

# CONRAD, LANGUAGE, AND NARRATIVE

MICHAEL GREANEY

*Lecturer in English Literature,  
Lancaster University*



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## Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page ix
Introduction	i
PART I SPEECH COMMUNITIES	
1 'The realm of living speech': Conrad and oral community	11
2 'Murder by language': 'Falk' and <i>Victory</i>	27
3 'Drawing-room voices': language and space in <i>The Arrow of Gold</i>	44
PART II MARLOW	
4 Modernist storytelling: 'Youth' and 'Heart of Darkness'	57
5 The scandals of <i>Lord Jim</i>	77
6 The gender of <i>Chance</i>	98
PART III POLITICAL COMMUNITIES	
7 <i>Nostromo</i> and anecdotal history	115
8 Linguistic dystopia: <i>The Secret Agent</i>	135
9 'Gossip, tales, suspicions': language and paranoia in <i>Under Western Eyes</i>	152

Conclusion	167
<i>Notes</i>	170
<i>Bibliography</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	193

## 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

self-regarding pride in their own achievements or a self-serving concern for their own comfort. The linguistic equivalent of narcissism would be the infatuation of a text with its own medium: this, for Conrad, would be a decadent betrayal of the proper instrumental and referential functions of language. Yet the famous valedictory sentences of this novella, where Conrad conjures up ‘a shadowy ship manned by a crew of Shades’ (p. 173), show just how ready he was to transform the vivid seascape into a world of symbols.

It would be naïve to expect Conrad’s sea fiction – or any of his writings – to abound in images of perfect speech communities. But in *An Outcast of the Islands* Conrad presents a sketch of the Rajah Lakamba’s retinue which might stand as his image of an ideal oral community:

Small groups squatted round the little fires, and the monotonous undertone of talk filled the enclosure; the talk of barbarians, persistent, steady, repeating itself in the soft syllables, in musical tones of the never-ending discourses of those men of the forests and the sea, who can talk most of the day and all the night; who never exhaust a subject, never seem able to thresh a matter out; to whom that talk is poetry and painting and music, all art, all history; their only accomplishment, their only superiority, their only amusement. The talk of camp fires, which speaks of bravery and cunning, of strange events and of far countries, of the news of yesterday and the news of tomorrow. The talk about the dead and the living – about those who fought and those who loved.<sup>6</sup>

This community of storytellers is remarkable above all for its lack of divisions. It is not subdivided into tellers and listeners; nor has experience been hived off into the institutional subdivisions of poetry, painting, and so forth. There is no strict division between imaginative and informational narrative – or even between the living and the dead. That the voices of the dead are audible is a given for the Malay characters in this novel; they retain a vital organic connection with an ancestral past from which the Europeans have cut themselves off. The Malay raconteurs who gather in Lakamba’s courtyard inhabit a ‘community of speech’ of the sort nostalgically evoked, according to Derrida, in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Prior to the advent of writing there was, according to the phonocentric tradition, a ‘community immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members are within earshot’. The determinants of ‘social authenticity’ detected by Derrida in phonocentric thought are ‘[s]elf-presence, transparent proximity in the face-to-face of countenances and the immediate range of the voice’. Writing, meanwhile, is stigmatized by Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss as the precondition of ‘social *distance*’. After

the invention of writing, people are held 'so far apart as to be incapable of feeling themselves together in the space of one and the same speech, one and the same persuasive exchange'.<sup>7</sup>

Tensions between speech and writing figure significantly in Conrad's Malay trilogy, which charts the commercial and political rivalries between indigenous peoples, Arab traders, and European expatriates in the south-east Asian Archipelago. The trilogy is much concerned with the emergence of a new bureaucratic order that produces such paltry specimens as Kaspar Almayer and Peter Willems to carry on the work begun by the pioneers of empire. Marooned in what is for them a God-forsaken tropical backwater, these expatriate derelicts are playing out the closing stages of miserably unsuccessful careers. Almayer, in particular, seems mesmerized by the spectacle of his own failure: he views life through a narcotic haze, dreaming of the bonanza of upriver gold deposits that will secure his future in Europe. Much of the ignominious pathos of Almayer's demise derives from the steady revelation of his helplessly peripheral position in a complex speech community teeming with rumours and intrigue. As the sole white man in the region, Almayer is not privileged but 'ruined and helpless under the close-meshed net of their intrigues' (*Almayer's Folly*, p. 27) – intrigues masterminded by his nemesis Babalatchi. A smokescreen of secrecy lies over the Pantai power-struggles: the illicit gunpowder trade, Lingard's navigational secrets, the mineral deposits of fabulous value in Dyak territory, and the mystery of Dain's 'death' remain all but invisible to Almayer.<sup>8</sup> Blissfully ignorant of his rivals' plots and the nocturnal liaisons of his wife and Babalatchi – themselves staple subjects of fireside gossip in the settlement – he ends up comprehensively routed by his commercial rivals, cuckolded by his wife, badly let down by his mentor and foster-father, and abandoned by his daughter.

The accent in these novels is on the power of speech. Writing, deployed as an instrument of cultural dominance by Europeans, is largely ineffectual. The decrees and statutes of the Dutch authorities, the maps and guide-books wielded by European tourists, and the ledgers and account-books of Almayer and Willems, collectively attest to a strain of cultural imperialism that enshrines authority in the written word. The commitment of Almayer, the 'empty-headed quill-driver', to 'conscientious book-keeping' (*An Outcast*, p. 300), conjoins a reference to his failed career as a trader with his broader affiliation to print culture. Almayer's arrival in Sambir, armed with bureaucratic paraphernalia and 'books of magic' (*An Outcast*, p. 299), causes a sensation; but 'he could not guide Patalolo,



control the irrepressible old Sahamin, or restrain the youthful vagaries of the fierce Bahassoen with pen, ink, and paper. He found no successful magic in the blank pages of his ledgers' (p. 300). The contents of his neglected office, which seems like the 'temple of an exploded superstition', are musty relics of print culture. The trilogy charts the skirmishes between speech and writing in a community where the spoken word reigns. The novels contain an anatomy of oral culture: the tales, recitals, and prayers that define a sense of belonging; the formal parleys and illicit eavesdropping, elaborate flattery, and tendentious rumours that express friction between rival factions. In this word-of-mouth culture information and opinion are manipulated with a subtlety that defies the authority of the written word. The plot of *Almayer's Folly* hinges on the identity of a disfigured corpse which Babalatchi persuades everyone is that of Dain Waris. Both Almayer and the Dutch authorities are hoodwinked by Babalatchi: the impromptu inquest of the Dutch search-party can only acquiesce in the popular rumours about Dain's death. Not for the last time in Conrad, popular opinion wins out over forensic inquiry as an arbiter of identity. If the locals do not possess the firepower to reclaim territory, they do manage the climate of opinion more adroitly than the Dutch. It is appropriate that Almayer should ultimately use his record books, the appurtenances of his pretence of cultural superiority, to light the fire that consumes his house: it is the final capitulation of writing to speech.

Conrad's literary career might be seen as a determined but deeply problematic bid to negate writing, to found a writerly aesthetic on the principles of oral or communal storytelling. Some of his earliest tales, such as 'The Lagoon' and 'Karain: A Memory', set a pattern that would be reproduced in a dozen or so short stories as well as in the Marlow narratives: the narrator (usually anonymous) reports and frames the oral performance of a storyteller. 'Karain', in which a Malay chief narrates to British sailors, is a valuable opportunity for Conrad to stage his own peculiar relationship with his British readership – the Polish exile becomes a British author by masquerading as a travelling storyteller. The storytelling situation provides a reassuring context for the negotiation of multiple frontiers: between the homely and the exotic, speech and writing, past and present, colonist and colonized.<sup>9</sup> A sketch of the ideal dialogic encounter is given in the preamble to Karain's confession:

There are those who say that a native will not speak to a white man. Error. No man will speak to his master; but to a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things,

words are spoken by the camp-fires, in the shared solitude of the sea, in riverside villages, in resting-places surrounded by forests – words are spoken that take no account of race or colour. One heart speaks – another one listens.<sup>10</sup>

Storytelling is idealized as dialogue between equals that transcends all cultural boundaries in an intimate communion of souls. Except that, in Conrad's version, the modern decline of storytelling might well be traced to the fatal moment when tellers were differentiated from listeners, or specialist storytellers set apart from passive auditors. One might even argue that the fundamental division in Conrad's characters is that between his often long-winded or aggressive vocalizers – Kurtz, Marlow, Schomberg, Willems, Captain Mitchell, Adolf Verloc, as well as various anonymous storytellers – and those unsung heroes of his fiction, the listeners, like Heyst, Razumov, Jim, and Stevie. If anything characterizes the relationship between speaker and listener in Conrad, it is a sense of imbalance; the relationship tends to be a power-struggle rather than a partnership.

Linguistic partnership is at the centre of a story from *Within the Tides* that deserves to be more widely known if only because it presents with diagrammatic clarity the curiously self-divided nature of Conrad's fiction. 'The Partner' is the story of an encounter in a coastal hostelry between the narrator (a writer of fiction for periodical magazines) and a gruff stevedore who also proves to be something of a raconteur. The stevedore's narrative – the tale of two joint owners of a ship, one of whom instigates a nautical insurance swindle – is preceded by a discussion on the art of storytelling in which the ruffian accuses professional writers of fabricating narratives and tampering with the truth for the sake of artistic effect. No artistic pretensions disfigure his own story, which is simply a bid to dispel the canard that Captain Henry Dunbar committed suicide on the *Sagamore* – the stevedore leaves artistry to the effete purveyors of magazine fiction. Aggressively unceremonious, he plunges headlong into his tale without bothering to establish a context; he jumps between different segments with no regard for smooth transitions or descriptive interludes; and he continually rebuffs his interlocutor's polite expressions of curiosity and understanding. Considerably bemused by the stevedore's forthright anecdote, the narrator decides that leaving it unadorned would be the next best thing to *viva voce* delivery:

This story to be acceptable should have been transposed to somewhere in the South Seas. But it would have been too much trouble to cook it for the consumption of magazine readers. So here it is raw, so to speak – just as it was told to me – but unfortunately robbed of the striking effect of the narrator.<sup>11</sup>

These concluding words put into play a set of conceptual oppositions (raw/cooked, speech/writing, nature/culture) which serve as the axes against which we must plot Conrad's own decentred position as would-be storyteller and reluctant novelist. The tale's narrative technique is, then, a structural analogy to its content. The partnership between bluff honesty (the ruffian) and ingratiating fraudulence (the writer) reflects the collaboration between the honest partner (George Dunbar) and the fraudulent partner (Cloete, himself a veteran of the advertising trade and therefore no stranger to linguistic deception). Ultimately, the sense of creative rivalry expressed in the story is indicative of the division in Conrad's own artistic identity between traditional storyteller and professional author. The tale scores a satirical point at the expense of the stevedore's naïveté, his puritanical equation of fiction with fraudulence, but it registers a deeper uneasiness at its own status as an artistic commodity. Not only is the storyteller closer to experience than the novelist, but he also enjoys a more intimate rapport with his audience; the professional author is condemned to write in isolation for a readership with whom he has a solely economic relationship.

As numerous critics have remarked, the best introduction to this aspect of Conrad's art is Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov'.<sup>12</sup> That Benjamin makes no reference to Conrad is immaterial, so richly suggestive of Conrad is his elegy for traditional storytelling. Benjamin weaves around his short critical biography of Leskov a series of profound reflections on the demise of 'communicable experience' in the modern age, a demise of which the disappearance of the storyteller is the primary symptom. Benjamin's 'storyteller' is a composite figure. On the one hand he is the archetypal raconteur of some bygone, but recognizably medieval age; on the other, 'storyteller' is an honorific title for members of that dying breed of writers whose fiction most *resembles* the ancient oral forms. 'Less and less frequently', writes Benjamin, 'do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly'.<sup>13</sup> For Benjamin the authenticity of discourse decreases as a function of its distance from real human speech. This decline, Benjamin contends, coincides with the ascendancy of print culture – and, in particular, with the rise of the story's most formidable rival genre: the novel. Alone among literary genres, the novel subsists independently of oral tradition:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening

to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin reserves special praise for those writers – as well as Leskov he cites Stevenson, Poe, and Kipling – whose work goes some way to healing the rift between the living voice and the spoken word.

It would be easy to caricature Benjamin's argument as an exercise in naïve phonocentrism that gestures vaguely to some Golden Age when everyone displayed an innate flair for storytelling that has somehow been amputated by post-Gutenberg technology. In fact, Benjamin issues a stern reproof to such glib nostalgia for the good old days of fireside yarns:

The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process which has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a 'symptom of decay', let alone a 'modern' symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than lamenting the demise of storytelling, we should savour its poignant afterlife in the works of those latter-day storytellers whose writings honour the primacy of the living voice. However, Benjamin is notably unspecific on the question of *when* 'written' storytelling supplanted its oral predecessor. Perceptible in his essay is what Raymond Williams, in his survey of literary representations of 'organic community', terms the 'escalator'-effect: as soon as one tries to affix the label to a specific historical period, it begins to recede over the horizon of myth.<sup>16</sup> The same is true of Benjamin's narrative: is he evoking a pre-1914, pre-1800 or pre-Gutenberg utopia? His use of overlapping historical frames is part of a strategic synthesis of myth and history in the service of an adversarial diagnosis of modernity. Conroy terms Benjamin 'the storyteller of the storyteller', and his essay is indeed less a scholarly article than a meta-story. Poised ambiguously between myth and history, Benjamin's storyteller is a protean construct whose ghostly afterlife in Leskov is a reproach to modernity's slow dehumanization of language.

The evacuation of narrative from the 'realm of living speech' entails the loss of that discursive space for intersubjective contact in which the living voice once flourished. The fragmentation of the realm of living speech has left individuals incarcerated in their own subjectivity, like

the shell-shocked Great War veterans who returned from the front 'not richer, but poorer in communicable experience'.<sup>17</sup> For Benjamin, the ravaged battlefields of the War are a scar on history itself, marking the decisive watershed between traditional storytelling and modern print culture. Nowhere is the decrease in the communicability of experience better exemplified than in the words of modernism's archetypal neurotic speaker, J. Alfred Prufrock, who is locked in perpetual mental rehearsal of possible conversations where language fails woefully to convey intent: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!'

A further obstacle to open communication in Conrad is the language barrier. A considerable number of his speech communities are multilingual environments – a (non-exhaustive) survey of his fiction would reveal that Dutch, Malay, Arabic, and Chinese are spoken in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*; French and a number of unidentified African languages are spoken in 'Heart of Darkness'; French and German are spoken in *Lord Jim*; Spanish and Italian are spoken in *Nostramo*; Russian, French, and German are spoken in *Under Western Eyes*. Although it is not always made obvious, considerable quantities of Conrad's dialogue are to be understood as having been 'translated' from a non-English source language. It is sensible to assume, for example, that French was the day-to-day business language for European traders and sailors on the Belgian Congo in 'Heart of Darkness'; equally, we can reasonably suppose that Italian is the common language of the Viola household in *Nostramo*. Whilst these linguistic differences are often unobtrusively noted by Conrad's narrators, they are rarely made the centre of attention, and only a handful of Conrad critics have given them more than a cursory glance.<sup>18</sup> At times in Conrad the language barrier is solid and visible – 'Amy Foster' is his most poignant depiction of non-communication between speakers of different languages – but elsewhere it seems rather conveniently to evaporate: Karain's narrative, for example, seems to present no problem to his Anglophone auditors, whilst in *Lord Jim* Marlow gathers information in Patusan without recourse to a phrase-book. It occasionally seems as though Conrad regarded English as the *lingua franca* of every corner of the earth; and even when English is not spoken, other languages are readily translatable into English. Problems of translation do occasionally surface – in 'Heart of Darkness', for example, where Marlow fails to understand various African languages; in *Lord Jim*, a novel which in two key scenes (Marlow's interviews with the French Lieutenant and Stein) effectively becomes bilingual; and in *Under Western Eyes*, a text narrated by a professional translator obsessed with

cultural miscommunication. In these texts the privileged status of English as the *lingua franca* or master-discourse of Conrad's fictional worlds does not go unchallenged; indeed, one of Conrad's greatest achievements as a writer is his use of an imperfectly Anglicized fictional discourse that bears the traces of many different speech communities. In the light of the various challenges to traditional storytelling and open self-expression in Conrad's fiction – the sense of imminent failure of communication and communicability in a fragmented, polyglot world – his motif of 'secret sharing' seems an increasingly remote ideal; but as Conrad's linguistic scepticism intensifies, the possibility of striking up an intimate rapport with a near-stranger in which 'one heart speaks – another one listens' becomes all the more precious to him.

"Listening", says Councillor Mikulin in *Under Western Eyes*, "is a great art."<sup>19</sup> If this observation is true, he has discerned an intriguing gap in our knowledge of aesthetics. Evidently, listening is an art that has achieved greatness without having its governing aesthetic principles subjected to the same kind of intellectual scrutiny that is commonly applied to, say, oratory or literary composition. 'Perhaps', Jan B. Gordon remarks, 'we will understand the way in which speech is preserved in texts when we develop a hermeneutics of listening (an audiology?) to match our post-modern fascination with grammatology.'<sup>20</sup> On the face of it, the inauguration of such an 'audiology' would be an unconscionably ambitious undertaking, raising on the one hand the problem of methodological limits – philosophy, psychology, and linguistics would all have a contribution to make; and, on the other, the problem of resistance to theory – it is not easy to let go of the notion that hearing is as natural and spontaneous as breathing, and in as little need of theoretical explication.<sup>21</sup> Still, given his trilingualism, his decentred position in the polyglot culture of modernism, and his encounters with the African and Asian outposts of empire, Conrad's fiction contains plenty of stimulating material for the would-be audiologist.<sup>22</sup>

Conrad's famous description of the purpose of his art – 'by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel . . . before all, to make you *see*' – is more often remembered for its rousing crescendo than its perceptual sequence: the shift from hearing through feeling to vision is one that the fiction itself struggles to perform. For Aaron Fogel, the claims of Conrad's aesthetic manifesto confirm the patterns of his fiction, where listening and hearing are the primary senses: 'Some *overhearing*, some intense aural idea or obsession, comes first – hearsay, legends, the image of talk, frightening information – and tempts the character into a

seemingly compulsive participation.’<sup>23</sup> No small part of this ‘compulsive participation’ is the effort to *see* the source of all this fascinating discourse, to clap eyes on the Axel Heyst or Lord Jim or Mr Kurtz about whom we hear so much and of whom we are permitted to see so little. Probably the most sustained instance of ‘overhearing’ in Conrad’s writings is the following passage in *A Personal Record*, which recalls his first encounter with the reputation of ‘Kaspar Almayer’:

I had heard of him at Singapore; I had heard of him on board; I had heard of him early in the morning and late at night; I had heard of him at tiffin and at dinner; I had heard of him in a place called Pulo Laut from a half-caste gentleman there, who described himself as the manager of a coal-mine; which sounded civilised and progressive till you heard that the mine could not be worked at present because it was haunted by some particularly atrocious ghosts. I had heard of him in a place called Dongola, in the Island of Celebes, when the Rajah of that little-known sea-port (you can get no anchorage there in less than fifteen fathom, which is extremely inconvenient) came on board in a friendly way with only two attendants, and drank bottle after bottle of soda-water on the after-skylight with my good friend and commander Captain C-. At least I heard his name distinctly pronounced several times in a lot of talk in Malay language. Oh, yes, I heard it quite distinctly – Almayer, Almayer – and saw Captain C- smile while the fat, dingy Rajah laughed audibly. To hear a Malay Rajah laugh outright is a rare experience, I can assure you. And I overheard more of Almayer’s name amongst our deck passengers (mostly wandering traders of good repute) as they sat all over the ship – each man fenced round with bundles and boxes – on mats, on pillows, on quilts, on billets of wood, conversing of Island affairs. Upon my word, I heard the mutter of Almayer’s name faintly at midnight, while making my way aft from the bridge to look at the patent taffrail-log tinkling its quarter-miles in the great silence of the sea. I don’t mean to say that our passengers dreamed aloud of Almayer, but it is indubitable that two of them at least, who could not sleep apparently and were trying to charm away the trouble of insomnia by a little whispered talk at that ghostly hour were referring in some way or other to Almayer. It was really impossible on board that ship to get away definitely from Almayer . . . (pp. 75–6)

This remarkable passage might be read as an attempt to map the oral hinterland of *Almayer’s Folly*, the polyphony of gossiping voices without which the novel itself would never have been written. Like Conrad’s evocation of Malay storytelling in *An Outcast of the Islands*, this passage responds with fascination to the ‘never-ending’ discourses of an oral community; but in this instance there is something strangely oppressive about the incessant murmur of talk that captures the narrator’s attention. For example, these constant whispers communicate nothing about Almayer beyond his name, which has become nothing more than a

pretext for the more vivid anecdotes of the haunted coal mine at Pulo Laut and the laughing Rajah with an appetite for soda-water. Repetitive gossip transforms Almayer into 'Almayer'; he becomes a kind of verbal ghost, haunting every minute of Conrad's day. The act of listening has become an involuntary obsession ('I had heard . . . I had heard . . . I had heard . . . I had heard . . . I heard . . . I heard . . . I overheard . . . I heard'), and those inescapable words 'Almayer, Almayer' have become a mantra that Conrad is incapable of not hearing.

Conrad's fiction is as deeply exercised by the problem of authentic listening as it is by that of authentic storytelling. Gazing at the portrait of Kurtz's Intended, Marlow remarks: "She seemed ready to listen without mental reservation, without suspicion, without a thought for herself."<sup>24</sup> Conrad's storyteller seems here to be fantasizing about his perfect audience, but Kurtz's fiancée fails to measure up to Marlow's idealistic speculations; indeed, it would be difficult to find anyone in Conrad's fiction who listens with the unprejudiced selflessness Marlow imputes to 'the girl'. Certainly Marlow's passive and obtuse listeners tend to confirm the suspicion of the narrator of *An Outcast of the Islands* that our ears are 'rebellious to strange sounds' (p. 198). The ideal listener in Conrad would be someone whose presence permits his or her interlocutor to think aloud without the fear that anything he or she says may be taken down and used in evidence. Qualities of this sort appear to be displayed by Dr Kennedy in 'Amy Foster': 'He had the talent of making people talk to him freely, and an inexhaustible patience in listening to their tales.'<sup>25</sup> But on the whole Conrad's fiction can't seem to realize the dialogic ideal in which 'one heart speaks – another one listens'. According to Fogel, 'The End of the Tether' and 'Heart of Darkness' represent 'a transition from preoccupation with the egotistical speakers [such as Peter Willems or Captain Mitchell] whose desire is *to make the other listen* to a preoccupation with the egotistical listeners who desire *to make the other speak*.'<sup>26</sup> Councillor Mikulin in *Under Western Eyes* takes pride of place in the latter category: with his tentative, delicately truncated sentences and air of quietly thoughtful sympathy he elicits a flood of compromising words from Razumov. This shift in the balance of power from speakers to listeners does not, however, imply that Conrad's listeners are automatically privileged – his most perceptive listeners are often traumatized by what they hear.

Conrad's scenes of overhearing are interpreted by Aaron Fogel as defining moments of 'aural trauma':



Marlow, Razumov, Stevie, Winnie, Heyst, Hirsch – among others – overhear the world involuntarily, amplifying, hearing one-sidedly and distortedly, so that moments in which they are ‘made to hear’ define them and obligate them against their will; an overhearing is one of the determining and catastrophic events in their lives.<sup>27</sup>

Fogel takes overhearing to indicate traumatically excessive hearing (a notable omission from his list of traumatized listeners is Flora de Barral, the victim of vituperative personal attack from her governess in *Chance*); but overhearing also denotes the wilful interpretative ingenuity in Fogel’s discovery of puns and ‘chimes’ in Conrad’s lexicon, such as the ‘off-rhymes’ of ‘silver’ and ‘silence’, ‘Gould’ and ‘gold’ in *Nostramo*. Fogel’s Conrad is an ‘overhearer’ of the English language whose fiction in turn requires its readers to *overhear* unidiomatic nuances and inflections in Conrad’s prose. I would like to amplify this notion of amplification beyond its apparent limits in Fogel’s scheme of things. The two forms of overhearing (as trauma and over-interpretation) are more intimately linked than Fogel suggests. Conrad’s work cautions against the perils of over-interpretation: his ‘overhearers’ are traumatized by precisely the kind of overhearing, the releasing of a hidden semantic surplus, that Fogel performs.

Consider in this regard Conrad’s presentation of the act of listening in ‘The Brute’. This story opens with the narrator ducking into a London tavern where our storyteller, a ‘talkative stranger’, is already holding forth to the assembled company on an unspecified but apparently shocking subject: “‘That fellow Wilmot fairly dashed her brains out’”,<sup>28</sup> he says. “‘It made me sick to think of her going about the world murdering people’” (p. 107). ‘She’, in this instance, is not a woman but a ship: the *Apse Family*, a huge, clumsy merchant vessel with a notorious safety record. The joke here is based on the narrator’s temporary misunderstanding of the anthropomorphic pronouns of maritime slang. His presence as a marginal auditor makes possible a brief scene of linguistic defamiliarization, a mildly shocking rediscovery of the metaphorical power of words.

Such moments of aural defamiliarization are common in Conrad. In *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* James Wait calls out his surname as he joins the crew with the roll-call already in progress. The chief-mate, Mr Baker, incorrectly assumes that someone has impudently demanded him to ‘wait!’, a simple misunderstanding which underscores the symbolic significance of the new crewman’s name. The journey of the *Narcissus* will be plagued by delays: its crew will be forced to wait patiently for the weather

to change and for the hero to die. Baker's mistake is felicitous – he involuntarily articulates the quasi-allegorical level of meaning in Wait's name, anticipating the delays that will plague the journey. What Baker 'overhears' is in effect the novella's symbolic idiom, which emerges fleetingly prior to the reassertion of a univocal idiom. So the play on words is more than merely a joke – the insubordination sensed by Baker is actually a part of the equivocality of language that nautical discourse strives to suppress. It is an equivocality Baker himself reveals through his slip of the ear, thus implicating himself in a small linguistic mutiny that foreshadows the more serious shipboard unrest fomented by the malcontent Donkin.

There are many such 'slips of the ear' in Conrad. In these moments of creative misinterpretation, overhearing restores to language a polysemy that official discourse strives to suppress. Conrad's fiction could usefully be contrasted with what Derrida calls the '*discourse of the ear*'.<sup>29</sup> In the preface to *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida meditates on the function of hearing in western philosophy, with particular regard to what he terms *s'entendre-parler*, or the structure of 'hearing-oneself-speak'. Since *entendre* in French signifies both to hear and to understand, this expression reinforces the perfectly natural assumption than in hearing ourselves speak we simultaneously grasp the full meaning of our utterances. This logic is part of the pretensions of philosophy to 'univocal rigidity' and 'regulated polysemia'. Derrida dwells on the ear's anatomical structure, on the intricate involutions, cavities, and canals of this 'differentiated, articulated organ' which can, on closer inspection, scarcely represent a sharp demarcation between mental experience and the 'outside' of the spoken word. Derrida's discourse of the ear focuses on the 'play of limit and passage', the sense that the oblique membrane of the tympan is both the boundary between language and subjective interiority, and an open thoroughfare between the two. Derrida insists on the *play* of limit and passage because neither image is adequate on its own. If we regard the ear as a limit, then we accept a clear ontological difference between the spoken word and subjective interiority, with the 'inside' as prediscursive consciousness. Alternatively, to regard the ear as a *passage* suggests a seamless continuity between the spoken word and mental experience. For Derrida, the ear is a zone of porous liminality, the site of the problematic interanimation of language and subjectivity. In hearing-oneself-speak, preverbal meaning, once voiced, is immediately heard and grasped in a tight loop of intentionality. But Derrida's investigations suggest that the speaker is neither origin nor arbiter of his or her own meanings;

he questions the immediate reappropriation of language to thought. Conrad's fiction raises similar questions over the relationship between voice, listening, and intention. Frequently in his fiction the hearer ascribes 'incorrect' meanings to discourse: hearing becomes a pre-emptive counter-interpretation, forestalling or deferring the 'intended' meaning of the utterance. Accidents of spatial relations permit the discovery in the most casual utterances of meanings that exceed both the preverbal intent of the speaker and the interpretative designs of the listener. The logic of *s'entendre-parler*, of comprehending (understanding *and* enclosing) one's own meaning, is continually violated by Conrad's logic of overhearing, which subverts 'univocal rigidity' and 'regulated polysemia', and throws language open to unregulated duplicity.

If we want to understand more about the particular dramatic circumstances in which Conrad subverts the 'discourse of the ear', then we might consider Mikhail Bakhtin's brief but suggestive comments on the subject of overhearing in his discussion of the 'History of Laughter'. According to Bakhtin, in the 'grotesque realism' of the seventeenth century the author is presented as eavesdropping on the coarse gossip of women or servants. Later, however

the frank talk of the marketplace and the banquet hall were transformed into the novel of private manners of modern times . . . Seventeenth-century literature with its dialogue was a preparation to the 'alcove realism' of private life, a realism of eavesdropping and peeping which reached its climax in the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

For Bakhtin, the alcove is metonymic of an entire way of life: nineteenth-century middle-class culture, into whose private spaces the novelist discreetly peeps. In place of Bakhtin's 'alcove realism', Conrad creates what might be called 'veranda modernism'. The veranda occupies a special place in the imaginative architecture of Conrad's fiction. The opening scene of his first novel finds Almayer dreaming of gold on his veranda; Kayerts and Carlier chase one another around their veranda in 'An Outpost of Progress'; Freya Nielsen plays the piano on the veranda of her father's house in 'Freya of the Seven Isles'; Schomberg holds court on his veranda in *Victory*; the narrator of *The Shadow-Line* learns of his job opportunity through a convoluted scene of overhearing on a veranda; it is on the courthouse veranda that Marlow has his first brush with Jim – a character whose life-story he narrates on yet another veranda. The veranda is a place of privilege, a place where the leisured expatriate or unemployed sailor can while away his listless postprandial hours with a hand of cards or a cool drink served by silent nameless Asian

servants. The veranda is also the customary venue for European talk, for long evenings occupied by gossip, yarn-spinning, and cigars. Given that many scenes of overhearing in Conrad take place on the veranda, one might – taking some inspiration from the architectural conceits of Derrida’s ‘Tympan’ – term the veranda the ‘ear’ of the building: like the ear, the veranda is both limit and passage. It is the venue for overhearing, tales of hearsay, and is the structural equivalent of the ear, neither inside nor outside its parent-structure. It is a supplementary space, both extending and completing the building. The veranda is the venue for storytelling but also the site of overhearing where inside and outside, culture and nature, overlap. If we need a visual shorthand for the transition in storytelling in Conrad’s fiction, we may say that narrative has been relocated from the camp-fire to the veranda, the zone of cultural privilege but linguistic instability – and nowhere is this transition better illustrated than in the gossip that flourishes on the veranda of Schomberg’s hotel in ‘Falk’ and *Victory*.