselves (trajectories, oscillations), and particles are nothing but the nodal points in which different waves intersect. (Žižek 2004, 3)

In this sense the Deleuzian field of proto-reality (Conrad’s darkness) is infinitely richer than reality: “the proper transcendental space is the virtual space of the multiple singular potentialities, of ‘pure’ impersonal singular gestures, affects and perceptions” (19–20).

This connection sheds an interesting light on the process of repetition: “what repetition repeats is not the way the past ‘effectively was’ but the virtuality inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization” (12). This could be a way of looking at Conrad’s narrative economy based on the figure of the leap, the impulsive gesture whose diegetic prototype is Jim’s series of leaps in watery or muddy substance, marking the point where the Actual and the Virtual meet. In short, to use the Lacanian coinage, the Real (the Deleuzian Virtual) is not external but extimate to reality. The Conradian moment similarly marks a narrative leap in the estimate, opaque substance of language out network that structures the rich flow of empirical data, the Deleuzian ‘transcendental’ [. . . ] is the infinite potential field of virtualities out of which reality is actualized. The term ‘transcendental’ is used here in the strict philosophical sense of the a priori conditions of possibility of our experience of constituted reality” (Žižek 2004, 4–5).
of which we may awaken to a new reality: “All creative art,” Conrad observes, “is evocation of the unseen . . . the most insignificant tides of reality” (Notes on Life and Letters, 13) which is “fluid-multiple-open”; it is only afterward that conscious perception reduces “this spectral, preontological multiplicity to one ontologically, fully constituted, reality” (2004, 3, n.2). Hence, I would argue, Conrad’s insistence on the fact that the history of his books is a question of “fluid,” “temperamental” grouping “which shifts and [of] the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective” (letter to Richard Curle, 14 July 1923).

The modern passion for the real thing, then, privileges the singular gesture, affect, perception over the constructed image. Yet, Ian Watt suggests, if Conrad was convinced that everything began with sense impressions, he also had “to avoid reducing writing to a simple circuit which merely transferred the author’s immediate sensory impression to the reader, as if the work were a mere photograph being developed in words and handed over to the recipient” (Watt 1981, 146). What the Preface makes clear is that narrative transmission is less a matter of photographic duplication than of a physical action of the word with its real effects and consequences, where ethics is necessarily involved. Conrad is quite clear as to the kind of waves of enjoy-meant he meant to produce—“a sort of lurid light” for Lord Jim (CLJC 2:302) and “a sinister resonance, a tonality . . . a continued vibration that . . . would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck” for Heart of Darkness.

Why “sombre” or “lurid”? Because unless contained/constrained through the art of narrative, the passion for the real is not good news for reality, it is attuned less to the logic of desire than to an economy of enjoyment: its name in Walter Pater’s day was hedonism which became later in the twentieth century an economic doctrine privileging the maximum of satisfaction with the minimum of pain, laying emphasis on the object produced rather than on its origin in labor. Conrad already hints at this collusion when he associates Kurtz’s reified being with the visual enjoyment of his possessions:

The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh. . . . He was its spoiled and pampered favourite. Ivory? I should think so. Heaps of it, stacks of it. . . . We filled the steamboat with it, and had to pile a lot on the deck. Thus he could see and enjoy as long as he could see,

because the appreciation of this favour had remained with him to the last.

*(Heart of Darkness, 205; my emphasis)*

The metaleptic shift in diegetic levels here opens a hole in the narrative fabric: in a brief flash our attention shifts from the storyline to a resonance, a sound wave which, if you open your ears like Marlow, suggests a link between the passionate embrace of the real (Kurtz being the “favourite” of the wilderness) and economic possession (“ivory”). Marlow is the sounding board and the barrier pitched against Kurtz’s Christian passion without a God with its undertones of enjoyment in destruction, since “the Real in its extreme violence [is] the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (Žižek 2002, 9).

The writer’s task will be to temper its deadly impulses by a kind of sublimation without an ideal, and I would suggest that the Preface’s reference to the word “temperament” in the original sense of a subject’s response to “sensory, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic experience” (Watt 1981, 82) is surely not accidental. The Conradian moment, like Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*, conveys the throb of the passion for the real into sensory, secular illumination which means to awaken us from our everyday ideological universe.

**The Paralyzing Syndrome**

The roots of the moment go back to Romanticism, in particular those “spots of time” which Wordsworth situates at the core of poetic experience, when the subject, led by Nature’s appeal, stands on the sublime limit close to the Real, to the Kantian Thing-in-itself, like the “huge peak, black and huge” which is the visual blind spot in the episode of the stolen boat (Wordsworth 1960, I, 1:357–400). In Romantic experience, however, Nature is still the poet’s Other. The Thing materializes into some sort of supernatural monster whose grim shape seems to pursue the trespasser “with purpose of its own / And measured motion like a living thing.” Its presence will continue to nourish the poet’s imagination with “huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men” (378–400). Nothing of the kind happens in the modernist spot of time where the experience of the extimate Real does not nourish any phantasmatic world: Conrad’s Author’s Note to *The Shadow-Line* is quite explicit:

7. Gérard Genette defines a metalepsis as the transgression of diegetic levels, which seems to be the case here: we leap from the most deeply embedded diegetic level (Kurtz in Africa, with its own temporality) to the internal narrative frame constituted by Marlow and his audience on the *Nellie* (present tense), a frame itself framed by the second external frame (the frame narrator) (Genette 1980, 234–35).
This story . . . was not intended to touch on the supernatural. Yet more than one critic has been inclined to take it in that way, seeing in it an attempt on my part to give it the fullest scope to my imagination by taking it beyond the confines of the world of the living, suffering humanity. But as a matter of fact my imagination is not made of stuff so elastic as all that. . . . [A]ll my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a self-conscious part. The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is; marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. (The Shadow-Line [hereinafter TSL], xxxvii)

In other words, the modern experience is a traversing of fantasy which lays bare something already latent in the phrase “spot of time” evoking *stasis* in time and space, a person’s *symptomatic* soft spot which is like a *blot* in the field of the visible.

Just like the vanishing point around which the perspective of an image is drawn, it is the ineradicable presence of that blind spot, like the archive of a void, that constitutes a given reality: Lacan has given to this unsubjectivized visual point the name of the object-gaze, a source of anxiety. The Conradian tour de force will be to make us see such blots otherwise since we tend to forget them when we are immersed in actual reality. The spot of time marks the point of encounter with the Real and the subsequent collapse of one’s Ideal image. Does not Conrad declare that “the effect of a mental or moral shock on a common mind . . . is quite a legitimate subject for study and description” (TSL, xxxviii)? This, precisely, is the subject of narratives like *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. The least that can be said is that not just anyone is able to bear the violence of the shock. Is not Captain Brierly’s leap on some “exact spot in the midst of waters” the symptom of his inability to face “one of those trifles that awaken ideas” (*LJ*, 39)? Jim’s case has touched a soft spot in Brierly’s history, so far veiled by a decorum of semblances. The true hero is Jim, because of his ability to hold up against that “thing of mystery and terror” (*LJ*, 35); and Marlow tells us that it is the presence of the “soft spot, the place of decay” permeated with malignant enjoyment that urges him to attend the inquiry thing:8 the stigmatizing soft spot, therefore, is the true kernel of the narrative web.

8. “What kind of thing, you ask? Why, the inquiry thing, the yellow-dog thing [ . . . ] the kind of thing that by devious, unexpected, truly diabolical ways causes me to run up against men with soft spots, with hard spots, with hidden plague spots, by Jove! and loosens their tongues at the sight of me for their infernal confidences” (25).
Marlow himself often stands at the visual pressure point which modifies the perception of the symbolic fabric in which he is enmeshed. One of the passages which drew Virginia Woolf’s attention is his awakening in the Eastern port of “Youth”:

when I opened my eyes again the silence was as complete as though it had never been broken. I was lying in a flood of light, and the sky had never looked so far, so high, before. I opened my eyes and lay before moving. . . . And then I saw the men of the East—they were looking at me. . . . They stared down at the boats, at the sleeping men who at night had come to them from the sea . . . the three boats with the tired men from the West sleeping, unconscious of the land and the people and of the violence of sunshine. . . . The East looked at them without a sound. (“Youth” [hereinafter Y], 130–31)

Such a suspended moment is situated at the exact point where two virtual waves clash, where “reality” previous to its perception is still “fluid-multiple-open,” before conscious perception. The sleeping Westerner awakens to a silent stare which is the vanishing point of his own reality; but he equally makes a blot in the landscape of the East who looks at him. What is remarkable is that East and West in turn occupy that blank which materializes the gaze qua object. This scene of origins, revisited through shifting angles, exposes the violence of colonial history and the relativity of our symbolic fabric.

The decisive criterion for such epiphanies is “some cruel, little, awful catastrophe” (LJ, 193): a word, a gesture brings forth the blot that spoils the idyllic vision of oneself or the world. Marlow’s predecessor in “Karain” is impressed by the eponymous “hero”’s power “to awaken an absurd expectation of something heroic going to take place.” But the Malay chief’s face soon betrays fear at

a shadow, a nothing, unconquerable and immortal, that preys upon life . . . .

His chest expanded time after time, as if it could not contain the beating of his heart. For a moment he had the power of the possessed—the power to awaken in the beholders wonder, pain, pity, and a fearful near sense of things invisible, of things dark and mute, that surround the loneliness of mankind. (Tales of Unrest [hereinafter TU], 61)

The resonances with the Preface suggest that Karain incarnates a question of poetics which is actually the pulsing heart, the darkly illuminating kernel of Conrad’s narratives. The “mysterious cause” (TU, 57) which makes Karain appear “enigmatical and touching” is a faceless, silent voice driving him to “kill
with a sure shot” until he comes on board, asking for some amulet that will block the drive—“Have I not killed enough?” (TU, 77). Does not the figure of the Western narrator anticipate Marlow, the one touched by the word of those who have been in touch with this shadow, this nothing? If Jim and Kurtz affect Marlow, this is because they too have gone far in peeling off the layers of reality toward the destructive void.

As in the Joycean epiphany, a trivial phrase throws the masks to the ground, like the French Lieutenant’s “Mon Dieu! how the time passes!” (LJ, 88). What does Marlow then see? He sees a naked human being who is like a leftover of the symbolic fiction which his uniform is supposed to represent. Or it will be the famous “Look at that wretched cur!” which strips Jim naked in the public gaze. Or it can be a woman’s word, for example, Jewel’s (LJ, 186). And if Marlow incarnates the symbolic function of language to order experience, the “feminine” knowledge, a sense of “that blight of futility that lies in men’s speech and makes a conversation a thing of empty sounds” (LJ, 91) still remains. It is also quite clear that, for Conrad, the encounter with the vanishing point where the protective film of semblances fades is actually where the experience of writing begins: “One goes through it, and there’s nothing to show at the end. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!” (CLJC 2:205). But this nothing is not the Sartrean void, it gives body “to some elementary matrix of jouissance” which is our common (b)lot.9

Why, then, should Marlow declare himself loyal to what he calls a “moral victory” in Kurtz’s own deathbed cry (Heart of Darkness [hereinafter HD], 241)? What kind of victory is this? It may be that Marlow, who has also been in touch with “the unseen presence of victorious corruption” (HD, 228), sees the brand of heroism in Kurtz’s acceptance of his passion. It is clear that Kurtz is a good candidate for “enjoy-meant” at its purest: he rejoins the order of being and loses his place in the symbolic order, which is the reverse of the humanizing process of language whereby we lose our being and gain a place in the symbolic. Marlow is quite aware that he is “striving after something altogether without a substance” (HD, 203), a thing of nothing really: a blank silence and a vacant eye at the core of reality. In this sense Kurtz’s cry is like a vocal ana-morphotic blot, the Deleuzian spectral Event loaded with affect, materializing the truth of jouissance.

Jim is less “authentic” in his destructive passion10 but there is in him some-

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9. “In contrast to symptom which is a cipher of some repressed meaning, sinthom has no determinate meaning: it just gives body, in its repetitive pattern, to some elementary matrix of jouissance, of excessive enjoyment. Although sinthoms do not have sense, they do radiate jouissance, enjoy-meant” (Žižek 2001, 199).

10. As Slavoj Žižek notes, “authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, from the Lacanian Real—the thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the city—to the Bataillean excess” (Žižek 2000, 6).
thing of Antigone's drive toward perdition. One of the early occurrences of the word *spot* in the novel is revealing. Jim tells that once on the lifeboat, he wanted to go back to *see* the spot of the *Patna's* supposed wreckage—in other words . . . nothing—that is, the spot where something which might have happened actually did not happen.\(^1\) It is therefore as if Jim meant to *repeat* the traumatic encounter with “that thing” during the *Patna* episode: “something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable body” (*LJ*, 23).

The point is of course that Jim also surrendered to that spirit within, that *extimate* kernel. It is no real surprise therefore if after his own symbolic beheading, the cancellation of his certificate, his next step takes him to Patusan, the land without past or future, the “very thing” he wants. And yet out there, his own heroism consists in trying to save the symbolic fiction, to “fight this thing down” (94): not to let himself be absorbed by the blind spot—hence his sublime position.

**Melancholy as Symptom: Gaze and Voice as Love Objects**

If we look for the particular signifying formation enabling the Conradian narrative to structure its relationship to enjoyment, we shall find it in the threshold device called Marlow. It is through him that Conrad produces a tale both horrible and beautiful, able to *block* and to *communicate* something of “the haunting terror, the infinite passion,” to convey “the abiding memory of the sublime spectacle” (*A Personal Record*, 92).

In *Lord Jim*, Patusan is of course the blind spot on the map, the projection space for Western fantasy and the site for Jim’s most ironical last “epiphany.” But before that, there is the decaying ship, an important Conradian *topos* where the estimate real undermines the ideal from without and within. Does not Marlow’s true adventure in “Youth” already consist in trying to keep “that old thing,” the *Judaea* (*Y*, 110), afloat by pumping water out, then in, until the ship’s explosion in the black Eastern night? The *Judaea* foreshadows the *Patna* (a near anagram of Patusan) half sunk by the waves of pilgrims loaded for commercial imperatives absolutely indifferent to religious ideals. What this lack of transcendence reveals is that the modern sublime does not pertain to elevated ideas, it is the effect of the passion for the real which reveals a central vacuity.

\(^{11}\) “Why back to the very spot, to see,” Marlow wonders. “It was one of those bizarre and exciting glimpses through the fog . . . an extraordinary disclosure” (*LJ*, 71).
When is Jim sublime in Marlow’s eyes, then? He is less sublime when he gives himself to his notorious “ability in the abstract” than when he appears bathed in an unnatural (not supernatural) light which signals the contiguity of the void, the locus of the object-gaze, with the spectacle of the world: “At the moment of greatest brilliance the darkness leaped back with a culminating crash, and he vanished before my dazzled eyes as though he had been blown to atoms” *(LJ*, 107). At other times he is a spot of white light, “a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world” (199): no matter whether black or white, Jim is Marlow’s true auratic object, located at the liminal point of visual sensation—“an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing . . . an object which, by its very inadequacy, ‘gives body’ to the absolute negativity of the Idea” (Žižek 2002, 206). He is sublime not in himself, but because he occupies a position which the halo around him makes visible: “He appealed to all sides at once—to the side turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness, with only a fearful ashy light falling at times on the edge” *(LJ*, 59). It is Marlow’s ability to be affected by “that side of us” that designates him as a partner to Jim, or Kurtz: with modernity, we enter the area of the Lacanian symptom which is the most real part, the true secret agent of our lives.

The consequences of Jim’s drama will be negotiated in Stein’s house, another place of darkness and glimmers hovering in the Lacanian entre-deux-morts, where human forms are seen “for a moment stealing silently across the depths of a crystalline void” *(LJ*, 130). Marlow comes asking for “a cure” for his protégé, “a case” (130)—and is it really surprising to see the language of psychoanalysis emerge in those pages? The entymologist has his own way of dealing with beautiful specimens: he puts them in glass cases. But this is not what Marlow wants for his own human case: he wants to convey the palpitating throb of the thing itself through his narrative. Viewed from the perspective of the oppositions set up by the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, Stein is on the side of science, whereas Marlow stands on the side of art: they do not serve the same version of truth. And it is Marlow’s impression of being “the last of mankind,” delivered to “a strange and melancholy illusion,” that urges him to hand on his story.

There are many occasions in Conrad’s fiction when a character suddenly discovers a vacuity in the crystal of the Other’s eye, often in relation to the not-all of femininity which relativizes the “male” narrative. The visual field of Patusan is dominated by a gaze without a face, “the melancholy figure of a woman”: a vanishing point which defies “the ordinary standpoint” *(LJ*, 165), another anamorphotic blot in which Marlow sees “the significant fact” of Jim's
journey. Over Jewel’s head looms the Eastern bride which is no other than a metaphor for death, the true cause of his desire (165). The care which Jim takes of the fence around the mother’s grave, the place of “feminine sublimities,” marks out his exact position at the beck and call of the Thing against which Jewel, the living woman, rebels (187). Even though Jim ends up rejoining, like Kurtz, the petrified forest of enjoyment, he remains in Marlow’s memory the auratic object in which there is something more than himself since he stands against, in all the senses of that word, “this thing” of darkness.

Karain, the matrix of many of Conrad’s characters, is also under the spell of a seductive maternal ghost and tongue, the invisible and inaudible “she” of his dreams (TU, 69) who has more power over him than the law of his community. After the shot which saves Pata Matara’s sister from the knife of revenge which nowadays would be called a crime of honor, Karain is carried into her presence but she says that she has never seen him before (73). His own spot of time is a traversing of fantasy which reveals the horror of his gesture: he has killed his own brother for the sake of a ghost behind a living woman’s head—exactly like the figure looming above Jewel’s head. This moment of dispossession gives the exact formula of melancholy which is the encounter of that blank in the love object’s gaze: “there is nothing, no reflection of my own image in the pool of her eyes, therefore I am nothing.” The encounter with this nothing is the primal scene of all Conrad’s writing to come:12 *Heart of Darkness* is structured around a black epiphany foreshadowed by the “inscrutable intention” of the “feminine” wilderness (HD, 185), followed by the encounter of the “vacant glassiness” in the dying helmsman’s “lustrous and inquiring glance” (HD, 202), then by Kurtz’s deathbed epiphany. What is crucial here is that another spectral event accompanies the gaze: a nearly inaudible voice effect, “a cry that was no more than a breath” (HD, 239).

There are many enigmatic, unsubjectivized cries or calls in Conrad’s work. The first thing greeting Marlow in the silence of the Eastern port in *Youth* is a faceless Western voice cursing violently:

> It began calling me “Pig!,” and from that went crescendo into unmentionable adjectives—in English. The man up there raged aloud in two languages, and with a sincerity in his fury that almost convinced me I had, in some way, sinned against the harmony of the universe. (Y, 129)

Marlow, one among a whole succession of conquerors, has indeed so sinned. Why is it crucial here that the voice should be floating like an organ without a

12. Morris Beja sees the short moment of Jim’s “last proud and unflinching glance” at the Eastern bride (LI, 246) as the novel’s climactic epiphany (Beja 1971, 53).
body? It is crucial because the charge which the narrative whispers sotto voce cannot be openly endorsed by the diegetic Marlow. It is this objective quality of voice which is most likely to convey some sort of revelation—"objective" simply means that the emphasis is on material presence: in other words, on the signifier’s real, opaque substance as opposed to the realities words can depict. In short, the literary sinthom and its radiating power are related to the manifestation of the Lacanian object-voice.

Indeed, the more detached from subject (whether addresser or addressee), the closer to the status of reified message detached from sender and addressee, the more likely the voice will be to carry its blind flash of knowledge—thus illustrating the definition of the unconscious as a blank that cannot be endorsed in the subject’s history or by the text’s authority. Does not Jim leap in answer to a call from the lifeboat in the dark addressed not to him but to George, the sailor who has just died of a stroke on the Patna’s deck? The anonymous call designates Jim’s true place as that of a living dead, just as in the wretched cur episode where a street voice stretches at him, threatening his ideal self-image ("Look at that wretched cur!" LJ, 47). The voice deserves the quality of object because its sender and addressee—someone in the street, Marlow, Jim, the yellow dog?—are undetermined: this is the moment when the spoken chain vibrates with virtual waves of interpretations.

In the economy of Conrad’s early narratives, Marlow is the device invented for registering the shock of the encounter with the glassy gaze or the blank voice. And it is in response to a speechless bond that he becomes “a helper” (LJ, 59) to the symptom incarnated by Jim or Kurtz: by lending his ear, his voice, and his words to the mysterious cause which has touched him, he makes the passage from paralyzing symptom to creative sinthom possible.

“Sinthomatic” Radiations

Recordings, transmission, network: the words sum up the construction of the text’s very special memory. After the first moment of recording, the vocal/visual spot of inert substance continues to radiate, not so much as a poetic translation of quantum theory than as one of the first narrative enactments of sinthom: Conrad, “one of the first novelists to articulate an affective view of aesthetic experience” (Beja 1971, 52), is remarkable for the proliferation of such traces of affective intensities in his work. There is always a “flash of darkness” that spoils the picture, even in an early production like “Karain”: “a torrent wound about like a dropped black thread . . . a sudden cry on the shore sounded plaintive in the distance. . . . A puff of breeze made a flash of darkness on the smooth water, touched our faces, and became forgotten. . . . The sun
blazed down into a shadowless hollow of colours and stillness” (TU, 40). Like Karain’s spot of land, “a marvellous thing of darkness and glimmers” (53), the Conradian tale will remain faithful to the cry, the hollow, the darkness. The encounter of the vacant glassiness, however, cannot be wholly absorbed by the blot: there is a remainder which can be conveyed only by the acoustic and graphic properties of language, a certain repetitive use of presymbolic, meaningless vocal fragments, little jolts of enjoyment which Lacan calls *lalangue*, the child’s little language:13 their pictorial equivalent would be the concentric lines swelling through the substance of the sky around the mouth of darkness in Munch's *Scream*.

If we ask ourselves who screams “The horror!” in *Heart of Darkness*, the first answer is, of course, Kurtz. And yet nothing prevents us from supposing that the cry might also be Marlow’s, in the retrospective *souvenir* of the moment when the veil also fell for him (etymologically, *sous-venir* is what comes from under). To put this in another way, if we treat the meaningless cry as a *detached object*, it begins to operate like a broken phrase floating through the novel’s texture, breaking through the cottonwool of another spectral house much later: “It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush which, it seemed to me, I would have to keep back alone for the salvation of another soul . . . those broken phrases came back to me, were heard again in their ominous and terrifying simplicity” (HD, 245). If Marlow tries to keep back the vengeful rush for the sake of the Intended, his ethical task as narrator will be to transmit/convey the impact. “The horror!” truly works as the hypogram of his narrative, the metonymic fragment from the “original Kurtz” (HD, 207) running along the narrative web, through the dissemination of the *hor-ror* into vocal débris that tickle the ear disagreeably: the impersonal effect comes off as the sighomatic realization of the “voices . . . the dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense” which haunts Marlow (205).14

In *Lord Jim* the resonances are more visual. The dissolution of reality is

13. “The initial move of a human being is not thought, reflexive distance, but the ‘fetishization’ of a partial moment into an autonomous goal: the elevation of pleasure into jouissance—a deadly excess of enjoyment as the goal-in-itself—e.g. a vulgar tune that inexplicably pursues us. . . . Is such an intrusive sinthom, a figment of obscene enjoyment spreading like a virus, really at the same level as, say, an intellectually stimulating theoretical insight that haunts us? Could it be maintained that such intrusive sinthomes provide the reo-level, the elementary matrix of memes? . . . This babble provides ‘anchors of familiarity,’ knots of potential meaning identified, recognized as ‘the same,’ independently of their actual meaning. . . . [T]his babble has to be devoid of meaning proper: first, signifiers have to be crystallized as identifiable entities; it is only then that they acquire a proper meaning. And is this babble not what Lacan called *lalangue* (‘language’), preceding the articulated language: the succession of Ones, signifiers of jouis-sense (‘enjoy-meant’)” (Žižek 1992, 143).

often rendered by the aesthetics of the grotesque—the image trembles, the proportions of the body change, something off-scene, off-stage threatens to break through as if under the thrust of a wave carrying the force of decay. Jim went through a first revealing moment on the Patna, at the sight of his skipper’s eye “staring stupid and glassy,” of his voice “harsh and dead, resembling the rasping sound of a wood-file on the edge of a plank” (LJ, 17). Later on Marlow has another glimpse of the man’s gaze, of his mouth about to utter a wordless scream as he embarks on a gharry:

The little machine shook and rocked tumultuously, and [ . . . ] the whole burrowing effort of that gaudy and sordid mass, troubled one’s sense of probability with a droll and fearsome effect, like one of those grotesque and distinct visions that scare and fascinate one in a fever. He disappeared. I half expected the roof to split in two, the little box on wheels to burst open in the manner of a ripe cotton-pod—but it only sank with a click of flattened springs. (LJ, 32)

Marlow’s troubled “sense of probability” signals the insistence and the return of a virtual wave: the repetition of words like jerk, terror, rock tumultuously, sank recall the Patna episode, the blind spot around which the kaleidoscopic narrative revolves: did not Jim also expect the sinking of the Patna which did not take place?

Jim is also, of course, the visual blind spot and the mystery which resists, insists, and propagates its waves of mist on Conrad’s cloudy narrative. The bright picture of Patusan and its people exists in Marlow’s memory, but, he says, “the figure round which all these are grouped—that one lives, and I am not certain of him” (LJ, 196). However unconventional and temperamental, the word grouped is crucial to Conrad’s narrative constructions. Not only does the static figure in the center remain but its opaque darkness fuels the narrative economy: Marlow will side with the uncertainty, the throbbing presence at the core of the suspended image, he will not give in as to his desire to hand over “its very existence, its reality—the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion” (LJ, 192), through his grouping of characters around Jim’s figure. And if, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, “we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it” (Žižek 2004, 19), is this not exactly what Conrad does?

The “stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment” (TNN, 147), then, are the dark spot which fuels the narratives of both Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim. This sheds another light on the famous metaphor of Marlow’s narrative as an empty kernel surrounded by a misty halo made visible by “the spectral illumination of moonshine” (HD, 138): does not
Conrad record here the structuring importance of the black epiphany? The thing will be to create the glow bringing out the particles of matter suspended in the halo, the “nodal points in which different waves intersect” at the intersection of the Deleuzian Virtual with Actual reality. Are not Conrad’s stories produced by contact with “the most insignificant tides of reality,” next to the pulsating substance of the real? Discussing the connotations of the word see in the Preface, Ian Watt notes that it may include the perception of “the spiritual truths, as in ‘a seer’” (83). And in order to be a seer, one has to have a fine ear. Conrad’s narrators are less voyeur than voyant, and their affinity with the concrete substance of words is clearly preferable to Jim’s disastrous “ability in the abstract.”

How, then, can words possibly send out flashes on the threshold of meaning? It is a question of presentation. Edward Said has underscored the importance of the text as produced thing (Said 1984, 93), of the eerie power of the Conradian word-object: “minimal but hauntingly reverberating phrases like ‘the horror’ or ‘material interests’: these work as a sort of still point, a verbal center glossed by the narrative and on which our attention turns and returns” (96; my emphasis). Just like Jim, the Conradian word is a still point, both dark and luminous, radiating with unexpected flashes against the “broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span” (LJ, 202). Conrad also liked to portray himself as a worker extracting his material from the pitch dark of a mine where the Other of ideals does not exist but where you may exploit the material properties of coal or diamond: “I’ve tried to write with dignity, not out of regard for myself, but for the sake of the spectacle. . . . Thus I’ve been called a heartless wretch of a man without ideals and a poseur of brutality . . . I have been quarrying my English out of a black night, working like a coalminer in his pit” (CLJC 4:113–14). How can writing raise the ideals to the dignity of . . . no-thing? How does one make visible/audible that nothing loaded with spoils of enjoyment?

From the point of view of the modern sublime, the countless un-, in-, -less, dis- affixes, more prominent in Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness than anywhere else, constitute the linguistic spot where the real contaminates representation: they are metonyms of the darkness which bites into the outer edge of the word: a textual realization of the insistence of the real through the agency of the letter. Likewise, common words and phrases like “one of us” are lifted from their trivial usage to shine against a central vacuity. In short,

15. A question central to Conrad’s ethics of writing: “the whole of the truth lies in the presentation . . . the only morality of art apart from subject . . . no word is adequate. The imagination of the reader should be left free to arouse his feeling” (CLJC 1, 200).
what used to be a sign in a symbolic system is turned into a thing-word: “a
sign designates positive properties of the object, whereas a word captures,encircles, precisely the elusive je ne sais quoi beyond the properties. [It] opens
up the sublime, ‘ineffable’ dimension and thus makes a Thing out of an
object” (Žižek 2002, 170). If Conrad’s words bear comparison with gems, it
is of course not because they are precious but because they are possessed of
a physical quality: they have incorporated something of the crystalline void
and, once raised before the reader’s eye, their translucent substance shines
forth exactly like Jim against the real, communicating sinnthomatically some-
thing of the “infernal alloy” which is also kept at bay. The verbal illumina-
tion operates like “matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (Woolf 1994,
175) and alters the narrative network, in particular its distribution of symbolic
places, both for characters and for the reader: what does this “one of us” ulti-
mately mean, unless every man’s ability to make a jump in the dark at the call
of a maddening voice?

We can now return to another broken phrase included in the massive
proleptic digression set off by Marlow’s account of the killing of the helms-
man in Heart of Darkness: 16 I am referring to the little note at the bottom
of Kurtz’s report which “blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash
of lightning in a serene sky: ‘Exterminate all the brutes!’” (HD, 208). Who
are the brutes? Who should exterminate whom? Is it Kurtz whom the white
manager dreams to get rid of? The vocal object strikes the reader’s ear, recall-
ing some disturbing truth about the death wish. After all, is not the Western
narrator listening to Karain pursued by the detached phrase “Kill with a sure
shot!” also a gunrunner? “I left him calling on the edge of black water. . . .
[ . . . ] I swam . . . he called out after me . . . I swam . . .” “. . . Left whom?
Who called? We did not know. We could not understand” (“Karain,” 58). It
is precisely when you cannot understand that you are most likely to awaken
in surprise.

Does not Conrad prefer “a flash of light into a dark cavern,” and “such
knowledge as comes of a short vision—the best kind of knowledge because
most akin to a revelation” (CLJC 1:342)? His care for transmission—in the
Preface’s own words, “to make you hear, to make you see . . . to make you feel”
(TNN, 147; my emphasis)—opens new perspectives to narrative theory if, in
the process of analyzing texts, we accept to take into account the dimension

16. As noted by Diana Knight, “a spectacular disturbance of narrative order ranges back
beyond the starting point of the story to Kurtz’s education, and forward through stacks of ivory,
through extracts of his pamphlet (including its P.S.), through midnight dances and unspeakable
rites, right up to the chronological end-point of his narrative—the visit to the Intended” (1991,
19).
of the sinthom which, it has been the argument of this essay, constitutes the actual Conradian voiceprint: a creative response to the presence of the real at the core of fictional reality, which can be apprehended through attention to any device likely to create a radioactive blot in the picture—repetition, transgressions in discursive levels, disturbances in temporality (like analepses and prolepses) hindering the progress toward meaning.


