

‘THOSE BROKEN PHRASES’: THE CONRADIAN VOICE EFFECT

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...a notion grows in a mind sometimes till it acquires an outward existence, an independent power of its own, and even a suggestive voice.

(The Secret Agent, 175)

In his *Epiphany and the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja sees Conrad as “one of the first novelists to articulate an affective view of experience” (Beja, 52). Intended effect based on the sensory power of words was certainly as important as intended meaning, to the author who meant to produce the sombre resonance of “Heart of Darkness”, the lurid light of *Lord Jim* or the mosaic effect of *Nostromo*:

A national writer like Kipling ... translates easily. His interest is in the subject: the interest of my work is in the effect it produces. He talks about his compatriots. I write for them. (*CLJC*, 4, 28–29)

Kipling himself noted that in Conrad’s fiction “the intensity of fear and terror” is above the English norm (Najder, 197). Unlike articulate feelings, such affects are not socially coded: they are “mute,” and yet essential to the communicative function of art, for example in tragic catharsis – but, as we shall see, this is a special communication.

Conrad also liked to portray himself like a man “without ideals”, a “poseur of brutality” who carved his words out of dark inchoate substance: a *physical* writer who did not hesitate to use the metaphors of quantum physics, when claiming that all creative art is “evocation of the unseen” composed of “the most insignificant tides of reality” (*NLL*, 13), including linguistic. This may be due to his own linguistic condition; but maybe also to an artist’s concern for “the haunting terror, the infinite passion” in the spectacle of this world (*APR*, 92), where the classic aesthetic transcendental categories have lost their relevance.

A THEORY OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Hans Robert Jauss's reception theory may be particularly apt to account for the Conradian reader's experience. Jauss's "Little apology of aesthetic experience" focuses on the issue of aesthetic *jouissance* which, according to him, cannot be dissociated from the scientific discourses on art, or from its socially symbolic function (Jauss, 125). Like Jauss, I see such a theory as a pragmatic aesthetics shedding light on the modalities of literary transfer.

The term *jouissance/enjoyment*, common to aesthetics and psychoanalysis, comes from the lexicon of law where it designates the enjoyment of property, such as distributed in human groups along the lines of class, gender, ethnic divisions. Conrad, for example, uses it in this sense when referring to the enjoyment of Kurtz, the leader gifted with a powerful voice, at the sight of his growing heaps of ivory tusks – the *spoils* of African conquest, out of which all kinds of objects will be carved at home (*HD*, 205). Interestingly, Henry James also uses the word *spoils* in reference to the poetic voice, whose "dying fall" affects the game of meaning with blind spots, likely to become the reader's own soft *spots of time*. This suggests that enjoyment – or, as Slavoj Žižek translates it from Lacan, *enjoy-meant* – is related to a more or less totalizing economy of voice. How do such voice effects contribute to the lasting effect of a work of art, and, in the case of the novel, how does the fleeting enlightenment they provide enable us to understand the context of a given historical situation?

Walter Benjamin was the first critic to outline the bond between aesthetic *jouissance* and the "beauty" of warfare – including economic:

"*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*," says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of "l'art pour l'art." Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object for contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic figure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. (235)

The Conradian voice is the opposite of such consuming national ideals. It has "the impersonal ring of a voice without a master" (*TR*, 203), in an age of too many charismatic leaders. It *means* to open a reserve of silence, to temperate the totalising impulses by a kind of sublimation without an ideal.¹ This, of course, requires a special economy, a quasi-cinematic art of visual/acoustic montage. Conrad's perspectives are made of vocal fragments from different realities arranged into a "collideorscape" – to use Joyce's pun –, whose arrangement produces a certain leftover, "a surplus

¹ The word *temperate* echoes another, *temperament*, used in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* with its original sense of a subject's response to "sensory, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic experience" (Watt, 82).

heterogeneous to cinematic reality but nonetheless implied by it:” a point of vocal opacity, analogous to the Hitchcockian visual blot.²

Critics have often noted the strangeness of the Conradian voice without a face, whose tongue we have to learn without grammar or dictionary. And yet, it speaks to us intimately like some *déjà vu/déjà entendu*; its best fictional representation is the *uncanny* lingo from a native slave-dealers’ lips which startles the white men in “An Outpost of Progress:” it resembles “the speech of civilised men”, yet it is neither French, nor English, nor Polish; it sounds like “one of those impossible languages which we hear in our dreams”.³ And yet, the unconscious here is less the royal avenue toward interpretation, than the opaque substance of our affective memory – individual or collective.

Conrad’s own “lingo”, the result of a peculiar knotting of voice to letter, makes room for similar effects. We are not, however, dealing with the autistic joys of some literary ivory tower: ivory is a serious object for him; the same for *jouissance* which, Lacan has suggested, begins with a soft *frisson* and may end with bomb-throwing. What is foremost is that his potential for violence has also emerged in our artistic modernity:

From an alluring appearance or persuasive structure of sound the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality. (Benjamin, 230)

In this sense, Conrad may well be a pre-Dada: unidentified vocal objects often hit us unexpectedly when we read and re-read his stories which provide an open handbook for our pragmatic aesthetics.

THE OBJECT VOICE AS *PUNCTUM*

When hearing a verbal message, one concentrates either on the meaning or on the material voice which is not part of the meaning: in normal experience the grain or

² “Montage is usually conceived as a way of producing from fragments of the real – pieces of film, discontinuous individual shots – an effect of ‘cinematic space’, i.e. a specific cinematic reality. That is to say, it is universally acknowledged that ‘cinematic space’ is never a simple repetition or imitation of external, ‘effective’ reality, but an effect of montage. What is often overlooked, however, is the way in which this transformation of fragments of the real into cinematic reality produces, through a kind of structural necessity, a certain leftover, a surplus that is radically heterogeneous to cinematic reality but nonetheless implied by it, part of it. That this surplus of the real is, in the last resort, precisely the gaze qua object, is best exemplified by the work of Hitchcock.” (Zizek 1992, 116)

³ “It was like a reminiscence of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilised men. It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams.

“What lingo is that?” said the amazed Carlier. “In the first moments I fancied the fellow was going to speak French.” (TU, 15)

pitch of voice is “inaudible,” both intimate and exterior to the reality described: it “cannot itself be present, although the whole notion of presence is constructed around, and can be established only by its elision.” (Dolar, 15) In other words, for the apprehension of self and world to take place, it is necessary that the voice should be forgotten, “extracted” – like the vanishing point at the core of a familiar landscape. There are moments, however, when, as in an anamorphosis, the point/spot comes forth – such anguishing moments, for example, when we hear the hollow, detached sound of our own voice, and our reality loses significance. It is here that we meet the gaze/voice as *object* – i.e., not on the side of the hearing/seeing subject – whose presence is most palpable in the context of psychosis.⁴ But it is also the function and “madness” of art to recuperate that object: the “dying fall” enclosed in the poetic message, whether visual or verbal, is what may touch you lastingly.

In his discussion of *The Secret Agent*, Jakob Lothe proposes a stimulating discussion of Conrad’s spatial art in reference to Roland Barthes’ *punctum*, to be differentiated from the *studium*, the field of representation in a photograph (Lothe, 259–260). The *punctum* is not necessarily a detail, it is a little something not on the side of the eye’s intelligent investigation; it shoots out like an arrow, it strikes you unexpectedly, and may even stigmatize you – it *spoils* the picture. Barthes thus describes the experience of looking at photographs of his dead mother:

A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me), [...] for punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a caste of the dice. (27)

I know now that there is another punctum (another “stigmatum”) than the “detail” This new punctum, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (“that-has-been”)... . (96)

More generally, the *punctum* moves us from a transparent relationship to self and meaning, to a level in which some meaning seems to be there when you are not there: it opens the space of the Other. The psychotic subject is one for whom such voices in

⁴ “Voice and gaze are the two objects added by Jacques Lacan to the list of Freudian ‘partial objects’ (breasts, faeces, phallus). They are objects, that is to say, they are not on the side of the looking/hearing subject but on the side of what the subject sees or hears. Let us recall the archetypal scene from Hitchcock: a heroine (Lilah in *Psycho*, Melanie in *The Birds*) is approaching a mysterious, allegedly empty house; she is looking at it, yet what makes a scene so disturbing is that we, the spectators, cannot get rid of the impression that the object she is looking at is somehow returning the gaze. The crucial point, of course, is that this gaze should not be subjectivized: it’s not simply that ‘there is somebody in the house,’ we are, rather, dealing with a kind of empty, a priori gaze that cannot be pinpointed as a determinate reality – she cannot see it all, she is looking at a blind spot, and the object returns the gaze from this blind spot. The situation is homologous at the level of voice: it is as if, when we’re talking, whatever we say is an answer to a primordial address by the Other – we’re always already addressed, but this address is blank, it cannot be pinpointed to a specific agent, but is a kind of empty a priori, the formal ‘condition of possibility’ of our speaking; so it is with the object returning the gaze, which is a kind of formal ‘condition of possibility’ of our seeing anything at all... .” (Zizek 1996, 90)

the Other are not silent, they no longer constitute the necessary point of elision in the subject’s landscape.⁵

The notion of the *punctum* can be extended to acoustic space, all the more so as the visual and the acoustic are intimately related. There are the things seen/heard which contribute to our well ordered symbolic fictions, and those shooting through us like objects pinpointing some dormant, often unpleasant truth: the canonical example in Conrad’s work is the anonymous phrase “Look at that wretched cur!” overheard by Jim in the street; the situation repeats itself in *Under Western Eyes* where Razumov hears a cry in the street, “O thou vile wretch!”; such detached phrases, issued from anonymous public space, designate a point of wretchedness in the hearer; besides, they tell that you are being observed by an unseen gaze: Razumov’s madness begins when such points begin to affect him and gradually dissolve his sense of reality.

The conscious artist, however, more particularly one dealing in foreign voices, can make a special use of such *punctum* effects loaded with affective intensities. They make us hear/feel/see the unseen – not the invisible. Or, to use Conradian metaphors in relation to Jim:

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)

Jim’s text appeal lies in the *interior exteriority* of this other side which is not the repressed, but belongs to the same surface. The place of decay, including pre-linguistic, is continuous/contiguous with reality, in a way which recalls the topology of a Möbius strip – a freak of nature revealed in 1858 by the German mathematician August Möbius, and made famous by M.C. Escher’s picture *Möbius band II, Red Ants*. Its uncanny geometry⁶ perfectly fits Conrad’s art of surfaces: the philosophy of depths is not for him. Thus, a sudden turn of the strip may bring forth what seemed to be the other side and yet belongs to the same surface, raising a character’s intimate point of wretchedness to the universal affect: is this not exactly Jim’s case?

⁵ “What happens in psychosis is that this empty point in the other, in what we see and/or hear, is actualized, becomes part of effective reality: in psychosis, we effectively hear the voice of the primordial Other addressing us, we effectively (91) know that we are being observed all the time [...] something is missing, the key signifier (the ‘paternal metaphor’) is rejected, foreclosed, excluded from the symbolic universe and thence returns in the real in the guise of psychotic apparitions. However, the obverse of this exclusion, the inclusion, should also not be forgotten. Lacan pointed out that the consistency of our ‘experience of reality’ depends on the exclusion of what he calls the *objet petit a* from it: in order for us to have ‘normal access to reality,’ something must be excluded, ‘primordially repressed.’ In psychosis, this exclusion is undone: the object (in this case, the gaze or voice) is included in reality, the outcome of which, of course, is the disintegration of our ‘sense of reality,’ the loss of reality.” (Žižek, *ibidem*, 90)

⁶ It is a rectangular strip of paper with which you make a loop with a half-twist in it, so that it becomes a two-dimensional surface. If you follow it with your finger, you discover that instead of having two sides (recto and verso) the strip now has *only one*. Besides, if you pierce the band in one spot, the hole gives the *illusion* of a two-faced surface which is actually one and the same.

If the bright picture of Patusan remains fixed in Marlow's memory, Jim is its uncertain spot (*LJ*, 196). And Marlow explicitly takes sides with the throbbing presence of the *blot*, the point of *undecidability* essential to Conrad's montage effects – his fluid, shifting grouping, raised to an aesthetic principle.⁷ Not only does the central figure remain, but its presence is essential to the revolutions of the Möbius strip disclosing the “*stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment*” (*TNN*, 147). Once again the artist anticipates the psychoanalytic insight whereby truth has a fictional structure, the *punctum* being the factor of truth enabling us to discern “*the hard kernel of the real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it*” (Zizek 2004, 19).

Anything likely to break through the usual coordinates of syntax, lexicon or linear narrative can perform the function of the *punctum* – in particular fragments of voices without a subject – noises, sounds, cries, calls, down to pure silence. Film theory has given a name to such detached objects – the *acousmatic* voice which can be the source of anxiety:

[it] transgresses the boundary outside/inside, since it belongs neither to diegetic reality nor to the external vocal accompaniment, but lurks in-between space, like a mysterious foreign body which disintegrates from within the consistency of “reality”. (Zizek 2001, 120)

Such an organ without a body is not alien to the literary voice, an object made of silent letters heard with our eyes, floating in a space in-between author, text and reader. That Conrad meant to rely on this “wilderness” of words for his effects, makes little doubt. There is a whole ballistics of speech in his work, based on the *punctum* effect whose explosive charge may open a silent void, making room for the forgetful memory:

...an explosion is the most lasting thing in the universe. It leaves disorder, remembrance, room to move, a clear space. (*CLJC*, 1, 44)

UNEXPECTED TURNS OF THE STRIP

The object voice is a powerful intra-fictional catalyst for the revolutions of the Möbius strip. It may reveal the psychotic context of individual and historical tragedies, dominated by figures of the “other” father, a modern entity which is the source of visual/auditory hallucinations and which emerged massively in Conrad's work, no doubt as a result of the decline of older symbolic fictions to which this writer was

⁷ Late in his writing career, he still claims it as his own, speaking of “unconventional grouping and perspective, which are purely temperamental [...] It is fluid, depending on grouping which shifts and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective. It is in those matters, gradually, but never completely, mastered, that the history of my books really consists.” (Letter to Richard Curle, 14 July 1923)

over-sensitive.⁸ Kurtz who “lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts,” (HD, 221) is the spot in the modern landscape which embodies economic *jouissance* at its purest. In Conrad’s work, the privilege in question is also political, the attribute of vaguely totalitarian fathers bent on destroying the younger generations: General T with his goggle eyes in *Under Western Eyes*, the mad captain of the becalmed ship in *The Shadow-Line* – Conrad’s “oblique meditation on war”; or Mr Vladimir in *The Secret Agent*, the diplomat who wants Verloc to organise a pseudo-anarchist event, whatever the human cost. Does not Verloc join the ranks of such fathers when, after sending Stevie to his destiny of bomb fodder, he goes home and relishes on a joint of cold meat, “without restraint or decency” (SA, 186)?

A whole battery of voices loaded with the most destructive *enjoy-meant* seems to issue from the very heart of Enlightenment: the famous phrase “Exterminate all the brutes!” in the margins of Kurtz’s philanthropic report, the Professor’s “Exterminate! Exterminate! That is the only way to progress” (SA, 222) suggest that philanthropy and science may go hand and hand with terror. The eponymous hero of “Karain,” like his literary brother in Flaubert’s “La légende de Saint Julien l’Hospitalier,” gives himself to the *joy* of exterminating the marvels of God’s creation, urged by a face without a voice whispering “Kill with a sure shot!” We are not, however in the context of a mystical legend, but of the clash East/West, of the historical emergence of a force indifferent to all ideals – here the technological violence of fire-arms. Once back in London, the narrator-gunrunner and his friend Jackson look at a shop selling those “polished tubes that can cure so many illusions” (TU, 52). A spectacular reversal of surfaces then brings forth the inhuman object voice, rising on the very stage of civilisation:

Our ears were filled by a headlong shuffle and beat of rapid footsteps and an underlying rumour – a rumour vast, pulsating, as of panting breaths, of beating hearts, of gasping voices. Innumerable eyes stared straight in front, feet moved hurriedly, blank faces flowed, arms swung. [...] “Yes; I see it,” said Jackson, slowly. “It is there; it pants, it runs, it rolls; it is strong and alive; it would smash you if you didn’t look out; but I’ll be hanged if it is yet as real to me as ... as the other thing ... say, Karain’s story.” (88–89)

It is indeed as if the story itself were the thing holding against “that thing” at the core of Western reality. Conrad’s language will be loaded with its vocal pulsation, in all the senses of the term.

The turn of the strip here makes us see the violent underside of power. It may also operate the other way round: the vocal *punctum* has the power to dislocate a petrified

⁸ “This father is distinguished by a series of features: he is all-powerful and cruel to the utmost, an absolute Master for whom there are no limits; yet, simultaneously, he possesses an insight into the very kernel of our (subject’s) being, our desire has no secret for him, he knows we are here to kill him and is resigned to it [...] The ultimate secret of the parricide is that the father knows the son has come to kill him and accept this death obediently. [...] This knowledge concerns a dark, licentious side of the father-king [...] a knowledge of enjoyment, i.e., the knowledge which is by definition excluded from the Law... .” (Zizek 2001, 158)

reality, like the picture of general paralysis in *The Secret Agent*. The anxiety which this novel communicates is, I believe, due to the fact that the still *unextracted* object voice/gaze is omnipresent: in Winnie's stony gaze, in the cry of horror stuck in Ossipon's throat, in the veiled sound of Verloc's words, reduced to a scientific wave of acoustic matter (194). Reality comes to life when Winnie, after murdering her husband with her kitchen knife, hears an obsessive tic-tic in her silent home. Her gaze follows the sound wave, exactly in the manner of the Hitchcockian tracking shot, until it reaches the objective source of the "voice:" the blood slowly dripping from Verloc's corpse on the sofa.⁹ The acoustic *punctum* effect here is simultaneous with the extraction of the gaze which has at last found its place in the white of the dead father's eyes (208).

Then only does Mrs Verloc awaken to the fact that she has a living body, rooted in time and space. Another floating phrase, one of those clichés from newspaper accounts of public hangings, makes her see the significance of her act:

It came with a cruel burning pain into her head, as if the words "The drop given was fourteen feet" had been scratched on her brain with a hot needle.

These words affected her physically too. Her throat became convulsed in waves to resist strangulation. (SA, 198)

As Winnie gives a shriek of horror, she is made to step into the figure of a tragic heroin, but one sacrificed to "*the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms*" (193). She falls in the arms of her next predator, Ossipon, the anarchist who believes in nothing but scientific discourse, or the savings books of his feminine conquests. Ossipon leaps with Winnie's money in his pocket from the train leading her to a Channel ferry, where it will be her turn to leap in the dark. It won't be long, however, before the object voice turns up with a revenge: after Winnie's suicide, Ossipon reads in the press about the mysterious death of a lady passenger: the phrase "an impenetrable mystery" detaches itself, and begins to *hang* obsessively over his head:¹⁰ the scientific mind does not resist the hangover very long and soon falls under the spell of madness (227).

Conrad's fiction is punctuated with such examples of maddening fragments lurking in acoustic space. And, as Barthes also insists, the *punctum* can be the efficient factor of truth in the clash between private and public memory.

⁹ "Her fine, sleepy eyes, travelling downward on the track of the sound, became contemplative on meeting a flat object of bone which protruded a little beyond the edge of the sofa. It was the handle of the domestic carving knife with nothing strange about it but its position at right angles to Mr V's waistcoat and the fact that something dripped from it. Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. [...] It was a trickle, dark, swift, thin... . Blood!" (194)

¹⁰ "'An impenetrable mystery seems *destined* to hang for ever over this act of madness and despair.' [...] 'An impenetrable mystery' was sure to 'hang for ever' as far as all mankind was concerned. But what of that if he alone of all men could never get rid of the *cursed* knowledge?" (224-225)

THE ACOUSTIC MEMORY

Jakob Lothe evokes Barthes' *punctum* in relation to Stevie's "*coruscating whirls of circles, [...] the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable*" (SA, 34). The word *coruscating* deserves attention: it designates a flash – in a jewel, or a piece of wit: a short-lived effect, rather than intelligible meaning. Does not the madness of Stevie's art, and of all art, consist in enclosing and excluding the inconceivable, whose presence is felt through coruscating rings of words or narrative?

Many such acoustic notes punctuate Marlow's journey up the African river in *Heart of Darkness*, like another soundtrack which will make us hear, then see: the clinking of chains, a report – "a kind of ominous voice" (154)¹¹ tickling his ear rather unpleasantly. This, however, is no supernatural voice: as Conrad firmly declares in his preface to *The Shadow-Line*, there is enough mystery on this earth for the modern novelist. Among the objects Marlow comes against, is Kurtz's written report promoting philanthropic work. Once back in Brussels, Marlow entrusts the report expurgated from its enigmatic little margin note to a journalist, who is only too happy to publish this example of eloquence at the service of Empire. And then, Marlow, who like most of us prefers oblivion, visits the Intended (245). But the unpalatable memory, whose nature differs from the souvenirs in the family album, or from the facts published in the press, continues its underground work.

Alarmed by the sound of the Intended's voice, Marlow's strained ear perceives another acoustic wave tearing through the cotton wool of the Brussels home. Kurtz' cry of horror returns, meaningless, permeated with "*a strange commingling of desire and hate*" heroically assumed, mingled with a "vibrating note of despair" (241): "*those broken phrases*" Marlow recalls, "*came back to me, were heard again in their ominous simplicity.*" (246) The inaudible soundtrack swells in the confined air, its mute letters begin to contaminate the "noble" words of the West, to insist in words like *ponderous door*, *decorous alley*, *georgous eloquence*, like gunpowder scattered here and there, until the final clash between intimate and public memory:

I was on the point of crying at her, "Don't you hear them?" The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. (251)

The remains of the father's judgement return in fragments not intelligible yet significant, bearers of a whole historical truth which falls in the ear "*like a dying vibration to one immense jabber*" (205). Such is the metonymic force of expansion of the *punctum* bearing "*a figment of obscene enjoyment spreading like a virus [...] anchors*

¹¹ "A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head. Six black men advanced in a file ... The clink kept time with their footsteps ... all were connected together with a chain whose bights swung between them, rhythmically clinking. Another report made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into a continent. It had the same kind of ominous voice." (HD, 154)

of familiarity, ‘knots of potential meaning identified ... independently of their actual meaning.’” (Žižek 2004, 143)

Against the rush of the sound wave, Marlow produces his paternalist lie to the Intended which is an act of obscurantist *repression*: one word for another, “your name” for “the horror.” It is as if the symbolic process of metaphor which is based on substitution had been perverted, to serve the political correctness of Enlightenment – does not Marlow declare that “*even the sunlight can be made to lie too*” (HD, 244)? To this, Marlow’s narrative will oppose the darkly illuminating power of the acousmatic voice whose *silent* presence may contaminate surface meanings. Is not the “*faint uneasiness of this narrative which seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river*” ultimately its creative power?

The same tension between public memory – facts for the tribunal – and individual, affective experience underlies *Lord Jim*, Conrad’s most lurid *collideorscape*. We know that the collision of the *Patna* with a bark of pitch-pine in pitch darkness, gave the ship a dangerous pitch – but the ship never sank, the story remains untold; yet, this encounter is the novel’s true blind spot where Jim met an intimate truth. Whenever the Möbius strip is about to revolve, the features of reality swell grotesquely, again as in an anamorphosis: a hint of the place of decay distorts the image, until the gaze and the voice come forth. Thus Marlow glimpses the *Patna*’s skipper embarking on a gharry with a glassy eye, about to utter a wordless scream. Marlow’s troubled “sense of probability” signals the proximity of a pulsing core of darkness:

The little machine shook and rocked tumultuously, and the crimson nape of that lowered neck, the size of those straining thighs, the immense heaving of that dingy, striped green-and-orange back, 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, and suddenly one venetian blind rattled down. (LJ, 32)

Can we not overhear in the repetition of words like *jerk, terror, rock tumultuously, disappeared, sank* the insistence of the force of decay underlying the *Patna* scene, marking the return of the novel’s unspoken memory?

The same happens in *The Secret Agent*. When Winnie sees the trickle of blood, she gives a faint shriek, a push to the table; the remains of Verloc’s dinner crash on the floor:

Finding the table in her way she gave it a push with both hands as though it had been alive, with such force that it went for some distance on its four legs, making a loud, scraping racket, whilst the big dish with the joint crashed heavily on the floor. (194)

The “loud, scraping racket” and the crash of the joint of meat make audible the deafening silence of the Greenwich explosion where Stevie was blown to a heap of fragments. Thus, the missing scene repeating itself in oblique visual and vocal varia-

tions is the inaudible/invisible source, the "inspiring secret" of Conrad's fiction which ultimately defeats any public "factual" interpretation.

Why did Marlow feel forced to lie to the Intended? Because she "knew", she was "sure": she was already full of intended meanings – in this sense, she embodies the counter-productive model of the deaf reader. As for the power of the Conradian voice-print, it consists precisely in its ability to unplug our ears.

LITERARY TRANSFER

How can the horror of the voice stuck in the narrative's throat be both communicated and held at bay?

Eisenstein's cinematic treatment of the acousmatic voice will be helpful here; as Zizek comments,

[a]lthough 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 [...] 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. (5)

Is this not exactly what happens with Kurtz the Terrible? Eisenstein called such meaningless but effective resonances "naked transfer" (199). The energy blocked in the paralysing affect acquires new momentum, once it is articulated back into some fictional structure where the truth can be obliquely present and absent. The ethics of such a creative act consists in enclosing the horror of the object voice, without for all that reducing the scream to silence. Is not literary transfer what ultimately differentiates the artist from the philosopher and the scientist, according to the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*?

The shape and concentric rings of Conrad's prose encloses a zone of silence in which ideals may be engulfed at just any moment, draining reality of its sights and sounds. Thus when a common phrase from the mouth of an officer touches Marlow's ear – the notorious "*Mon Dieu! How times passes!*" –, it brings forth the inaudible voice, "*that blight of futility that lies in men's speech and makes a conversation a thing of empty sounds.*" (LJ, 91). But the miracle is that at such points of contact with the inchoate, the acoustic substance swells into a life of its own. The "*destructive element*" (LJ, 21), instead of leading to some catastrophe, becomes the energetic core of a special act of transmission based on a new narrative syntax.

As soon as the *punctum* operates, Barthes tells us, it creates a blank point allowing the distinction within/outside the field of the image. Kurtz's enigmatic end, the horror of Stevie's death, the terror of collapsing ideals on the *Patna* are the archives of such a void – the horror means nothing, the *Patna* never sank, the Greenwich attempt was a simulacrum organised by some Embassy in order to give publishing matter to the

Press. Why, then should the *punctum* which stigmatizes Marlow, Jim, Winnie and many others have such a revealing power? There are two reasons: first because it marks the encounter with the entropic void swallowing all decorums: “*the effect of a mental or moral shock on a common mind ... is quite a legitimate subject for study and description,*” Conrad claims (*SL*, xxxviii). Secondly, because it points to a virtual reality lying in wait outside the field of the image of both self and world: Jim thus leaps in response to a voice in the unseen space which actually did not call *him*, but another – and yet spoke an intimate truth. The *punctum* effect, the undecidability as to sender and receiver here marks a *point of contingency* and a violence done to self-representation: it has awakened “the spirit of perdition” (*LJ*, 13) which is Conrad’s true subject. This literal *qui-pro-quo*, raises Jim to the status of a modern Everyman, a shifter round which other figures are grouped (196). Likewise, Conrad speaks of “*the figures grouped around Mrs Verloc,*” whose story is “*suggested and centred around the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion*” (*SA*, 321).

When Stevie draws his circles, Winnie catches a glimpse of “*his thin neck in a deep hollow at the base of the skull, as if ready to snap*” (34): like the cord of silence ready to snap for Decoud, the dealer in public words, in the midst of the Golfo Placido, the silent shadow of the object-voice weighs on Stevie, who shares with Winnie the wordless ability to compassion. The question for Conrad the mature artist will be to bind the voiceless affect, “*its inspiring indignation and underlying pity and contempt*” (228), to the letter loaded with little jolts of desire, hatred and compassion. It is not just a matter of producing a few acousmatic effects, but also of letting the truth filter through a point of *undecidability*.

Floating voices loaded with violence, scorn, hatred for others and for oneself often whisper what cannot be spoken aloud. One such strange occurrence punctuates Marlow’s awakening in the peaceful Eastern port of his youthful fantasy. A load of explosive words, another lingo made of local dialect and English, falls on his head. Among this litter of abuse, he overhears the word “Pig!”: to whom is this addressed? To some native *or* to Marlow himself – as if his arrival had disturbed the harmony of the mythical Orient. This is enough for the *punctum* effect to awaken in a flash the historical truth of the clash between East and West (*Y*, 192), and Marlow is no other than the narrative area allowing the effect of such “*matches struck unexpectedly in the dark*”.¹² The living truth lurks in the voice without a subject which brushes against you and transforms a Jim, a Kurtz, a Nostromo, a Mrs Verloc, into the reader’s secret partners – they are *one of us*¹³ – a still point aligned on the void of the unspeakable,

¹² His predecessor in Karain already notes: “A sudden cry on the shore sounded plaintive in the distance, and ceased abruptly, as if stifled by the downpour of sunshine. A puff of breeze made a flash of darkness on the smooth water, touched our faces, and became forgotten. Nothing moved. The sun blazed down into a shadowless hollow of colours and stillness.” (*TU*, 40)

¹³ Edward Said speaks of “...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.” (Said 96; my emphasis)

a core that rings a black bell. Through a kind of stylistic metamorphosis, the broken phrase *-or-* becomes a syntactic operator, the marker of shifting identities and places, dissipating – in the sense of propagating and pacifying – the primordial violence done to representation. Another field of reception opens, it may take anyone by surprise.

Seen from this perspective, Conrad's use of inverted commas, dashes and dots or colons is no mere rhetoric: it often produces rhythmical leaps between narrative levels, sudden twists of the strip making you hear, feel and see otherwise. There are strategic moments when Marlow's voice shifts to that of his listener in the dark:

“...that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. ...”
He was silent for a while. (*HD*, 172)

Typographical details like dashes, dots, semi-colons may thus localize the object voice, whose very silence may prick you at any time. They have the value of truly performative acts in the way they drive a hole in the continuum – like the little hole of the *punctum*. Looking at a title like “Karain: a memory”, we begin to see different possibilities challenging the safety of our symbolic place as readers of an exotic story. Is Karain a place, *or* a character? Whose memory is this: Karain's, *or* the Westerners'? The story won't tell, the *undecidable* lies at its core. The same applies to the fragment torn from Kurtz's appeal to altruistic sentiment: “*it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: “Exterminate all the brutes!”*” (*HD*, 208)? No doubt, another bullet floating in indeterminate space: several candidates may occupy the uncertain place of the “brutes” – Kurtz, or the white settlers, far ahead of the African inhabitants. In this uneasy moment, the colonial fiction vacillates on its foundation. The more detached, the more the voice is likely to strike you, to liberate its secret cipher of enjoy-meant.

The *punctum* is far from being polite, Barthes observes. Why, otherwise, should Jim turn at the sound of “look at that wretched cur!”? The object voice recuperated by Conrad's art catches you, it calls you to welcome the unexpected, the unpalatable truth which is all the more powerful because it is rooted in no definite subject.

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