THE RETURNS OF THE READER IN *AN OUTCAST OF THE ISLANDS*

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Illuc ergo venit ubi erat.
Augustinus

When Conrad wrote the author's note to the novel some 25 years after its publication,[1] he tried, as usual, to convince the reader that it was the realistic transcription of one episode in his sailor's life. Recalling his call on the Eastern settlement and his vision of Willems, he claimed that after that visit he never returned to Sambir. This is blantantly untrue as he returned to it in his fiction[2] at least on two occasions; once in *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and then in *An Outcast of the Islands*. (1896) This suspicion of self-deception is no doubt the sign that this Malay experience meant more to him than he was prepared to admit. The return to the origin of his fiction, because it is a form of repetition, is elevated to the status of a symptom of its causation, and so it incidentally lends credence to those critics who think like Morf that the overriding theme of betrayal in the novel expresses the guilt complex that he felt at having left Poland. Such a suggestion would seem to be corroborated by the fact that the epigrah of the novel Calderon's well-known phrase: "Man's greatest crime is to have been born"[3] is extracted from his play *Life is a Dream*, in which the action takes place in Poland and the hero Sigismond is the son of a king imprisoned because omens said that the son would overthrow and then kill the tyrant father. When the son discovers the truth he becomes furious and nearly killed the beautiful lady who had seduced him. He eventually recovers his status as an outcast at the end of the play, imprisoned

[1] The novel was published in 1896 and he wrote the note in 1919 for the collected edition of his works.

[2] Not to mention the possibility that Sambir and the area could have ben used as a models for fictional locations in *The Rescue* and above all *Lord Jim*.

[3] The actual tongue of the quotation is Spanish: "Pues el delito mayor del hombre es haber nacito" which may function as a screen or an index of alterity, like the Malay words in the text.

again by his father. With Lingard in the role of the king, the parallel with Willems is striking.

However, Conrad's return to the Malay background is more complex than may seem at first glance. Indeed it finds an echo in the impressive series of impossible returns[4] staged in the novel. The so-called Malay trilogy offers an interesting configuration in so far as the chronological order of the diegetic events runs counter to the temporal order of publication. *Almayer's Folly* which was the first novel to be written tells the end of Lingard's story. The first is in fact the last and the last is the first. *The Rescue* which comes last in the order of publication is therefore the first in terms of diegetic time, while *An Outcast of the Island* occupies a steady intermediary position both in terms of dates of publication and of diegetic chronology. This implies that the writing progresses on the syntagmatic axis, the level of the enunciation, and that it regresses at the level of the énoncé and of the temporal sequence. These two contradictory textual movements backward and forward at the same time definitely blur the origin of the texts at the same time as they imply that Conrad the writer was simultaneously Conrad the reader when he was writing.

That this unusual configuration must have been a disturbing state of affairs for some readers is manifest in the fact that it prompted certain publishers to re-establish a sense of continuity and a semblance of order by putting *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Island* in a single volume[5] opening with the second novel, and preceded by the following warning: "However the publishers of that edition have reversed the chronological order so as to enable the reader to follow the actual sequence of events."[6] The phrase "actual sequence" is rather pleasing in a fictional context where the diegetic world is constructed by the signifying chain as it moves along, but it testifies to the readers' embarrassment when they cannot rely on the conventional logic of cause and effect.

Besides Conrad's chances of gathering a large readership were scant if we are to believe James Payn in *The Illustrated London News*, who admitted that: "He [The British reader] is insular in his tastes, not easily interested in places and people who are outside his experience,"[7] while an anonymous reviewer blamed him for failing to become "the Kipling of the Malay Archipelago."[8] Such comments are obviously eurocentric and raise the issue of the stereotyping inherent in the West's representation of the East. Conrad's first readers were conditioned by this construction of the Eastern

[4] Willems cannot return to Joanna and Macassar, Almayer's situation will never know the prosperous *status quo ante* after Willems led the Arab traders to the settlement. Lingard's confidence in Willems is definitively destroyed, Willems cannot return to Aissa after his wife landed in Sambir, Lingard himself will disappear for good leaving his *protégé* to fend for himself etc.

[5] See for instance: Joseph Conrad. *An Outcast of the Islands, Almayer's Folly*. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1955.

[6] *Ibidem*, 4.

[7] Norman Sherry. *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, 66.

[8] *Ibidem*, 69.

myth produced by the vogue of Orientalism[9] and it is interesting to see how the text of *An Outcast of the Island* fares in this respect more than a century later.

Considering that *An Outcast of the Islands* was published on March 4th 1896, Conrad's second novel could have been a fitting wedding present to make to Jessie George whom he was to marry twenty days later after proposing in early February. Yet it was not so and the dedication is to Edward Lancelot Sanderson, a new friend he had met in March 1893 during a voyage to the South seas on board the Torrens with John Galsworthy. In his psychoanalytic biography B.C. Meyer[10] makes the bold claim that Conrad's treatment of the theme of exogamy through the relationship betwen Aissa and Peter Willems is a displacement of his complex and ambivalent relationship with Jessie, as if the perfect Victorian angel of the house threatened to turn into a possessive exotic lover. It may suggest a certain fear of the feminine but textual evidence to validate this point is hard to come by.

On the contrary the paratext appears to point to another direction, that of the reader. Indeed Conrad who felt insecure about the quality of his English did ask Sanderson and his mother to help him trim the manuscript of *An Outcast of the Island* in search of possible spelling mistakes or awkward turns of phrases. This dedication is clearly a thankful gesture towards one specific reader and one reader whose linguistic expertise he had great confidence in, so that we can safely conclude that *in An Outcast of the Island* the reader is at the centre of Conrad's preoccupations, not the insubstantial generic reader of later theoreticians but the real individual reader alive to the subtle linguistic games that writing and reading fiction allow. The aim of this paper is precisely to study how Conrad's use of language in *An Outcast of the Islands* shapes up the reader's response to the text.

Norman Sherry, in his *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*,[11] compiles no less than 13 reviews for the novel, which shows that the initial critical reception was far from insignificant.[12] It was mostly favourable but frequently deplored a certain tendency to overwriting. However, not unexpectedly it is H.G. Wells's unsigned piece in the *Saturday Review* which sheds the most interesting light on the novel:

> His style is like river-mist; for a space things are seen clearly, and then comes a great bank of printed matter, page on page, creeping round the reader, swallowing him up. You stumble, you protest, you blunder on, for the drama you saw so cursorily has hold of you; you cannot escape until you have seen it out. You read fast, you run and jump, only to bring yourself to the knees in such mud as will presently be quoted. Then suddenly things loom up again, and in a moment become real, intense, swift. (Sherry, 74)

[9] See Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

[10] B.C. Meyer. *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytical Biography*. Princeton: University Press, 1967.

[11] Norman Sherry. *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

[12] In fact, Allan Simmons, in a lecture delivered at the Cracow Conference in September 2007 has shown that Sherry left out a considerable amount of reviews. A forthcomng four-volumes series on the question is in preparation.

This graphic account of Wells's personal reading experience is interesting because it highlights the physical, bodily, dimension of the act of reading. It is a reminder that reading requires the participation of the reader's body, be it only because of his physical contact with the materiality of the text, the book itself. But in return, Wells argues – and we can't say that he is not a competent reader – the book exerts a physical pressure on the body of the reader (he stumbles, blunders on, runs and jumps, etc.) Even taken metaphorically these verbs suggest that the reader responds physically to the diegetic world of the fiction he has in hand. Moreover, there is only one notion in literary criticism that can help us to account for the intersection between the imaginary, abstract world of fictional representation and the concrete, physical and emotional world of the reader, it is that of aesthetics as its etymology confirms. Indeed, the word *aisthesis* can be equated with the English "sensitivity" and refers to the ability of a work of art to produce effects on the reader through the mediation of sensory perceptions. In this way reading is not only an intellectual activity it is also an experience of corporeal subjectivity in so far as the reader's own senses and sensations are at work. In short, reading is an aesthetic experience that exteriorizes interiority. H. G. Wells's very perceptive analysis of the aesthetic effects produced by the text of *An Outcast of the Islands*, illustrates the fact that reading necessarily oscillates between sense and sensibility. Our approach however will sightly differ from his and this paper concentrates on the devices used by Conrad to make the reading of the novel a truly aesthetic experience, and in order to do so we will start form Barthes's distinction between the readerly and the writerly text which will be revisited in the light of the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*. To start with let us recall how Louise Rosenblatt defines the act of reading:

> There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work [...] The reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader...[13]

If I entirely subscribe to Rosenblatt's conception of reading as a transactional process, on the model of Winnicott's transitional object or zone between the self and the real world, it is never the less with the proviso that this process has very little to do with the *affective fallacy* denounced by Wimsatt and Beardsley.[14] This is not to say that texts do not elicit an emotional response, but rather that the feelings created in the reader by real literary texts in no way remain at the level of the primary immediate pulsional reaction to traumatic events (death, violence for example as represented in the diegetic world), or at the level of the crude instinctual feedback generated by a particular use of language (offensive, vulgar, pornographic etc.), but are somehow

[13] Louise Rosenblatt. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1938; New York: Noble and Noble, 1968; New York: MLA (Modern Language Association), 1983.

[14] In *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, as early as 1954, criticized the age-old method of judging of the quality of a text on the basis of the emotional effects it produced on readers.

refined, through a process of sublimation that transforms the reading experience into an aesthetic experience. A novel stands or falls on this ground and we will now examine how *An Outcast of the Islands* fares in this respect. This multifarious process of sublimation constitutes the art of writing itself.

According to their effects on the reader Roland Barthes distinguished between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss (an extremely misleading translation for *jouissance*.) Roughly speaking the text of pleasure corresponds to the readerly text while the text of bliss corresponds to the writerly text.[15] However this opposition is of little use on two accounts.

First because there is no such thing as a text of pure pleasure or readerly text or a text of pure jouissance or writerly text. The two dimensions are necessarily present in any given text and what differentiates them is a question of degree not of nature. A text of *jouissance* is first a text of pleasure otherwise it would be unreadable,[16] but the relation is not symmetrical, because some texts of pleasure can exclude all possibility of bliss *or jouissance*, because jouissance cannot be reduced to the desire to know.

Secondly there is a considerable margin of uncertainty as to what *jouissance* means in this particular context. What most critics call enjoyment of the text (or *jouissance*) is nothing more than a higher step in pleasure on the scale of enjoyment (or pleasure) while *jouissance* is clearly to be found, as Freud suggested, beyond the pleasure principle, and is thus associated with suffering and the death drive. As a result the notion of *jouissance* applied to a literary text is highly problematic because as Lacan pointed out in 1977 "*jouissance* is forbidden to him who speaks" (1977, 319) on account of the Symbolic foundation of the signifying chain. What we mean, then, when speaking of *jouissance* in relation to the reader can only be fragments of *jouissance* that are produced by the glimpses of the Real[17] accomodated by the text and which are sometimes called *surplus enjoyment*.

However, what remains certain, is that for the reader's desire to be sustained, the text must desire him in return, otherwise he would simply lose interest and close the

[15] The opposition between readerly and writerly texts was introduced by Roland Barthes in S/Z in 1970 in order to provide a scale of values to assess the literariness of a work of fiction. The readerly text puts the reader in the passive position of a consumer. It does not really offer any resistance to interpretation and is characterized by closure. The writerly text, on the opposite, requires the active participation of the reader, problematizes meaning and resists closure so that to some extent the reader is partly the writer of the text too.

[16] The only large scale attempt at producing texts which precluded the readerly dimension is that of the American metafictionists of the 50's and the 60's (John Barth, Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, William Gaddis and others and significantly they all reverted to more classical ways of telling stories at the end of their careers. For instance John Hawkes who claimed that "the true enemies of the novel were plot, characters, setting and theme." Eventually returned to more conventional narrative modes in his later production, having found other ways of writing modernity into his fiction.

[17] In Lacanian parlance the Real refers to that which in the subject remains out of reach (for instance his unconscious), and a materiality from which the subject is severed by his entrance into language. Hence Lacan's claim that the real is that which is impossible to say.

book. So, reading is an activity that presupposes a form of libidinal cathexis, the reader being willing or eager to go on with his activity, in the exact proportion in which the text makes room for his desire. To account for the crucial libidinal element that lies at the heart of the reader's activity I therefore propose that we now speak of the *writerlibidinality* of the text – a neologism which is a portmanteau word composed of Barthes's notion of writerliness compounded with the psychoanalytical notion of libidinal energy.

There are two modalities of *writerlibidinality* in *An Outcast of the Islands* and they are paradoxically complementary and antithetic; on the one hand the cognitive dimension and, on the other, the aesthetic or poetic dimension. Two main areas involve the cognitive desire of the reader of this particular novel. The first one concerns its diegetic world aptly summed up by the phrase the Malay Archipelago and the second the more conventional reading for the plot (and the characters).

As far as the representation of the East is concerned, the role of the reader's encyclopedia[18] is central and ambivalent. In a first stage the text requires the cooperation of the reader to be understood and in the case of *An Outcast of the Islands*, this knowledge is massively conditioned by the colonialist ideology which was the doxa of the time. Hence the proliferation of stereotypes in the cast of native characters: Abdulla is the industrious, deeply religious and ruthless Arab trader, Babalachi is the wily, scheming Malay, Joanna the bigoted helpless half-caste, while the Chinese are inevitably hard-working, cringing and servile. In other words the standard Victorian colonialist encyclopedia serves as a framework to construct that fictional world of the orient and at the same time seems to confirm its pre-requisites. In novels like *An Outcast the Islands*, the text not only relies on the encyclopedia of the reader for its decoding but simultaneously expands it when he discovers out of the way places and characters.

However, as usual with Conrad, things are not as simple as they appear because the stereotyping also applies to the White European characters who more often than not border on caricature. Lingard is the prototype of the courageous heroic figure, romantically chivalrous but systematically self-deceived. Almayer is the epitome of the lachrymose maudlin loser who can't help blaming others for his own failures, Willems is the very image of the vain unconscionable, and ambitious upstart who will not hesitate to betray his benefactor but is eventually defeated by his own arrogance. As an anonymous reviewer for the American magazine *The Nation* remarked, though he seemed to consider it a shortcoming of the novel: "The moral of the book seems

[18] This notion is borrowed from Umberto Eco's *Lector in Fabula*. In it he argued that the word is not to be understood as designating a set of books giving comprehensive information on all the branches of knowledge – although it is certainly part of it – but in the sense given to it by semioticians. In this perspective, the act of reading requires the cooperation of the reader in building the very readability of the text, owing to his access to his own private encyclopaedia, based on the extra-textual and extra-linguistic context of the text, and on his own knowledge of the world at large. The reader's encyclopaedia is this all-encompassing knowledge the individual reader has at his disposal when he performs the act of reading.

to be that white Christians can be much worse than black pagans, and generally are, along the Straits of Macassar."[19]

In brief, the narrative simultaneously confirms and exposes the prejudices on both sides because there is no idealization of the whites nor of the natives for that matter. As a consequence, this situation paves the way for something which was not included in the initial reading contract, namely an awakening to the reality of what colonialism does to the natives but also to the European themselves, thereby making them aware of their status as imagined communities exactly like the Western representation of the peoples they colonize. Conrad's sleight of hand here consists in reversing a probable desire for exotic knowledge into a situation of self-awareness.

Among the most characteristic elements of the encyclopedia in *An Outcast of the Islands*, is presence of a whole lexicon of Malay[20] words, some of which were already used in *Almayer's Folly* but their number has considerably increased. Frequently they function on the mode of redundancy as they are followed by their English translation, as in chapter IV when Lingard overpowers Willems and sets forth to Sambir with him not without warning Joanna:

> The coxswain raised his lamp deliberately to Willem's face.
> "This Tuan! Tau? I know."
> "Quick then!" said Lingard, taking the lamp from him – and the man went off at a run.
> "Kassi mem! To the lady herself, called Lingard after him." (41)

These Malay words or turns of phrases almost always appear in free direct speech to bring vividness and local colour to the scene, but the invariable outcome is also to mirror the position of the reader who is confronted with his own role as a textual decoder or translator with all the problems inherent in the task.

Now, for those readers who read for the plot, the distinctive feature of the narrative is the omnipresence of affects which tend to invade the textual space. The *primum mobile* in the novel is certainly Willems's overweening pride but it sets in motion a whole series of reactions which are all prompted by the protagonists' emotions. Resentment is the key affect in the plot and all the reactions of the characters unsurprisingly fall into this comprehensive category. The characters' resentment, rebellion, against their fates, is expressed by such emotions as frustration, anger, fear, terror, self-pity, depression, anxiety, desperation. There is not one single moment of joy in the novel, even Willem's love for Aissa is fraught with danger as his tragic end testifies. The saturation of the narrative with negative affects even extends to the landscape, as Conrad's narrative voice occasionally indulges in the lures of the pathetic

[19] *The Nation*. 15 April 1897, 287, quoted by Norman Sherry in *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, 80.

[20] A rough estimate shows that there are more than 35 of those Malay phrases like "Tahu" (I know), "tidi apa" (what does it matter) etc., to which can be added the local names of trees or fruit like "campaki" (frangipani tree) or "waringin" (banian tree), as well as a few words of local pidgin like "kavitan" for Captain.

fallacy: “Then the thunder was heard far away, like an incredibly enormous voice muttering menaces.” (278)

Three examples will be enough to study the way the narrator deals with such affects and reveal the rhetorical paraphernalia used by Conrad to illustrate them. To start with Almayer, with unlimited self-indulgence, blames Lingard for having let him down after Willems betrayed the secret of the river and laments himself in front of the Roumanian orchid-hunter staying in his house at Sambir:

> “Father was wrong-wrong!” he yelled. “I want you to smart for it. You must smart for it! Where are you, Willems Hey? ... Hey? ... Where there is no mercy for you – I hope!” (368)

Aissa voices her fear that Lingard might kill Willems for his treachery or take him away from her. In order to implore his clemency she expresses her irrational and possessive passion for Willems:

> He is all! Everything. He is my breath, my light my heart... Go away... Forget him... He has no courage and no wisdom any more... and I have lost my power... Go away and forget. There are other enemies... Leave him to me. He had been a man once... You are too great. Nobody can withstand you... I tried... I know now... I cry for mercy. Leave him to me and go away. (253)

Willems himself heaps reproaches on his blindness to the reality of his situation which retrospectively made him look like a fool. And even if he is silently talking to himself, the emotional weight of his monologue is considerable:

> Heard said... called there often...most respectable ladies... knew the father very well... estimable; ...best thing for a young man... settle down... Personally, very glad to hear... thing arranged... Suitable recognition of valuable services... Best thing – best thing to do.
>
> And he believed! What credulity! What an ass! Hudig knew the father! Rather. And so did everybody else probably; all except himself. How proud he had been of Hudig’s benevolent interest in his fate! (35/36)

The three passages above provide us with an impressive – although not exhaustive – survey of the range and variety of devices used to inscribe the affects in the textual space. One can distinguish four main modalities of attempts at giving a textual and linguistic form to affects, which by definition remain outside the realm of representation.

Firstly, the figures of interpellation (apostrophes, interjections, rhetorical questions, exclamations) whose aim is to express the intensity of the locutor’s emotions by suggesting that the speaking subject is overpowered by them and cannot help addressing his interlocutor(s) in a frantic way. They betray a loss of control over the speech flow that the reader can only suppose is due to an emotional shock or trauma, as they try to give the mimetic illusion of oral speech.

Secondly, the figures of lack (ellipses, aposiopeses, dashes) which create holes and gaps in the textual fabric, implying that the speaker is so upset or perturbed that

he can't really say what he intends to say, either because his grasp of language is not sufficient or because what he would like to say is too overwhelming.

Thirdly, the figures of repetition (paronomasia, redundancy, polysyndeton, anadiplosis) which manifest a certain form of paralysis, as if the speaker was so stunned that he could not complete his utterances.

Fourthly, the figures of rupture or irrationality (parataxis, staccato rhythm, stychomitia), which suggest that the speaker is losing his grasp on himself and on his command of language, as it is confirmed by the cropping up in the narrative of reporting verbs meant to describe the tone or quality or state of the voice allegedly producing them like "he yelled", "...ejaculated Ali suddenly, very loud in a pressing tone." (294)

Altogether the presence of such figures in the narrative achieves a sort of theatricalization of interlocution that reinforces its dramatic aspect. The emotive function of language is pushed to its limits and, eventually the form of the utterance matters more than its contents, or to put it more clearly, it is the form itself that is the contents of the phrase, as its ultimate function is not so much to convey information as it is to illustrate how the speaker is the victim of a sort of dispossession which is simultaneously the cause and the manifestation of his resentment.

In the narrative, descriptive, passages the range of rhetorical means used to convey the force of affects is more limited but their lack of origninality is compensated by the sheer accumulation of the signifiers of affectivity themselves, as in the following passage in chapter six, part two, when Willems, prisoner of Aissa's embrace, sees the blind Omar creeping towards him with a kriss in his mouth:

> He was in the grip of horrible fear; of a fear whose cold hand robs its victim of all will and of all power; of all wish to escape, to resist, or to move; which destroys hope and despair alike, and holds the empty and useless carcass as if in a vise under the coming stroke. It was not the fear of death – he had faced danger before – it was not even the fear of that particular form of death. It was not the fear of the end, for he knew that the end would not come then [...] it was the unreasoning fear of this glimpse into the unknown things, into those motives, impulses, desires he had ignored but that had lived in the breasts of despised men, close by his side, and were revealed to him for a second, to be hidden again behind the black mist of doubt and deception. It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, controle, comprehend nothing, and no one – not even himself. (148/149)

The passage is perfectly emblematic of the aesthetic problem the reader is confronted to in *An Outcast of the Islands*. On the one hand, the scene verges on the bathetic as Omar is a feeble helpless old man who could easily be overpowered. The fact that Willems is paralyzed by such an ineffectual threat is supposed to illustrate the extent of his enslavement to Aissa, but it somehow stretches the reader's suspension of disbelief to dangerous limits. On the other hand, the narrative is an unqualified textbook description of an encounter with the Real, in so far as it highlights that dimension of the subject that cannot be put into words. Willems, thereby adumbrating

Kurtz's admission in *Heart of Darkness*, is allowed a glimpse of the horror that lies at the heart of the human heart.

My contention is that whatever rhetorical means are employed, there is no surplus enjoyment in the accumulation of markers of affectivity but only the potential threat of imaginary identifications, as if the text meant to carry away the reading subject thanks to the power of its emotional weight. Although the novel avoids the textual pragmatic strategy inherent in romance, melodrama, or sensationalism, it nevertheless never reaches the status of tragedy, on account of he fact that catharsis cannot operate on such miserably lamentable characters as Almayer or Willems, who are not so much the victims of their hubris, as they are locked within the small world of their own mediocre ambitions, expecting grandeur and nobility to be brought to them from the outside, by a generous benefactor. And in the end, the figure of Lingard, in spite of its romantic appearance turns out to be as profoundly self-deceived and ridiculous as his two *protégés*.

We shall now continue this brief exploration of how Conrad frames the response of his readers, of how he channels the *writerlibidinality* of the text, so that it avoids deteriorating into pathos. Because they enable us to account for what occurs beyond the realm of the linguistic and the semantic in communication, the affects are precisely the transition zone that allows the notion of textual body to make sense, to the extent that it becomes the locus where glimmers of *jouissance* and of the Real can be perceived.

It is the concept of textual voice that will enable us to account for the fact that in Conrad's prose the real of *jouissance* is sublimated into the reaffirmation of desire. The voice in question is not so much the voice of vocality or *phonè* as it is the silent voice of the text which is simultaneously present within the text and remains outside it as the origin of the text, revealing thereby its dimension of extimacy.[21] Owing to this paradoxical status we will henceforth consider as constitutive of the textual voice, all the stylistic devices that open up a silent, vacant zone within the signifying chain, so that it creates an empty space where the authorial voice loosens its control over the clarity of sense to allow free play to the equivocation of sound. Among such markers of the emergence of the textual voice in *An Outcast of the Islands* can be included:

* The markers of comparison (like, as etc.) in so far as they open up a gap between the representation of the action and its interpretation, that is to say they create a vacillation of meaning. For instance, in chapter sixteen, when Almayer reports Willems's assault upon him, he complains: "I lay on the floor like a bale of goods while he stared at me, and the woman shrieked with delight. Like a bale of goods!" (183), Almayer is not a bale of goods, but the image certainly suggests the idea of the reification of the protagonist. Consequently, three different levels of interpretation are possible namely, the literal account of Almayer's misadventure, the ironical dehu-

[21] Extimacy is a Lacanian neologism based on the pattern of "intimacy" and expressing the idea that something that belongs to the most intimate part of the subject can be exterior or alien to him at the same time.

manizing image of a bale of goods and the ideological notion of reification. We call textual voice the voice that circulates between those three versions of the same event, thus reminding the reader of his responsibility in the construction of meaning.

* The recourse to Free Indirect Discourse[22] which is a massive feature in *An Outcast of the Islands* and which blurs the origin of the utterance which can be attributed either to the narrative voice or the character's thoughts or to both, precluding any possibility of certainty and, therefore, foregrounding hesitation. In chapter one when Willems reminisces about his past successes in life, the third person narrator is evidently quoting or reporting Willems's thoughts, thereby giving the reader a hint of the possibility of dramatic irony to, as the accumulation of laudatory adjectives amply shows:

> 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 [...] Then he reviewed the more important affairs; the quiet deal in opium; the illegal traffic in gunpowder; the great affair of smuggled firearms, the difficult business of the Rajah of Goak. He carried that last through by sheer pluck; he had bearded the savage old ruler in his council room; ... (7/8))

There is no doubt that it is the authorial voice that occupies the void between the literal and the ironical interpretation owing to the irrepressible flexibility of Free Indirect Discourse with its in-built evaluative dimension.

* The accumulation of foreign words and phrases, mostly of Malay origin, is not only meant to provide a complement to the exotic setting, it also functions as a challenge to the authority of the main vehicle of the narrative, the English language. Even if, in almost all cases, these words or phrases are translated by the narrative voice, or presented in such a way that the reader has no difficulty apprehending their meaning, as foreign words, their very materiality as signifiers is enough to open up a blank space in the narrative, the more so as all linguists know that quite a lot is lost in translation. They literally materialize the presence of alterity within the textual space and, as such, they remind the readers that reading a literary text is always an experience of alterity whose outcome is to allow them to realize the extent to which they themselves as subjetcs are the products of a construction too. Once again, the silent but powerful authorial and textual voices circulate between the various languages present in the narrative, as illustrated in the following example, when Lingard, rescuing Willems for the last time, switches from English to Malay while addressing the native residents. Obvioulsy, we are given the English translation of Lingard's Malay words, which implies that another voice is silently at work in the text:

[22] For an in-depth study of the crucial role of Free Indirect Discourse in Conrad it is vital to turn to Jeremy Hawthorn: *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*. Sevenoaks: Edward Arnold, 1990.

> "Oh, damn it!" exclaimed Lingard, then went on in Malay, speaking earnestly. "Listen. That man is not like other white men. You know he is not. He is not a man at all. He is ... I don't know." (230)

* If the text of *An Outcast of the Islands* is packed, not to say ridden, with affects, it is also inordinately filled with voices that function on the principle of the acousmatic voices found in films, that is whose source of enunciation is blurred and comprehension uncertain. They remind the reader of the problematic status of vocality in a literary text, which is essentially silent. The main distinctive feature of a literary text is precisely that voices escape representation, and it is the task of the writer to make the reader hear them. Frequently associated with foreign languages, these voices generate a grey area within the text. It is a clue to the fact that, even though they are metaphorically described in the diegesis – they can be grave, severe, loud etc. – these voices, in fact, silently circulate in the text, because they are captured by the signifier or, more precisely, they are materialized by the very letter[23] of the text, as we can see in chapter nine when the residents in Lakamba's campong wait for the end of Willems's interview with the blind Omar: "A voice far off shouted something – another, nearer, repeated it; there was a short hubbub which died out with extreme suddenness." (97) In the gap between their constitutive silence and their status within the fiction, is located the textual voice evoked poetically by Keats when he wrote: "Sweet melodies are heard but those unheard are sweeter."[24]

Ultimately if *An Outcast of the Islands* is not a totally convincing novel it is mostly because the authorial voice of control and mastery is somewhat too loud – because the tendency to overwriting noticed by early reviewers – whereas the textual voice of ambiguity is perhaps not audible enough. As H.G. Wells quite perceptively said of Conrad's art: "...He has still to learn the great half of his art, the art of leaving things unwritten.",[25] even if he did acknowledge that "...it was perhaps the finest piece of fiction that has been published this year [1896]." This confirms that the real writer (the great writer) is the one who somehow manages to accomodate glimpses of the real in his fiction and if *An Outcast of the Islands* is a partial failure (or success) it is precisely because the representation of reality too often obscures the destabilizing presence of the real in the background. Or to put it positively, in his later major works Conrad more successfully contrived to tone down the authorial voice for the benefit of the textual voice. In Conrad, reading consists in hearing the silent voice of the text, but this silent voice goes by another name, it is also called style, style being a way of treating the real of the affects that proliferate in the text, so that the real of *jouissance* can percolate into art. In other words, style is nothing more than the process of subli-

[23] In this particular case the letter of the text is fittingly represented by all the typographical devices associated with the affects of speech like question marks, exclamation marks, aposiopeses etc.

[24] The line comes from his poem: Ode on a Grecian Urn.

[25] Norman Sherry. *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, 75.

mation itself, which means refining the *writerlibidinality* of the text into surplus *jouissance* for the reader.

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