

## *Introduction*

In 1907, when he already had some of the greatest novels in English to his name, Joseph Conrad confessed to Marguerite Poradowska that 'l'Anglais m'est toujours une langue étrangère'.<sup>1</sup> Like so many of the major modernist authors whose work has been assimilated into the canon of English literature, Conrad was an 'outsider', a foreigner on whom posterity has conferred the status of honorary Englishman, but who probably belongs with that later group of twentieth-century writers described by George Steiner as 'extraterritorials'.<sup>2</sup> Born in the Czarist-ruled Polish Ukraine in 1857, Conrad joined the French navy in 1874 before obtaining a berth on a British vessel in 1878. Seventeen years later he published his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, the beginning of a career that produced some of the most venturesome fiction in the literature of what was his third language. The transformation of Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski into Joseph Conrad was a prodigious feat of literary self-fashioning; but Conrad took profound exception to being paraded in the literary journalism of his day as 'a sort of freak, an amazing bloody foreigner writing in English'.<sup>3</sup> It is very easy – and rather misleading – to assume that the English language was an obstacle between Conrad and creative expression; one could argue with equal justification that Conrad's sense of estrangement from his adoptive tongue was the very enabling condition of his fiction. We would do well to consider the possibility that Conrad wrote his masterpieces *because* rather than *in spite* of the English language.<sup>4</sup> Not, I should hasten to add, because English is in any sense superior to Polish or French, although this idea strongly appeals to F. R. Leavis, who maintains that 'Conrad's themes and interests demanded the concreteness and action – the dramatic energy – of English'.<sup>5</sup> It might be truer to say that the English language is, from the very start, one of the central 'themes and interests' of this trilingual Polish expatriate. Conrad found in his acute feeling for the slipperiness of words the resources to reinvent the language of English fiction. His formidable

self-consciousness over the possibilities of language and narrative is the central focus of this study.

One of the defining idiosyncrasies of Conrad's literary career was his powerful distrust – even, at times, hatred – of writing. His letters treat the act of writing as a form of exquisite mental torture producing an excruciatingly slow trickle of words. 'Sisyphus was better off',<sup>6</sup> he declared, in a mood of extravagant self-pity that is entirely characteristic of these dispatches from the purgatory of literary composition. Nowhere is Conrad's writerly ordeal more graphically rendered than in the famous lament to his French translator Henry-Durand Davray: 'La solitude me gagne: elle m'absorbe. Je ne vois rien, je ne lis rien. C'est comme une espèce de tombe, qui serait en même temps un enfer, ou il faut écrire, écrire, écrire.'<sup>7</sup> Less melodramatically, Conrad's friend and sometime collaborator Ford Madox Ford confirms that 'Conrad hated writing more than he hated the sea . . . *Le vrai métier de chien*.'<sup>8</sup>

No less hateful for Conrad than the business of writing is its textual product. His fiction is mesmerized by the spoken word – the charismatic oratory of Mr Kurtz, the sibylline counsel of Stein, the richly enigmatic storytelling of Charlie Marlow – but deeply inimical to its own medium. Mutilated texts are scattered across the landscapes of his fiction: Kaspar Almayer makes a bonfire of the account books and musty documents strewn around his office; the first print-run of Don José Avellanos's history of Costaguana is dismembered in the Monterist insurrection; the evening newspaper that reports the Greenwich explosion is ripped in two by Winnie Verloc.<sup>9</sup> Not content with visiting punitive violence on every species of writing within the novels, Conrad's fiction endeavours to negate its own writtenness, usually by ventriloquizing a raconteur – Marlow or one of his many counterparts – behind whose garrulous personal presence the text silently effaces itself.

Throughout his literary career Conrad sought to overcome – or circumvent – the perceived limitations placed on his creative enterprise by the rebarbative impersonality of 'cold, silent, colourless print'.<sup>10</sup> His fiction is haunted by the dream of a community of speakers sharing a language of transparent referentiality and self-present meaning, such as an intimate circle of storytellers or the close-knit crew of a merchant vessel. Raymond Williams describes the ship in Conrad as a 'knowable community of a transparent kind',<sup>11</sup> a sort of waterborne *Gemeinschaft* whose values and traditions are preserved in the anecdotal wisdom of generations of sailors. Conrad's ships and storytelling cliques are his versions of what one scholar, in another context, has termed 'linguistic utopia'.<sup>12</sup>

Idealized speech communities of this sort locate authentic language in some distant, pre-Gutenberg era when the living voice enjoyed a kind of discursive monopoly on human communication.

Conrad's nostalgia for a lost era of authentic storytelling finds expression in the very structures of his fiction. He famously masquerades as a 'vocalizing' narrator or raconteur in the Marlow tales, 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', *Lord Jim*, and *Chance*; many of his short stories – including 'Karain: A Memory', 'Lagoon', 'Amy Foster', 'Falk: A Reminiscence', 'Gaspar Ruiz', 'The Informer', 'The Brute', 'The Partner', 'Because of the Dollars', 'The Warrior's Soul', 'Prince Roman', and 'The Tale' – are also narrated by 'word of mouth'. Edward Said has written on Conrad's fondness for the 'tale-within-a-tale' device as follows:

the dramatic protocol of much of Conrad's fiction is the swapped yarn, the historical report, the mutually exchanged legend, the musing recollection. This protocol implies (although often they are explicitly there) a speaker and a hearer and . . . sometimes a specific enabling occasion. If we go through Conrad's major work we will find, with the notable exception of *Under Western Eyes*, that the narrative is presented as transmitted orally. Thus hearing and telling are the ground of the story, the tale's most stable sensory activities and the measure of its duration; in marked contrast, seeing is always a precarious achievement and a much less stable business.<sup>13</sup>

As Said remarks, Conrad's writings do not always aspire to the condition of speech: as well as *Under Western Eyes*, there is *The Arrow of Gold*, whose 'source' is a 'pile of manuscript', and 'The Inn of the Two Witches', whose 'source' is a 'dull-faced MS.' found by its narrator in a box of second-hand books.<sup>14</sup> But Conrad prefers on the whole to let it appear that his writings originate in informal conversation or oral tradition. Of 'Karain', for example, he claims that 'there's not a single action of my man (and good many of his expressions) that can not be backed by a traveller's tale'.<sup>15</sup> The first hint for *Nostromo* was a 'vagrant anecdote' (p. vii); the subject of *The Secret Agent* was suggested in a 'casual conversation' with a friend, who 'may have gathered those illuminating facts at second or third hand' (pp. ix–x). Even such tales as 'The Idiots', 'An Anarchist', and 'Il Conde', which don't formally deploy the tale-within-a-tale convention, purport to be the most recent links in a chain of *spoken* narratives.

Conrad clearly believed he had much to gain by emphasizing the structural and idiomatic continuity between the written word and the living voice; most of his fiction takes the form of what Jacques Derrida would call a 'writing of the voice'.<sup>16</sup> In Derridean terms, Conrad's use of the storytelling proxy is a classically 'phonocentric' gesture, one that

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reproduces an age-old privileging of speech over writing. In his critique of the cult of the voice, Derrida takes up the structuralist model of language as an impersonal system of signs – which he chooses to call *écriture*, or ‘writing-in-general’. His most notorious formulation of his sense of speech as a function of writing is given in his discussion of Rousseau. In the course of unmasking the logic of supplementarity in Rousseau – the sense that writing always already inhabits the speech upon which it is supposedly parasitic – Derrida has cause to reflect on his own critical methodology. It would be tempting, he suggests, to believe that having demystified Rousseau’s philosophy of language we have arrived at a transparent understanding of the man and his thoughts. But he accepts that his own discourse is subject to the same compromising textuality that it detects in Rousseau. In the light of this caveat, Derrida issues a caution that has become the master-slogan of deconstructive criticism: ‘il n’y a pas de hors-texte’.<sup>17</sup>

Similar questions of language, truth, and textuality are broached in ‘Outside Literature’, Conrad’s tribute to the scrupulous exactness of expression that characterizes the language of ‘Notices to Mariners’.<sup>18</sup> Conrad differentiates confidently in this article between literary and non-literary language, between ‘imaginative literature’, where metaphorical language proliferates freely, and sailors’ discourse, which is free from any trace of indeterminacy. However, the nagging possibility that there may well be nowhere ‘outside’ literature, or nothing outside text, is never far from the surface of Conrad’s fiction. Conrad had plenty of reasons for wanting to get outside literature: he wanted to appeal to a mass readership; he wanted the spoken voice to override the dead letter; above all, he wanted to escape *literariness*, the duplicity and figurality of language. In a moment of wishful thinking, Conrad once styled himself ‘the most unliterary of writers’;<sup>19</sup> but the impossibility of getting ‘outside literature’ into some utopian realm of mathematical plainness or pure orality is one of the constant revelations of his fiction.

Conrad’s fiction is not unwavering in its commitment to the living voice; the antithesis between the spoken word and ‘cold, silent, colourless print’ gradually develops into a more complex opposition between authentic and inauthentic language – where the latter comprehends any spoken or written discourse that flaunts its own uprootedness, figurality or ambiguity. He displays a particular and sustained fascination with *gossip*, a ‘speech genre’<sup>20</sup> – to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin’s useful term – that constantly threatens to pervert authentic storytelling. Conrad’s nautical raconteur, Charlie Marlow, is deeply exercised by the problem of

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raising his narrative discourse above the level of mere gossip. Conrad's heroes, including Kaspar Almayer, Tom Lingard, Mr Kurtz, Lord Jim, Nostromo, Razumov, Flora de Barral, Axel Heyst, and Doña Rita, all learn what it means to be subjected to invasive narrative curiosity. The storytelling on which the Conrad speech community thrives degenerates all too easily into gossip, hearsay, or rumour, discourses that are degraded and emptied of authority by thoughtless repetition.

An important corollary of Conrad's suspicion of language is his ambivalent conception of silence.<sup>21</sup> Though his conspicuously talkative characters like Schomberg and Kurtz are markedly less sympathetic than laconic men of action like Falk, MacWhirr, and Singleton, Conrad never allows any simple antithesis between degraded speech and ideal silence. The predicament of painfully inarticulate figures like the title-hero of *Lord Jim* or Stevie in *The Secret Agent* might remind us that voicelessness has little to recommend it. The reticent intellectual does not fare much better in Conrad than the tongue-tied Everyman: Razumov can't turn his back on the subversive whispers of his fellow students; nor can Axel Heyst escape the world of degraded public language into wordless isolation. Language soon pours into any discursive gap left by silence: consider, in this regard, the following description of Peyrol in *The Rover*: 'His reticence about his past was of the kind that starts a lot of mysterious stories about a man.'<sup>22</sup> The ideal speech community in Conrad always seems on the point of becoming its opposite – an echo chamber of free-floating rumours, irresponsible gossip, and disembodied voices.

If problems of voice, textuality, and silence bear significantly on Conrad's speech communities, then so too do broader ideological issues of gender and nationality. For example, there appears to be no place for women in his storytelling cliques; a representative illustration of this exclusion is 'Falk', where a group of men, 'all more or less connected with the sea', swap yarns in a Thames hostelry whose dilapidated condition

brought forcibly to one's mind the night of ages when the primeval man, evolving the first rudiments of cookery from his dim consciousness, scorched lumps of flesh at a fire of sticks in the company of other good fellows; then, gorged and happy, sat him back among the gnawed bones to tell his artless tales of experience – the tales of hunger and hunt – and of women, perhaps!<sup>23</sup>

This diverting sketch of Neolithic raconteurs reveals one of the unspoken norms of Conrad's speech communities: storytelling is an exclusively male occupation. There are plenty of female voices in Conrad, but there is no female equivalent of Charlie Marlow; indeed, Conrad's privileging

of the voices of Marlow and his counterparts is problematically dependent on his repression of non-male storytelling.

Also marginalized in Conrad's fiction are non-European voices. Notoriously, in 'Heart of Darkness', African voices are audible only as formless jabbering or menacing shrieks, as riotously incomprehensible as the wilderness from which they emanate. These voices are excluded from the tale's narratorial ensemble, emptied of semantic content and absorbed into the jungle's sinister acoustic. Conrad's sense of the limitations of face-to-face storytelling becomes increasingly visible in the political fiction, where he can't seem to extend his speech communities beyond the horizons of European experience. By the time of *Nostromo*, there is a profound tension between the intimate experience of storytelling and the vast compass of Conrad's political vision. Whether charting the impact of Anglo-American imperialism on a turbulent Latin American republic, evoking a London infested with eastern European dissidents, or imagining democratic Geneva as an outpost of Russian autocracy, Conrad's political fiction exhibits a breathtaking geographical scope which belies his reputation as the novelist of isolation and inwardness. Incipient in *Nostromo*, and more fully realized in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*, is a transformation of the community of speakers into a conspiracy whose members are linked by what they *don't* know about one another. In *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* the central criminal plot – Vladimir's projected attack on Greenwich, the assassination of Mr de P – becomes a metaphor not only for modern society in the deadlock of permanent conspiracy but also for the secretive, duplicitous text of modernism.

The shape of the present study reflects my sense that Conrad's mounting suspicion of language, together with his diminishing faith in utopian dreams of oral or communal modes of storytelling, culminates with *Under Western Eyes*. This book falls into three parts: the first examines changing ideas about speech and writing in the nautical prose and early Malay fiction, in 'Falk' and *Victory*, and in *The Arrow of Gold*; the second devotes three chapters to the role of Charlie Marlow, whose problematic 'yarns' – 'Youth', 'Heart of Darkness', *Lord Jim*, and *Chance* – are the products of an intricate confrontation between traditional storytelling and modernist reflexivity; the third considers how, in Conrad's great sequence of political fiction – *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes* – his linguistic nostalgia finally yields to the rebarbative textuality of modernism.

My critical method has necessarily been influenced by the debates that have transformed literary studies in recent years; no serious student

of Conrad can afford to ignore the impact of feminist, postcolonialist, Marxist, and poststructuralist reinterpretations of his work.<sup>24</sup> My own predisposition is towards those schools of thought that focus our attention on matters of language, form, and structure. This preference for a formalist approach takes its cue from Edward Said, whose provocative contention that Conrad's 'working reality, his practical and even theoretical competence as a writer, was far in advance of what he was saying'<sup>25</sup> might be seen as the jumping-off point for the present study. Though not theoretical in any systematic sense, this study draws on elements of deconstruction, narratology, and Bakhtinian dialogics whenever they seem to clarify and enliven our understanding of the texts in question. One possible objection to my critical method of 'close reading', with its detailed and sustained attention to matters of textual detail, might be that it encloses itself in a linguistic utopia where words refer only to other words, with politics and history conveniently ignored. The celebrated Conrad scholar Eloise Knapp Hay was memorably dismissive of those who approach his work armed with nothing more than 'verbal ingenuity and the Oxford English Dictionary'.<sup>26</sup> Implicitly a defence of 'close reading' from the charge of historical myopia, this study is written in the belief that one can analyse the dense linguistic textures of Conrad's narrative without sacrificing a proper awareness of its potent political themes.

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PART I

*Speech communities*



## CHAPTER ONE

*'The realm of living speech': Conrad and  
 oral community*

This chapter will examine the speech communities of Conrad's nautical writings and early Malay fiction, and consider the emergence in his short stories of a model of storytelling that would find its most sophisticated expression in the Marlow narratives. I want to suggest that, whatever affiliations Conrad has to premodern linguistic communities, his engagement with the powerful tensions between speech and writing, telling and listening, leads him not backwards into traditional storytelling but forwards into a precocious modernism.

Conrad's memoir, *The Mirror of the Sea*, can be read as an introduction for the lay reader to the lexicon of the sea, full of praise for the exemplary clarity of 'sea-talk' and disdain for 'lubberly book-jargon'.<sup>1</sup> Sloppy imitations of 'sea-talk' in the popular press incur Conrad's special displeasure: the bogus romanticization of second-hand versions of nautical life is doubly obnoxious to this sailor-turned-writer. There is a certain territorial pride in Conrad's scornful critique of those ignorant landlubbers who toy carelessly with the sailor's linguistic tools. Conrad sees nautical language as a precision instrument earmarked for a specific purpose and not to be tampered with by amateurs. He lingers on particular words and phrases with affection – and perhaps a touch of envy towards sailors, who, unlike professional writers, experience no trouble in finding *le mot juste*:

He [the chief-mate] is the man who watches the growth of the cable – a sailor's phrase which has all the force, precision, and imagery of technical language that, created by simple men with keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade, achieves the just expression seizing upon the essential, which is the ambition of the artist in words. (20–1)

As Conrad indicates in 'Outside Literature', journalists who ransack the sailor's lexicon for picturesque phraseology are likely to distort it in ways that would, at sea, be not merely careless but dangerous. His quarrel

with journalism is part of a wider suspicion of metaphoricity, ludicity, rhetoric – any form of language in which words are displaced from their primary context and deployed elsewhere as mere ornament.

Conrad was powerfully attracted by the idea of the sea as the place where language is in good order; but his maritime fiction tends to focus on the idea of ‘sea-talk’ in crisis. Jacques Berthoud has argued that a certain tension between figurative and technical vocabularies is a defining characteristic of the language of Conrad’s nautical fiction.<sup>2</sup> In ‘Typhoon’, Captain MacWhirr’s obdurate level-headedness is seen in his suspicion of metaphor, his blank incomprehension of ‘images in speech’.<sup>3</sup> But the narrator is not himself constrained by MacWhirr’s embargo on metaphor. Indeed, the whole tale, ostensibly a celebration of the invincible stolidity of MacWhirr, is constructed around the metaphorical association of the elemental chaos of the typhoon with the below-decks mayhem caused by the rioting ‘coolies’.<sup>4</sup> A similar discursive division between technical and imaginative language is evident in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*. The ‘official’ languages of the *Narcissus* are the raucous banter of the sailors and technical ‘sea-talk’ of the kind celebrated in *The Mirror of the Sea*. The stability of this linguistic community is challenged by the voices of the shifty agitator, Donkin, and the mortally ill hypochondriac, James Wait. ‘His picturesque and filthy loquacity’ – the narrator scornfully reports of Donkin – ‘flowed like a troubled stream from a poisoned source’.<sup>5</sup> Donkin’s scrawny physique is taken as evidence of his moral inferiority to his burly taciturn shipmates who are nevertheless gullible enough to swallow his complaints: ‘inspired by Donkin’s hopeful doctrines they dreamed enthusiastically of the time when every lonely ship would travel over a serene sea, manned by a wealthy and well-fed crew of satisfied skippers’ (p. 103). If Donkin stokes up political discontent, James Wait connects with the crew at a more disturbing level: his charismatic voice has many of the sailors cringing with dread when their minds ought to be on the job in hand. These mutinous voices precipitate a breakdown of order that is marked by linguistic confusion: ‘squabbling uproar’, ‘execration’, ‘confused shouts’, ‘deafening hubbub’. When Captain Allistoun re-asserts his authority, the language of the ship once more displays terse efficiency as the gruff staccato interchange of orders given and received replaces the cacophony unleashed by Wait and Donkin. The novella’s ‘victory’ over linguistic disorder is sealed when, at the threshold of death, James Wait writhes in ‘a frantic dumb show of speech’ (p. 151) – the loss of his fine baritone is the novel’s ‘vengeance’ on the subversive charms of rhetoric. The danger for the crew of the *Narcissus* is narcissism: a