SEMIOTIC DRAMA: THE EXPANSION OF MEANING IN CONRAD'S FICTION

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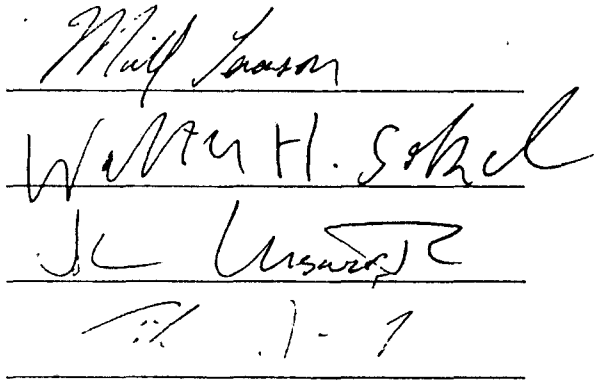

ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad focuses in his important early stories and novels on temporal, spatial and social contexts as contributors to meaning, rather than simply on language as the sole direct access to truth. Sounds, silences, and other aurally perceived signs become prominent in this process. Newly significant elements of drama emerge in the search for a semiotics of experience. Drawing on writings of Belsey, Bakhtin, Wittgenstein, and others, this study examines the way characters, narrators, and ultimately readers must acknowledge ways in which language constructs versions of self and world. Narrative points of view or multiple viewpoints of characters complicate and refuse monologic understanding: the only viable approach to meaning is dialogic. The range of meaningful signs expands in ways that characters--and possibly readers--have not previously expected. They now include silences, tones, poses, gestures and grunts. Through narrators' self-conscious attempts to "get it right"; through repetitions of words and phrases; through occasional direct addresses to an implied reader, implying a complicity between the narrator and a "we" who shares the same assumptions; and

through characters who question the stability of their perceptions, the reader is coaxed, along with the characters, into seeking meaning in unconventional ways.

Conrad's characters and narrators negotiate language, self and community. They have adopted the community's version of reality--in language, in epithets--as the only truth, but recognizing that language distorts in its attempts to stabilize an essential self forces them to seek an expanded semiotics. Subsequently, readers abandon their comfortable role as accomplices who are satisfied that language can lead to understanding, and begin learning the dialogic art of reading across time and across signs. Language is essentially paradigmatic, offering itself as the accurate reader of stable reality at any point in time. Conrad challenges both characters and readers to abandon this myth of consistency and to substitute a syntagmatic, dialogic, and dramatic reading of the widest variety of meaning-producing signs.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

HD *Heart of Darkness*

LD *Lord Jim*

NN *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

N *Nostromo*

OP "An Outpost of Progress"

P Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

SA *The Secret Agent*

UWE *Under Western Eyes*

To my family

PREFACE

I was first drawn to Conrad in graduate school. Other students had balked at the "heaviness" of his writing, at his "impenetrability," to use one of Conrad's favorite terms. Undergraduates I subsequently taught rebelled as well at novels they felt had no plot and therefore no purpose. Yet I was intrigued in Conrad's works with the sounds and silences that seemed to create an overlay of significance. He seemed to be investigating the process of understanding, not simply what the meaning is. Beyond objections to his aesthetics, though, I heard serious objections to Conrad due not only to his supposed racism and imperialism, but to his "attitude toward women": friends asked how I could work on a writer who "clearly" belittled women in his writing and was no feminist in his personal life. I was told that my choice might appeal to believers in the sanctity of the canon, but I was turning my back on the hard work of bringing women writers into the light. I was abandoning the sisterhood. A trusted professor counselled me that he would support my decision to write on Conrad, but that as a woman, I would undoubtedly have to defend my choice to search committees and others, explaining

why I had chosen neither a female writer nor a feminist critical approach to Conrad's writings.

I decided to ignore all these objections; I knew I was not a canon-loving anti-feminist. As I researched and wrote, however, and as I sought ways of distinguishing my study from the pile of Conrad criticism, I knew I would have to justify my aesthetically and politically "incorrect" choice.

In the course of my research, the critics who appealed to me most were the linguistic and feminist theorists who discussed marginalized elements of situations and characters, texts as a version of reality. I appreciated Ludwig Wittgenstein for his exploration of the games we play with language that we take as meaning. Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the dialogue that occurs within characters themselves and that is generated in texts between the reader and various levels of the text seemed tailor-made for my views about Conrad, as did Julia Kristeva's view of the perceiving subject as a less-than-unified sifter of moments of meaning. Catherine Belsey, as well, identified some of the tensions between subjects and language in very useful ways for my project. So I knew my interpretation of Conrad could be well-bolstered by important critics.

It was when I was teaching Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse to non-majors, explaining that her stream of consciousness style might echo feminine thinking patterns,

where meaning evolves in temporal, spatial and social contexts, rather than the more stereotypically male linear view of experience, that I saw another way out of my self-justification dilemma: Conrad's writing had some affinity with Woolf's and other modernists' occupation with the interactions of subject, time, and space, and with the relationship of language and meaning. Woolf examines the way Mrs Ramsay lapses into her public mode of speaking at the dinner table, a language which some of her guests speak easily, but which others perceive only as insincere and boring, in a way reminiscent of how Conrad's characters and narrators awaken to the role language plays in their understandings and actions. A Conradian tale examines the ways characters understand their situations, or their surprise at the disparity between their emotional and intellectual experiences. Like Woolf, he focuses on the temporal, spatial and social contexts as determinants of meaning. Conrad places on his stage the means rather than the end, the process rather than the goal.

Although I discuss his early novels and stories in chronological order, from "An Outpost of Progress," 1896, to Under Western Eyes, 1911, my aim is not to trace the evolution of Conrad as a writer. Nor, although I argue about a "revolutionary" attitude toward language and other determinants of meaning, do I focus on Conrad as the son of aristocrats sympathetic to revolutionaries, examining problems associated

with writing in his third major language. Instead I study in the texts the intensifying of certain themes, their exploration from various vantage points. (In this sense, Conrad himself adopts the method of his narrators and characters.) I argue that the problems of language, self, and community form the nucleus around which tensions are created and studied in Conrad's works. The range of elements that have meaning is expanded in ways that characters--and possibly readers--have not previously presumed: objects, moments, intentions, actions, silences, poses, grunts all carry meaning in their physical and temporal contexts. No authorial pointers insist that concepts of meaning be expanded, but narrators, characters and the text alert the reader to pay attention to other-than-linguistic signs. Through narrators' self-conscious attempts to "get it right"; through repetitions of words and phrases; through occasional direct addresses to an implied reader, implying a complicity between the narrator and a "we" who share the same assumptions; and through characters who question the stability of their perceptions, the reader is coaxed, along with the characters, into seeking meaning in unconventional ways.

As an interpreter on another level, I am challenging the basic paradigm I observe by examining it across numerous works of Conrad. Versions of the following paradigm are at work: characters and narrators are negotiating language, self and

community. They have been socialized to treat the community's version of them--in epithets, in language--as the only truth, but the novels reveal the inadequacy of a stable, socially-bestowed nature. When they recognize that language distorts them in its attempts to stabilize an essential self, characters begin to pay attention to other determinants of meaning. As a result, readers abandon their comfortable role as accomplices who are satisfied that language can lead to understanding, and they discover the dialogic art of reading across time and across signs. Language is essentially paradigmatic, offering itself as the accurate reader of stable reality at any point in time. Conrad challenges both characters and readers to abandon this myth of consistency and to substitute a syntagmatic or dialogic reading of the widest variety of meaning-producing signs.

This work was accomplished with the help of many people. I wish to thank Anthony Winner for his careful reading and direction over several years of my writing at a distance from Charlottesville, and Michael Levenson for his early and continued encouragement of my work on Conrad. I am indebted to my colleagues at Kansas State University, Carol Franko and Naomi Wood, for their generous roles as critics and sounding boards, as well as to many other friends in Manhattan who have helped me remember to ask, "if not now, when?" My debt to my family is also enormous: the faith and support of my parents,

as well as my sister, brother and their families, have been matched only by that of my husband, Tony Crawford, and my son, Nate Crawford, whose many acts of love and understanding have sustained me in the process of writing this dissertation.

INTRODUCTION

> They believed their words. Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows make. But about feelings people really know nothing. We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond the words.
> ("An Outpost of Progress," 226, emphasis added)

Joseph Conrad's works critique the belief that language can match, name and clarify a unified, stable reality that is "out there." Because words are only the veneer of knowledge, although they are taken to be the real thing, Conrad advocates investigating signs "beyond the words." The traditional power of language is to narrate individuals' thoughts and actions, to name people and surroundings, all in a passive, exact correspondence. The nineteenth century saw language as a natural expression of homo sapiens, and furthermore the unique creation of the Individual. Many critics see Conrad subscribing to this Romantic belief in "the power of language to make sense of the world and, however imperfectly, to recreate it" (Thornburn 127). Conrad himself tells in his famous Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" how he aspires

to reveal the truth of the universe through art. The artist, he claims, "seeks the truth and makes his appeal" (xi) to his audience in personal but recognizable terms, speaking the language of the community, but in his own individual way. He appeals to the shared memory of intuitive truth and unity, "to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation--to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity . . . which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity" (xii). Yet I see him not seeking a single unified vision of the world that can be expressed in just the right words. He seems rather to be asking readers and characters to abandon their hopes for a single world view, or view of the self, and acknowledge that their solidarity arises from the universal inability to grasp a single truth, a solidarity based on absence and plurality, rather than creation and unity.

It may seem odd, then, that Conrad's nonfictional writing implies that the careful writer can reach a shared, recognizable perception of reality with which others, his readers, will concur. Conrad speaks often in his letters of the importance--and the agony--of finding the precise word to unveil his truth. Yet in his fiction, beginning with "An Outpost of Progress," 1896; The Nigger of the "Narcissus", 1897; and Heart of Darkness, 1899, the epistemology moves from belief that language describes reality--which means communal reality--to a crisis of doubt about where meaning resides and what

language can do to approach it. Neither reader nor character nor writer can maintain a confidence in absolute knowledge. As Catherine Belsey puts it, the "shared truths" are no longer "obvious" (599). In the Romantic or Victorian quest for meaning, language was not assigned a central role; it was, rather, a transparent lens through which reality could be perceived, if the lens were adjusted to precisely the right angle and thickness by the skilled lenscrafter. Classic realist fiction thus "cooperates" with ideology's suppression of the role of language in the construction of the subject--a suppression that leads people to (mis)recognize themselves as autonomous. There is no stable subject, no stable reality, no stable truth, yet these seem to precede humans, who "learn" an established language that claims the ability to identify subjects, reality, truth. A term that identifies an object or a concept becomes transparent, a lens through which to view the thing itself. As Wittgenstein puts it, "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (48). Conrad seeks to resurrect the role of language and other conveyers of meaning, in contrast to the nineteenth century critics' tendency to ignore the role of language as a source of meaning, a tendency expressed well into the twentieth century by Percy Lubbock's "enormously influential The Craft of Fiction (1921) which talks endlessly

of craft, shape, design, and technique, [but which] contains no analysis of language" (qtd in Fowler 110). Conrad challenges these assumptions and makes language a leading actor on his stage.

The implications for readers of Conrad are at least three-fold. We must approach his writing in layers: first, we are reading a work of art created by the writer in words; second, the narrators and characters are using words to recall or recount their stories; and third, to differing degrees, characters, narrators and readers face the functions and limitations of language. Conrad scholars have focused on one or two of these layers, but few have looked at all three.[1] Conrad's fiction exposes layers of both authorship and readership: Conrad himself is writing his fiction for readers, but his characters are also writing or vocalizing their stories to affirm the reality they perceive. The reader's complicity in creating meaning is identified as problematic as well: the reader of non-realist fiction balks at any assessment that is touted as absolute. Writers at the end of the 19th century can no longer appeal to their "dear reader," but they still need a community of readers. As Catherine Belsey puts it,

> Classic realism offers the reader a position of knowingness which is also a position of identification with the narrative voice. To the extent that the story first constructs, and then depends for its intelligibility, on a set of assumptions between narrator and reader, it confuses both the

> transcendent knowingness of the reader-as-subject and the 'obviousness' of the shared truths in question. (601)

Conrad plays with just these assumptions by using narrators whose reliability we have to negotiate, or by ironically presenting characters and situations that expose inconsistencies. Conrad's widely-discussed use of irony--either humorous or poignant--attests to the various points of view he defines as "reality."

Yet even that metaphor--points of view--does not fit exactly, because it implies that a single reality exists to be seen from various angles. Instead, the only reality is in the angle; in the outside of the kernel, whatever shape or texture that outside adopts; in the no-longer transparent lens. For this to be the focus, a writer must experiment with other-than-realist techniques. "The hero as point of view, as position vis-a-vis the world and vis-a-vis himself, requires unique methods of development and literary characterization" (Bakhtin 38). Conrad is experimenting with ways of adjusting the lens, of perceiving without naming, of understanding without language.

We are reminded of the first layer Conrad highlights--that of the writer--every time Conrad bemoans in a letter his difficulties in squeezing words out of his brain. Why should it be so difficult to find the right word if it "belongs" to the object or experience? The second level, which focuses on

characters or narrators selecting words, reveals, as readers of realistic novels have come to expect, as much about the speaker as about the situation it describes. But there's more: these figures are doing all they can to make language work as interpreter, and it is resisting. They have to turn to other determinants of meaning to even approach an understanding. This leads to the third layer: the limitations of language.

Conrad directs particular attention to this last layer. Humans have historically thought to unravel meaning from experience or tale or text: as the narrator of Heart of Darkness claims, language should expose the kernel inside the nut, the essence of meaning. But Conrad seems to agree with Marlow that the meaning resides on the outside: in the language used in experience, in the telling of the tale, and in the interpretation of the language used. No kernel of truth exists to be found. To use Roger Fowler's terms, Conrad thinks of "literature as discourse," where the focus is "not only on relationships of speech, but also of consciousness, ideology, role and class" (80).

Conrad demonstrates in his fiction that language incorporates society's beliefs and desires, its "consciousness." It carries ideas and values. When Lord Jim feels he must abandon his role as seaman, or when Marlow rejects calling the Africans "enemies," their rejection of language means a

rejection of the social values incorporated in those terms. According to Wittgenstein, shared language use means shared values; to speak is to acquiesce to a point of view, an understanding of the world. Language constructs world views, and thus to study language is to study the construction of that world. Labelling people according to their occupation or role, for instance, ascribes to them certain characteristics, and limits the way others act toward and think about them.

If communication is only effective when it begins with shared beliefs, then Heart of Darkness, for example, portrays a worst possible case. Diverse uses of language in that novel portray separate world views, and the standard European conclusion is that natives cannot be "civilized": the outward signs may vary, but the interiorized code remains. Little hope exists for mutual understanding. Most Europeans are insensible to the meanings of the natives and the wilderness: they are "cut off from the comprehension of [their] surroundings" (HD 96). They hear drum rolls, but without understanding their import; only a few will even hear the drums as communication. They hear the silence of the forest and perceive only its impenetrability. It might be expected that foreigners cannot understand each other because of their different expectations of the world, but even members of the same society abandon language when they cease to share beliefs. Many Conradian characters turn away silent, with

nothing more to say to those who do not perceive the world as they now do. Furthermore, characters are often surprised that language can be ambiguous. With these observations comes the recognition that no single reality is shared by all humans, but, rather, that reality is merely a construct, created by language. The "subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity" may be no more than a verbal construct open to scrutiny (P xii).

Most characters are not ready for this revelation. They are surprised at irony, at the discrepancy between what they say and what they do. They have not suspected language of harboring its own meaning or of having an active role in determining meaning. Worse, they dangerously assume they are living individual lives, having unique emotions and thoughts, when they are only mouthing the script. Language use seems to affirm human community, because speaking is a kind of action: it assumes that we belong to the community of our listeners. But language games can stand in for real feeling or action; habitual, automatic linguistic interaction can substitute for genuine human intercourse. Language provides only an illusion of connection with others. Equally dangerous are two reactions of characters seeking stability: one is the tendency of individuals to erase their individuality in their anxiety to participate in the community; the other involves verbal efforts to mold the community to fit the character's view.

Conrad is no fan of rhetoric in this negative, manipulative, propagandistic sense.

In Conrad's works, characters persuaded of the stability of the self or their perceptions are forced to see themselves and their sense of their world as always in dialogue with competing views. Conrad's method is comparable to Dostoevsky's, at least as described by Bakhtin:

> The hero interests Dostoevsky not as a manifestation of reality possessing specific, fixed social-typical and individual-characterological traits, not as a specific figure constructed of unambiguous and objective features, an aggregate answer to the question "Who is he?" No, the hero interests Dostoevsky as a particular point of view in relation to the world and in relation to the hero himself, as the semantic and judgement-passing position of a man in relation to himself and to surrounding reality. (Bakhtin 38)

Conrad's interests are similar: his focus is on characters' perceptions of themselves and their surroundings, rather than any attempt at objective analysis. Instead of "who am I?", characters learn to ask "what makes me think of myself and the world this way?" The answer, repeatedly, involves the ways language and other non-linguistic signs construct those versions of self or world. Additionally, the point of view of a narrator such as Marlow, or the multiple viewpoints of the characters in Nostromo, complicate and preclude monologic understanding: the only viable approach to meaning is dialogism. What we see in Nostromo, then, are the multiple points of view of similar and disparate experiences.

In each of the seven works I explore, characters undergo what Paul Armstrong terms "the challenge of bewilderment": that uncomfortable creeping awareness that neither the self nor one's perception of reality will succumb to consistency, stability. Marlow is typical, for instance, in his inability, despite his continuing efforts to gather information, to define a stable, accurate Jim. The only viable approach is "irreducible hermeneutic pluralism" (Armstrong Challenge 10), an initially uncomfortable but ultimately more satisfying approach to reality. This pluralism infects characters' sense of themselves and their world.

> The subject is thus the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change. And in the fact that the subject is a process lies the possibility of transformation. In addition, the displacement of subjectivity across a range of discourses implies a range of positions from which the subject grasps itself and its relation with the real, and these positions may be incompatible or contradictory. It is these incompatibilities and contradictions within what is taken for granted which exert pressure on concrete individuals to seek new non-contradictory subject-positions. (Belsey 597)[2]

Individuals recognize that they are not confined to a single definition, and rather than owning a unified, coherent identity, they are composed of multiple and often "contradictory" selves. Those selves often seem immutable because they are named, but these names turn out to be inaccurate or insufficient. The Secret Agent, for example, is forced to

acknowledge aspects of his personality inconsistent with his "name." Because these contradictions are uncomfortable, individuals look for new ways of defining a stable spot for themselves in relation to the world, with more and less success in Conrad's novels.

So language is more and less than it seems. It has unrecognized power in creating meaning, while simultaneously being unable to do all people expect it to. Neither language nor its partners in meaning, silence, sound, and gesture, will communicate if the listener does not share with the speaker assumptions about the world. Too often, language does not, in fact, communicate because its meaning depends on shared assumptions, which do not exist. Characters are shocked to discover that when language is stripped away, nothing is left. They have been conditioned to believe they were having thoughts and feelings, but in truth, they "know nothing real beyond the words" (OP 226). Once they recognize this nothingness, once unmoored, released from bonds that connect to community, many--from Kurtz to Decoud--flounder, unable to substitute an individual code of meaning. It is only when characters can abandon the need for a code, a core, a kernel, that they can open themselves to the variety of signs that will lead to epistemological satisfaction.

If language maintains lies and encourages a false--because stable--understanding of life, should it be abandoned?

Conrad is adamant about his "no," while insisting that individuals cease expecting language or silence to answer questions about reality. Even when the role of language is exposed, the effort to speak, to make language speak one's meaning, is commendable. That Kurtz judges by means of language makes him extraordinary; that Haldin tried to communicate with Razumov makes him a hero. The implication is that humans must try to communicate in order to understand and in order to create meaning. Indeed, Conrad questions whether meaning can exist without community. As social beings, people need to speak: they can only create meaning between and among themselves, not alone. Yet public language will hardly speak private visions.

If language use implies human community and the will to live, the corollary is that silence suggests death. Certainly, in general, silence dissolves community and is anathema to individuals such as Donkin who are nothing but language. It also reminds men of their solipsistic views of the world: without the confirmation of social language, the individual drifts alone. And yet silence is typically more positive than this in Conrad. Silence indicates a unity with nature: ships and forests, rivers and oceans all are startlingly silent. This silence of the wilderness obscures a "hidden knowledge" which makes it especially appealing and appalling. Silence indicates as well an unconscious understanding of the truth of

the universe: an extra-lingual, immediate connection with the forces of nature, suggesting at once an unconscious subservience to natural energies and fate and an openness to plurality. Taciturn men like Singleton and Captain Allistoun demonstrate an exemplary way to serenity. Furthermore, silence signals a receptiveness to one's surroundings, not an automatic understanding based on previous experience or on society's language.

A mystery surrounds silence, nonetheless. It is impenetrable: it cannot be understood, and it somehow may be refusing to be understood. In fact, the role of silence in the making of meaning is active. Silence is both collective absence--as when the crew of the "Narcissus" abandons language by common consent, its communal acceptance that language is insufficient for the moment--and unbearable individual isolation.

Thus begins a study of Conrad's experiments with the ways it is possible to tell a story, make readers his partners, and find meaning in the signs of experience.

CHAPTER 1

SOLO AND CHORUS: LANGUAGE AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY

> We know nothing real beyond the words. (OP 226)
>
> It was a stormy chaos of speech where intelligible fragments tossing, struck the ear. (NN 128)

In two closed societies, one African "outpost of progress," and one ship named the Narcissus, Conrad's characters attempt to create meaning, to come to understandings, all without the normal parameters of communal influence. Cut off in space, and constrained by time, these men--and they are all men--must create their own system of meaning. They have come, of course, from "civilized" communities, but that fact does not seem to assist them in their search. With a suppressed omniscient narrator, Conrad can focus on the additions and substitutions characters make when language fails them.

In "An Outpost of Progress" Conrad examines the lives of men trapped forever in the reality endorsed by European society and created by its language. At first Carlier and

Kayerts appear simply to be unthinking: they are "dull . . . to the subtle influence of surroundings" (215-16). They cannot perceive meaning in the world around them; they cannot make connections or discern any patterns of significance. "Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way" (218). The two men are not only blind, but deaf: despite being surrounded by "the eloquent silence of mute greatness," they "understood nothing" (219). Then Conrad introduces a hint as to the real causes of the agents' inability to interact with their surroundings or with other human beings. Unlike the crew of the "Narcissus" who occasionally experience an exhilarating solidarity via language, these agents have been subsumed by both language and the community it speaks for. They have been rendered automatons by their association with society:

> Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines. (217)

Such men, agents of community, released from any need or desire to act as individuals, are anathema to Conrad because their type has no defense against the "mysteries of a universe made of drops of fire and clods of mud [which] do not concern us in the least," as Conrad writes in a letter about "Outpost" (Watts 65). Language frustrates the individual's unconscious

attempts to know his world by trapping him in a ready-made, socially approved and created explanation. Despite their didactic tone, almost too explicit for modern ears, Conrad's generalizations on the cases of Carlier and Kayerts need to be quoted:

> Few men realize that their lives, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one's kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one's thoughts, of one's sensations--to the negation of the habitual which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilized nerves of the foolish and the wise alike. (216)

The individual is unaware of his inability to process experience outside the socially approved version of reality. Only a "few men" see beyond their packaged lives, their illusory safety accepted by most as the only reality. This previews the predicament in Heart of Darkness when Conrad warns that "the contact with pure unmitigated savagery . . . brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart." But the trouble is not limited to literal savagery. The last sentence of this passage prefigures crucial situations in the novels examined

here: Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, Secret Agent, Nostromo, and Under Western Eyes. In all these novels, characters plunge into a world where they feel alone and lonely in their thoughts and sensations, and where not only has habit been disturbed, but things are "vague, uncontrollable and repulsive." If there is any saving grace, however, it is in the aroused imagination and the challenge to "civilized" behaviors.

Two more foolish men than Kayerts and Carlier would be hard to find. These European agents of the "Company," newly in charge of a trading station in Africa, are forced for the first time to rely on their own resources: "No two beings could have been more unfitted for such a struggle. . . . They did not know what use to make of their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought" (217). They cannot free themselves from their mechanical dependence on ingrained language patterns. They are fools because they trust their language too much. And Conrad suggests this may be a human failing, shared by characters and readers alike. Language seems to speak their thoughts, create their understandings, delude them into thinking they are having ideas or feelings, when they are only experiencing a packaged reality. As Conrad writes to Graham, "on fait des compromis avec des paroles": we make compromises with words (Watts 117). Belief in the meaning of words merely indicates

dissociation from the true meaning of the basis of life, and human beings' habitual trust in society's best intentions for them. Conrad complains that "we don't even know our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever, and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit" (Watts 65). This seems to imply, then, that individuals do have private thoughts, but that they cannot connect with a communal meaning by using the language the community has created. Does this mean that all language is indicted? Marlow will uncover some valuable language, but the value and usefulness of language are not so evident in "Outpost" or The Nigger. Peter Glassman notes that in The Nigger, "sophisticated uses of language are linked inextricably with violent, nihilistic and cowardly human impulses" (177). The reason lies precisely in the self-conscious nature of "sophisticated" language. Once we become aware of our bondage to nature, Conrad argues, "our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming--in negation, in contempt--each man according to the promptings of his particular devil" (Watts 71). Naive and spontaneous language might be worthwhile, but usually language contributes to self-delusion and mistaken beliefs in a stable, communal meaning. The fault inheres to social language, as Conrad suggests in his discussion of Kayerts and Carlier: "We know nothing real

beyond the words" (226). But language itself simply guides its users to false interpretations. The grim-humored director easily convinces the agents in "Outpost" of their high value and that of their station. Kayerts especially is persuaded of the director's sincerity because the agent is used to such social, sophisticated language. Conrad's account is grimly humorous and sarcastic: "Kayerts was moved almost to tears by his director's kindness. He would, he said, by doing his best, try to justify the flattering confidence, &c., &c. Kayerts had been in the Administration of the Telegraphs, and knew how to express himself correctly" (215). The meaning here derives not from any inherent meaning in the words, but in the delivery of and prescribed response to these words.

Yet because language derives from shared experience, it also provides the illusion of connection. Left alone, Kayerts and Carlier "chatted persistently in familiar tones" (216), each secretly realizing that the other is "more precious ... here, in the centre of Africa, than a brother could be anywhere else" (216). They play a language game, acting their given roles as chief of the station and assistant. To Kayert's playful "superiority" Carlier salutes and replies "in a brisk tone, 'Your orders shall be attended to, Chief!' Then he burst[s] out laughing, slap[s] Kayerts on the back and shout[s]" cheerful lies about how easy their life is going to be. "Before they reached the verandah of their house they

called one another 'my dear fellow'" (217). Verbalizing these automatic phrases, along with the physical acts of laughing and back slapping, comforts these mechanical men. Again the poignancy of this exchange comes from the inconsistency between these words and movements and the situation.

At the same time as their familiar social language comforts, the unfamiliar native language thoroughly disorients the agents. (A similar discomfort occurs with other "foreign" languages in The Nigger.) Kayerts and Carlier have had trouble enough understanding their natural surroundings, but they are even more baffled by "men with spears in their hands [who] made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke" (218). The two white men cannot conceive of this noise as communication, since their own speech is so programmed. Since they can find meaning in automatic words and movements, they will find little or none where they do not recognize the paradigms. Chinua Achebe sees this description of the natives' speech as evidence of Conrad's racism: "It is clearly not part of Conrad's purpose to confer language on the 'rudimentary souls' of Africa" (255). I would argue that Conrad's criticism focuses on the white intruders, whose experience and imagination are not fully enough developed to recognize human language when they hear it. The natives' speech is heard negatively only by the "civilized" men.

Since language is based on communal experience and shared

agreements, when these vanish, not only does language not work, but no one can quite decide how to think. In "Outpost" the breakdown of social influence parallels the abandonment of language. Kayerts and Carlier spend the day in silence as they try to reconcile the materialization of their greedy dreams with the plan of the other staff member of the trading station, a native man named Makola. Makola proposes the sale of men for ivory. At first the two European agents "stammered" (226) out some platitudes about the horrors of slavery. Then, to deal with this shock to their "civilized" sensibilities, they try altering their language. When Makola attempts to move one of the ivory tusks, Carlier helps him, sometimes speaking "with unnecessary loudness," sometimes "in a careless tone" (226). This attention to speech delivery signals Carlier's growing awareness that his former language patterns are inadequate, just as his former moral codes will not process this injustice. Later the agents play another language game to ease the transition from their European set of social norms to their new on-the-job values. "Whenever they mentioned Makola's name they always added to it an opprobrious epithet. It eased their conscience" (226). And just before they enter into complicity with Makola, abandoning their social restraints and misgivings, there is a pregnant silence. This silence is an invitation to a new society, for with their collaboration comes automatic expulsion from their

former social values, which dissipate without adherents. They still count on language to express their self worth for them, since they are unable to do any sincere thinking about it themselves. But their language no longer seems to be working: it no longer protects them from themselves.

> It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as the inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts. . . . And out of the great silence of the surrounding wilderness, its very hopelessness and savagery seemed to approach them nearer, to draw them, gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting. (227)

Neither Kayerts nor Carlier has the "innate strength" Conrad hoped could substitute for society's version of reality. Their understanding has dissolved with their language.

Waiting for the Director to arrive, their mini-society disintegrates, without the automatic glue that held it so firmly. As it does so, the silence between them increases until social language and communication fail completely, leaving, finally, no shred of social agreement. They quarrel over whether to use up one of their rationed lumps of sugar, which has become almost an objective correlative for their falsely sweet, neatly cubed European values that have forced them into this untenable situation. Carlier searches for words to label what is wrong, as they discover that their earlier language games and their earlier community no longer

work:

> "You are a hypocrite. You are a slave-dealer. I am a slave-dealer. There's nothing but slave-dealers in this cursed country. I mean to have sugar in my coffee today, anyhow!"
>
> "I forbid you to speak to me in that way. . . I am your chief," he began, trying to master the shakiness of his voice.
>
> "What?" yelled the other. "Who's chief? There's no chief here. There's nothing here: there's nothing but you and I. Fetch the sugar--you potbellied ass."
>
> "Hold your tongue. Go out of this room," screamed Kayerts. (229)

Carlier is doomed with his recognition of nothingness: no socially created words can label their anti-social roles and actions. Interestingly, the final perception of their ring-around-the-house chase and fight is Kayerts'--Carlier has been fatally shot in the other room--as he is listening for Carlier's rebounding attack. All he hears are the sounds of a crash, and then nothing, an ominous nothing: "The other man made no sound It was a stratagem. He was stalking him now!" (230). Of course, Carlier is very much dead, but Kayerts has learned too late that the meaning he perceives in the silence is the wrong meaning.

Although these characters have been unsuccessful in their attempts to extricate themselves from the stronghold language and community have on their ability to create meaning, to recognize that they "know nothing real beyond the words" (OP 226), the crew of the Narcissus begins its voyage unaware of the function of language or of any rent in reality. Most of

the men use language with no thought to its effect on their knowledge, establishing with their conversations a society in miniature on the ship, asserting their will to live in shouts against the gales. As language, noise-making and silence align with community, solitude and nature, the crew members notice the accumulation of meaning. Yet assumptions about what language can do dissolve as it fails crucial tests.

Auditory meaning frames and fills The Nigger of the "Narcissus". In the opening scene the reader hears in one ear the "hum of voices" on the ship and in the other "the feverish and shrill babble of Eastern language [that] struggled against the masterful tones of tipsy seamen." Harbor residents learn that new hands are joining the Narcissus by the indignant "howls of rage and shrieks of lament occurring in the bargaining over wages" (4). In the last line of the novel the narrator recalls the crew: it was "as good a crowd as ever fisted with wild cries the beating canvas of a heavy foresail or tossing aloft, invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale" (173). Ship life and crew members are introduced as much in audible descriptions as in visual ones: colors, textures, light and dark are seen, but overwhelmingly the air is filled with "the distracting noise," "the growling voices [which] hummed" (5), "the tempest of good humored and meaningless curses" (6), "the clash of voices and cries" (7), all contrasted with the silence of the Scandina-

vians and the "inward whisper" of old Singleton (7). The first encounter with each character deliberately connects him with "the racket of explosive shouts" (9), or isolates him as noticeably quiet or silent, providing clues to the character's perceptiveness about himself and his world.

In general, the crew's noise level comments on its unconscious relationship with natural elements, and by extension, with the universal forces of nature. Conrad wrote to R. B. Cunninghame Graham in January, 1898, "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it."[3] By means of sounds and silences, this voyage seems bound to remind its travellers of their victimization. If Conrad's characters respond unconsciously to their natural surroundings, they can avoid the tragedy of conscious participation which denies their human integrity. Men expect their community can replace their dependence on natural laws, but they learn on the Narcissus that it cannot.

A pattern emerges: human silence signals unity with nature; human noise and discourse, unity among men. Before the display of the tempest, reminding men of their insignificance within nature and the ineffectiveness of their human community, "No one spoke and all listened. Outside the night moaned and sobbed to the accompaniment of a continuous loud tremor as of innumerable drums beating far off. Shrieks

passed through the air" (54). Nature's polyphony urges social disintegration. The crew members' silence returns with their conscious acceptance of their fate: "waiting wearily for a violent death, not a voice was heard; they were mute, and in somber thoughtfulness listened to the horrible imprecations of the gale" (61). Toward the end of the voyage, in an unusually still, calm air, the men again are reminded of their inextricable link to nature and fate, not to their fellows: "the murmur of lively talk suddenly wavered, died out; the clusters broke up; men drifted away one by one. . . , sobered by that reminder of their dependence on the invisible." The ship itself is "wrapped up in a breathless silence . . . [sleeping on] the sea that stretching away on all sides merged into the illimitable silence of all creation" (146-47).

In fact, the only effective means of reaching true understanding of human existence on the Narcissus may be non-verbal: the silence of old Singleton who combines wisdom, unconsciousness, and the best human interaction possible. He does not need the imprecision of language: he can communicate "without a word" (22).. Singleton unconsciously knows that language is not needed for communication, but this seems to be an antiquated perception, as few with this knowledge remain to share his view. His silence reveals not only active fidelity to nature, but also his social isolation, for "the men who could understand his silence were gone . . . , [the] voiceless

men" (25). These men disdain--or at least ignore--language when it is an illusion of communication. They are not taken in by the loquacious Donkin, for example, to whom "they listened, impenetrable . . . and in grim silence" (101). The old ways of understanding and communicating are gone. These silent men do not participate in the human intercourse for which laughter and discourse are often shorthand: Singleton, for one, "lived untouched by human emotions. Taciturn and unsmiling . . ." (41). It is the rare, privileged communality that is asserted through silence or quiet. Indeed the narrator identifies himself as belonging to a younger, less silent generation because he does not perceive that Singleton's taciturnity belies the "human emotion" his peers could read. Yet the noisy verbal exchange now apparently required to affirm community on the Narcissus is still balanced by the "unexpressed faith [and] unspoken loyalty that [knit] together a ship's company" (11).

Not all quiet men participate in this wordless comprehension. Captain Allistoun is introduced as a man so quiet he is like "a phantom above a grave" as he watches over his ship. He stands "watchful and mute" and "then, without a sound," descends again to his quarters (30). Indeed "he was one of those commanders who speak little, seem to hear nothing, look at no one--and know everything, hear every whisper, see every fleeting shadow of their ship's life" (125). Nonetheless, his

own patient submission is tested on occasion by the seemingly irrational and uncaring violence of the elements. Another extraordinary silence which manifests community occurs when the crew as a whole submits to the captain's order not to cut the masts in order to save the ship. Even though the men individually believe cutting to be their only hope, they defer to his unifying decision: "not a murmur of remonstrance came out from those men. . . . They were silent and gasped" (59).

The usual disruption of community is figured by a silence, however, which seems to lead to isolation and death. Jimmy requires silence from the crew to sooth his sense of imminent death: "Our singers became mute because Jimmy was a dying man. . . . At night, instead of the cheerful yell," which unifies the crew, dramatizing their common goals and life, "the watches were called man by man, in whispers, so as not to interfere with Jimmy's, possibly, last slumber on earth. . . . We ate our meals in silence and dread" (37). Jimmy's insistence on death and silence has dissolved the community into fragments of individuality. Later, the crew members' own fears of death in the midst of the storm reduce them again to silent fragments: "Huddled close to one another, they fancied themselves utterly alone. They heard sustained noises and again bore the pain of existence through long hours of profound silence" (82).

Physical proximity does not suffice to create communal

feeling; language is needed, as Conrad ironically demonstrates with Donkin, individualist supreme but loud champion of men's rights within the homogeneity of society. Jimmy compares him to "a screechin' poll parrot" (110), the very opposite of silence. During the storm, "the rage and fear of [Donkin's] disregarded right to live" were expressed as "he shrieked . . . blubbered and sobbed" (76). When Mr. Baker and members of the crew insist that Donkin be quiet, "he ceased and lay still with the silence of despair" (77). The crew knows unconsciously that individual noise-making is not a sign of community; and like Carlier and Kayerts, Donkin's individuality is so socially based that silence is anathema to him.

Jimmy's ambiguous relationship to life unsettles the crew's complex understanding of life, death, and community, and awakens an awareness of the roles of language. The crew realizes that Singleton's pronouncement on Jimmy that "of course he will die" merely acknowledges his mortality while reminding them of theirs. More importantly, however, the statement alerts them that no single, correct interpretation of any utterance or phenomenon exists. Their suspicions about the multiplicity of realities are confirmed. Singleton's pronouncement is not meant for Jimmy alone; indeed, it "meant nothing . . . . All our certitudes were going; we were in doubtful terms with our officers . . . . We suspected Jimmy, one another, and even our very selves" (43). When language

bears multiple meanings, then, frighteningly, so can reality.

Language, since it is engendered by and indicative of humanity, generally implies community and camaraderie, as well as the will to live. The crew, most unified when they are all talking or laughing, approaches a dangerous loss of individuality, becoming exclusively communal. At the entrance of Wait, "the circle broke up. The joy of laughter died on stiffened lips. There was not a smile left among all the ship's company. Not a word was spoken" (34). Even silent Singleton demonstrates an unusual verbal concern for his shipmates during the storm:

> On the weather side of the poop the watch, hanging on to the mizzen rigging and to one another, tried to exchange encouraging words. Singleton, at the wheel, yelled out: "Look out for yourselves!" His voice reached them in a warning whisper. They were startled. (57)

As the storm begins to subside, the fearful silence of the exhausted crew is broken by an angry exchange between Mr. Baker and Knowles. Yet it is perceived as a "comforting row. . . . it was like a whiff of hope, like a reminder of safe days" (76). "Safe" here does not suggest only lack of danger, but also "the habitual, which is safe," as the narrator of "An Outpost of Progress" defines it (OP 216). The sounds prove they are certainly alive; they are hearing the reestablishment of the community they are accustomed to.

Verbal exchange has a reviving effect not only on the community, but on individuals. The crew, one by one, visits

Jimmy in his sick bed, exchanging words and laughter to keep him alive: "Men succeeded one another. They spoke in clear voices, pronounced cheerful words, repeated old jokes, listened to him; and each, going out, seemed to leave behind a little of his own vitality . . .[to] renew the assurance of life" (147-48). The sailors seem more than willing to sacrifice a bit of individual vitality to assure the continuity of the community and life for all. Their efforts, however, are by now a sham, since they have long suspected Wait of fakery. They are playing their own language game, providing only the illusion of community. Yet many desperately need this illusion. Jimmy's five rescuers know he is alive when he finally responds to their yells, "like a solo after a chorus" (66). He sounds desperate to hear them and to be heard, desperate for the assurance of community after his isolated, wordless entrapment, for his loud screams continue until his voice gives out. Even then, as soon as a tiny hole is made in his trapdoor, the narrator reports that Jimmy "rushed at the hole, put his lips to it, and whispered 'Help' in an almost extinct voice" (69).

Another faint attempt at language is made by crew members whose humanity and will to live have been awakened as the ship seems to assert its own intention to resist the storm:

> Short moans were swept unheard off the stiff lips. . . . The Scandinavians kept on a meaningless mutter through chattering teeth. . . . A man yawned and swore in turns. . . . Two elderly [men]. . .

> whispered dismally [and]. . . the words dying faintly on their lips ended in sighs. (77)

As they finally begin to right the ship, the noise-making becomes louder, more insistent, and constructively communal: "Men sighed, shouted, hissed meaningless words, groaned"; "we encouraged her with a feeble and discordant howl"; and finally, "we all spoke at once in a thin babble" (86-88). Returning to the forecastle, the men are at first disturbed as they each discover their material losses. But as they begin to recognize their communal loss, they also return to a communal language: "They called one another 'old man' and 'sonny' in cheery voices. Friendly slaps resounded. Jokes were shouted" (96). The content of their speech is unimportant. They are all making noise together, to confirm their will to live, and to live in a community. But is this community any more real than the false world of Kayerts and Carlier?

For language is not always constructive; community not always true. The crew members talk themselves into a near mutiny when Captain Allistoun refuses to allow Jimmy's return to deck, egging each other on with "words of reproach, encouragement, unbelief, execration" (122). The men feel drawn together in a solidarity against the captain and officers. As the off-duty sailors discuss the situation,

> now and then one of the watch on deck would rush in . . . listen a moment, fling a rapid sentence into the noise and run out again. . 'Stick together,

> boys,' roared Davis. Belfast tried to make himself heard. . . . Another one jumped up, excited, with blazing eyes, sent out a string of unattached curses and sat down quietly. Two men discussed familiarly, striking one another's breast in turn, to clinch arguments. Three others, with their heads in a bunch, spoke all together with a confidential air, and at the top of their voices. It was a stormy chaos of speech where intelligible fragments tossing, struck the ear. (128)

This is a still life in sound. A playwright or composer could not have more carefully orchestrated the human sounds. In fact, because Conrad's stage directions are so clear, the reader does not need the specific script that reveals exact words. The only actual words reported, "Stick together, boys," are a reminder of the function of these imprecise language games. Yet the words and gestures provide only the illusion of community.

This illusion remains tenuous at best. The truest unity is the almost prelingual perception of which Conrad speaks in his Preface, "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity." Yet he cannot ignore his suspicion that this conviction may be false: there may be nothing behind the idea of solidarity. James Wait and Donkin seem to prove his doubts. They resist the bonds that connect the other men. Communal language use contrasts with that of these individual language users primarily in its self-consciousness: the rhetoric of the group is much less deliberate than that of the individual. Donkin is the sort of man who "knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed

faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company" (11). He speaks to assert his individuality. Donkin is introduced as a manipulator of language: with his verbal appeals, "he knew how to conquer the naive instincts of that crowd" (12). His attempts to overwhelm its unconscious vulnerability succeed; indeed, the naive crew members are "touched" by their responsiveness to such genuine appeal. Although the narrator claims that "our contempt for him was unbounded," he admits listening "to the fascinating Donkin . . . we could not but listen to that consummate artist" (100). The irony in "fascinating" and "consummate" reveals the narrator's and the crew's naivete. Glassman suggests Conrad's identification here with Donkin as artist (178), yet certainly Donkin's magic derives more from specious artistry than from true artistic power. Since for Conrad, however, the artist is interpreter of truth, this idea applies to Marlow's versions of his experiences, to Kurtz's revelation of darkness, as well as to Donkin's vision of the rights of men. Although Donkin is "despised," he is also "irrefutable" (101), his effectiveness undiminished by his depravity. Nonetheless, Donkin's motives are questionable at best, and the narrator leaves no doubt about his value: Donkin's "picturesque and filthy loquacity flowed like a troubled stream from a poisoned source" (101). Artistry alone does not sanction its subjects.

Wait, too, uses words and silence to control others, not

to connect with them. Ironically, his language or wordlessness often binds the crew among themselves, not to him. Language, a poor substitute for the intuitive connection Conrad seeks, cannot be counted on to wrest meaning from the world. Wait's control of "the resources of language" (Glassman 177) parallels Donkin's power over the crew. Conrad explicitly connects James Wait's beautiful and sonorous voice, his even intonation, his "magnificent" expression, and the secret manipulative power of his rhetoric. Wait is conscious not only of what he says, but how he says it: the pitch, pacing, loudness--in short, the performance of language contributes to its meaning. His first request on the Narcissus is made with words which were "heard all over the ship and the question was put in a manner that made refusal impossible" (19). Wait's entrance is arresting and startling, as a dissociated resonant voice interrupts the dispersing crew. Significantly, his other mode of noise-making is ambiguously controlled, but equally arresting: his coughs, always "tremendously loud" (18), startle the crew, perhaps because they seem uncontrollable both physically and consciously, but are not intellectually inspired. These characteristics would seem to label the coughs as unconscious, positive communication. Instead, however, Wait proves to be in control and outside the community, as evidenced by language's lack of impact on him: his lie-abed ways are unaffected, even though

"he was reported, he was examined; he was remonstrated with, cajoled, lectured" (44). Yet even as the crew begins to suspect the degree of Jimmy's control, and the extent to which language matches their communal reality, a single cough can silence them or solidify their sympathy for him. (It is interesting to note how frequently other human noises join language as communication, whether it is the growls, groans and gasps of the crew, or the grunts of Mr. Baker.) This ambivalent attitude toward control and consciousness parallels Conrad's concern with his own writing. Conrad alternately claims that his writing was composed under his strictest control and that it was created without any conscious control at all (Nettels 25-26). The issue, then, may not be how human beings treat language, but how it manipulates them.

The role of language in understanding the world is hidden because most people do not suspect language of control or of deception. Language wears a halo of responsibility and respectability. Captain Allistoun, whose authority does not require the usual social exchange and discussion for decisions, pronounces Jimmy's enforced imprisonment without anyone doubting his sincerity. Only later, conferring privately with his officers, does he reveal his true sympathy for the sick man. Jimmy's five rescuers also screen their true emotions with language. His plight has touched their sympathies enough to attempt the rescue, but they hate him, too, for putting

them through the danger and for their strong suspicion of his sham. The rescuer-narrator explains their pretence: "We could not scorn him safely--neither could we pity him without risk to our dignity.. So we hated him, and passed him carefully from hand to hand. We cried 'Got him?' 'Yes. All right. Let go.' And he swung from one enemy to another" (73). Newly conscious of the discrepancy between their actions and their words, of the irony they do not expect, the crew members confront the idea of language as action. They would not be so aware of their duplicity if language were not negatively reinforcing it. Nonetheless, new consciousness of their own ability to manipulate language does not wholly alert them to the possible illegitimacies of Donkin's or Wait's practices.

Conrad hints at why language does not always work. Typically, language forces interaction and response: an assertion, question or command usually elicits a response of some kind, either verbal or nonverbal.[4] If the language is foreign, however, literally or figuratively, resistance and incomprehension are inevitable. When Donkin chums up to Jimmy early in their acquaintance, casually assuming common grounds for interacting, "the nigger stared like a man addressed unexpectedly in a foreign language. . . . 'Don't be familiar,' said the nigger. . . 'We haven't kept pigs together'" (23). The last sentence has the colloquial ring of Wait's home community of language users, one unfamiliar to outsiders.

Wittgenstein's notion of the need for shared judgment and experience for effective communication is helpful here. Yet Conrad's belief in a universal, natural truth suggests that men who are true to themselves and nature could understand any language or meaning-carrying sign. No human is entirely impermeable. Even the dull Kayerts and Carlier can dimly recognize in their universal memory the language of the leader of strange natives who arrive at the station one day:

> There was something in his intonation, in the sounds of the longsentences he used, that startled the two whites. It was like a reminiscence of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilized men. It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams. (OP 221)

Marlow in Heart of Darkness is even more explicit about his unconscious ability to comprehend even the most remote "wild and passionate uproar" (96). To be sure, foreign experience or language naturally resists rhetoric. Of the few silent characters on the "Narcissus," the two young Norwegians and Wamibo the Fin can just barely communicate, and Archie, another quiet one, is "the Finn's interpreter generally" (97). When the "despised and irrefutable" Donkin rants at the crew about rights and human dignity, "the younger men listened . . . Wamibo did not understand; and the older seamen . . . listened, impenetrable, broad-backed, with bent shoulders and in grim silence" (101). Conrad is explicit here about his particular use of "impenetrable" to mean "resistant and

impervious to discernment or proselytism." Thus Makola in "Outpost," "taciturn and impenetrable" (OP 214) is an enigma to the two white European agents: their perception is that, at times, "he was very strange, seemed not to understand, seemed to have forgotten French--seemed to have forgotten how to speak altogether" (OP 221). Of course that is not at all the problem: Makola is having to question his personal and cultural values, weighing the lives of men over ivory, and so both his native and adopted languages abandon him as transmitter of values. By abandoning language he is rendering himself impenetrable to the values and ideas inherent in language. Like Captain Allistoun, Makola has no need for discussion, but is determinedly self-reliant: when interrogated by Kayerts about selling the station men for ivory, Makola is "imperturbabl[e]," "impassive and silent" (OP 225). Natural surroundings, often unfathomable, unyielding of their meanings, are described similarly: the bush is "impenetrable" in "Outpost" (16); the darkness of the sea and sky is impenetrable in The Nigger (104); the forest is "impenetrable" in Heart of Darkness (93). As Marlow puts it, we are "cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings" (HD 96), and it is due as much to our own inadequacy as to the intentional inscrutability of nature. As Conrad writes to Graham: "Life knows us not and we do not know life" (Watts 65). Singleton's "impenetrable silence" and the impenetrable solitude of Jimmy's fear

hint at once at a non-social, non-verbal, and extraordinarily individual and mortal seclusion.

In The Nigger language does not become inadequate until crew members have rejected the captain's authority, asserting their individuality. Then language, which is by nature social, fails. When the captain finally agrees to hear their grievances, "suddenly all the simple words they knew seem to be lost forever in the immensity of their vague and burning desire. They knew what they wanted, but they could not find anything worth saying" (134). Language restricts their needs for expression; its vocabulary does not yield to their ideas and desires.[5] During the interview with Captain Allistoun, there are "offended" and "profound" silences. But after the near mutiny,

> a heavy atmosphere of oppressive quietude pervaded the ship . . . . Very little was said. The problems of life seemed too voluminous for the narrow limits of human speech, and by common consent it was abandoned to the great sea that had from the beginning enfolded it in its immense grasp; to the sea that knew all, and would in time infallibly unveil to each the wisdom hidden in all errors, the certitude that lurks in doubts, the realm of safety and peace beyond the frontiers of sorrow and fear. (138, emphasis added)

The crisis of doubt which began about whether Wait would die, about "the meaning of that black man" (45), about whether he and the crew are sharing the same reality when they rescue the man who might be "shamming sick" (72)-- these doubts about the existence of a sharable reality culminate in their abandoning

language in favor of a natural force that can explain all to the ready and willing. Yet although they are abandoning language, they do so "by common consent," remaining firmly attached to their community. After all, this is the modernist world, not yet the postmodernist.

Even the master of "sophisticated language," Donkin, isolated, "ignored by all" and able to speak only to the cook, even he "could find no words severe enough to criticise our conduct; and . . . in the heat of reprobation he swore at us" voluminously (144). Socially sanctioned language has failed him utterly. To Jimmy, who binds the crew in their communal lie, they are "a chorus of affirmation" (139), responding operatically to his solo; they are mutually reinforcing false social assumptions. At Jimmy's death, however, "a common bond was gone . . of a sentimental lie" and language again becomes inadequate: "Men spoke unkindly to their best chums. Others refused to speak at all" (155-56). Yet this dissolution to silence does not end in death as it does in "Outpost." As the ship docks, the land rises to enfold them. From "millions of men" comes "an immense and lamentable murmur . . . , the undying murmur of folly, regret and hope" (163-64). The camaraderie of the crew is reborn: "The men, scattered by the dissolving contact of the land came together once more in the shipping office" (167). The land reaffirms the loss of communion at sea, but offers its own substitute. Indeed, as

Conrad describes his "task" in his Preface to this work, he wants to

> awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all men to the visible world. (xiv)

The communal feelings of the barroom, the Scandinavian Home, the wives, mothers and families, all assert their enveloping control, and language returns. The narrator can say of the crew: "From afar I saw them discoursing . . . while the sea of life thundered in their ears ceaseless and unheeded" (171). The immortal truth is there to be absorbed unconsciously by these men if they are receptive, and to envelop them if they are not: the solidarity is "unavoidable". The trees and stones of the city, "remembering and mute," survive as eternal reminders. Although language and community have failed them in crises of nature and community, these men are unwilling to abandon the familiar sound of language, creator of their world.

CHAPTER 2

THE COMPULSION TO SPEAK

> The man presented himself as a voice. (HD 258)

> There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale that was not so much told as suggested to me in desolate exclamations, completed in shrugs, in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs. (HD 269)

The nineteenth century witnessed radical changes in the way people perceived the world and their roles in it. In Heart of Darkness Conrad parallels the transition in ideas about language which characterize the beginning of the modern period. Marlow begins telling his story to expose the meaning beneath the haze of his experience; yet because he has learned that meaning is not intrinsic, but extrinsic to experience, he unearths the crucial role language has played in his understanding. Indeed, his tale unfolds the history of the philosophy of language in the nineteenth century.

Throughout the novel, Marlow discovers and explores the way language skews understanding. Marlow's increasing awareness of the variable meanings of sounds, silence, and

language leads him to observe that no single notion of reality is shared by all. This destabilizing epistemology concerns Conrad the artist, as well. Even if no single reality exists, Conrad believes that the artist, seeker of truth, connects most closely to "the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity" among all men, past and present, and Nature (P xii). Marlow is no artist, but he also seeks the truth, a task made more difficult by the changing versions of reality he experiences. Understanding the jungle and its inhabitants requires that foreigners (Europeans) recognize their affinity with them, a patent contradiction to those who believe that identity--especially racial identity--is stable. At first, for example, as the steamer penetrates "deeper into the heart of darkness," Marlow feels "we were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings. . . . We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were traveling in the night of first ages" (95-6). He is far not only in space from his European base in the present, but also in time from the past with which he should feel "solidarity." Gradually, however, recognition sparks feelings of kinship with the inscrutable sounds and stillness: it is frightening and confusing, but he acknowledges

> the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being meaning in it which you . . . could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything--because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. (96)

Even though in his present time and place, in his current cultural and ethnocentric situation, these sounds make no sense to him, he intuitively feels a solidarity with anything human: as Terence put it, "Homo sum; humani nihil a me alienum puto" (I am a man; I hold nothing human foreign to me). Marlow recognizes in these sounds an extralingual source of meaning. So there are truths about human beings, meanings it should be possible to find. But how?

For Conrad the writer, words should lead the way to this truth. Even while demonstrating that language is a creator of meaning, he is ambivalent about the functions of language. Some of his ideas echo views dominant throughout most of the nineteenth century: words reflect reality; meaning is outside of the mind, waiting to be discovered. For John Stuart Mill, for example, language is "the connecting link between the universe of things and the world of human thought" (Keefe 131). Language has the power to connect humans with their past, relieve them from the isolation of the present, remind them of their humanity. These assumptions about language explain why Conrad claims the primacy of the solidarity which "binds together all humanity" (P xii). As language users, humans share beliefs about the foundations of reality, although we will examine the opposing situation of speakers of different languages. Conrad's diction re-emphasizes the role of language: the artist, he claims, "speaks . . . to the

latent fellowship with all creation" (P xii). The verbal artist can do no less, as his medium speaks its connection with the past. We can say of Conrad what one critic says of Carlyle, Arnold, Tennyson and other Victorians: "The written word was their primary defense against the flux of time, the connecting link between them and their cultural and personal past" (Keefe 128). English cannot link Conrad with his Polish past, but it can connect him to the human past whose stability he seeks.

In this pre-modern view, language and art are linked to universal forces beyond quotidian experiences. Conrad holds that "all creative art is magic, is evocation of the unseen in forms persuasive, enlightening, familiar, and surprising, for the edification of mankind" (Notes 13). Art and language also facilitate the recognition of our collective memory of the unseen, the currently incomprehensible. Both the "unseen" and the "conviction of solidarity" suggest a hidden connection underlying all of creation. This idea seems to align the Romantic notion of human beings and Nature being one--as Wordsworth says, "all like the workings of one mind, the features/ Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree"[6]--with the Naturalist view that human behavior follows the laws of Nature. Humans may not read the symbols correctly or perceive the scientifically verifiable natural law, but those signs exist. Again, however, meaning resides outside of human

control.

But meaning can be uncovered. Marlow tries to fix the meaning of his past with his spoken words, even as he begins to realize that the words are his meaning, his only connection to the past. Peter Glassman views Marlow's longing for Kurtz, who "presented himself as a voice" (113), as

> a passionate wish for, in effect, literature. Life has been too bold for Marlow; he feels he wants art. Stirred by a painting, he wants a more particular 'gift of expression'--not the bewildering activeness of actuality, but the 'real presence,' however bewildering that may be, of human words. (218)

Yes, Marlow is bewildered, but not because he is overwhelmed by life. Rather it is because he is awakening to a new significance for language as a less-than-satisfactory way to meaning. Language connects us to the founding myths of Western culture. As Edward Said claims, all "secular narrative . . . is based on . . . the natal banishment of man from immortality." This, of course, "has the profoundest implications for the verbal artist, since the words of the language he uses are lapsed recollections of the single Original Word" (Said 142). Indeed, humanity's memory extends to the "origins in the unity and unspoken Word of God's Being" (Said 280), which is to say, to silence, because human verbal discourse did not begin, was not needed, until Adam and Eve were excluded from the unity of Eden and had to depend on the inter-human. W. H. Auden describes the expulsion from the

Garden in similar ways in "Sonnets from China":

> They left. Immediately the memory faded
> Of all they'd known: they could not understand
> The dogs now who before had always aided;
> The stream was dumb with whom they'd always planned.
> (128)

Humans first created language in an attempt to recapture the lost unity, then in order to control and influence their environment and fellows. Paradoxically, language is expected to recapture the memory of unity which was silent, unspoken--an unrealizable goal, at best. Yet in a pre-modern awareness, it seems the only approach to meaning.

The modern era was undoubtedly influenced by Darwin's theories which helped turn the study of humankind "away from its classical preoccupation with human language as the essence of humanity" (Keefe 133). Suddenly, language is simply one of a series of human signs which intend meaning, no more or less important than the gesture, the look, the grunt, the silence. Walter Pater, in his 1868 Conclusion to The Renaissance, epitomizes these new ideas. For Pater, "language is private, reflexive. . . . No longer an interpreter of a transcendental or material reality, it has become an expression of the self" (Keefe 134). Language is not the sole interpreter of reality, but one of many approaches.

Heart of Darkness traces the adoption of this modern view of language. Marlow hopes and expects that language will reveal reality, community, and self, but he must admit that

language creates these notions. Even the novel's narrator who recounts Marlow's tale observes, in setting the scene on the Thames, that "in the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint" (45). That is, the visual evidence suggests that the sea and the sky are one entity; it is the only words that force them apart. Characters who have relied on language to unveil the truth of the world find themselves floundering, often unmoored suddenly from the comforting words which explained their lives. Reluctantly, characters acknowledge that the only truth is a personal, isolated one, and one of the only ways to interpret this modern world is through a personal linguistic effort. Oscar Wilde, a student of Pater's, discusses the role of art, but as Keefe points out, he is surely thinking of "poetry, the art of language." Art, says Wilde, "can never really show us the external world. All that it shows us is our own soul, the one world of which we have any real cognizance. . . . It is art, and art only, that reveals us to ourselves" (qtd in Keefe 135). It is no longer Scribo ergo sum, the phrase Keefe applies to the early Victorians, but now "I write or speak to create myself." Marlow is not a theorizer, but, needing to discover meaning, he realizes he must be a voice: words, his and others, may be a primary means of communicating, but they are not the only way to meaning. While the art of language must be rescued from insignificance, the semiological search for meaning must

be expanded.

Language, then, is not indicted in Heart of Darkness as fiercely as in the earlier stories. Marlow approves of the attempts to understand life through language, even if those attempts fail or reveal enigmatic, untenable or monstrous truths. To speak is to assert an understanding, a belief, a conclusion. Just as, according to Conrad, the purpose of the artist is to interpret reality and reveal the truth of the fragments of existence, all in a convincing appeal to the senses, so the magic of language is its decisive engagement with its surroundings. The use of language postulates an approximation of the truth, a theory of understanding, an interaction with fellow language-users. If, as Wittgenstein posits, language only has meaning in its use in human society, then a purpose or intention is necessarily imbedded in any use of language. Henry James's makes a parallel point in his 1905 The Question of Our Speech, though his emphasis is more aesthetic than functional:

> All life therefore comes back to the question of our speech, the medium through which we communicate with each other; for all life comes back to the question of our relations with each other. These relations are made possible, are registered, are verily constituted by our speech, and are successful . . .in proportion as our speech is worthy, . . . is developed, delicate, flexible, rich. (10)

James suggests that relationships exist only in the speech used to create them. Both writers see the need to forge beyond quotidian, communal language, to make it respond to our

needs and experiences. Language can be both prescriptive and liberating, both limiting and enabling: language is used to assert individual will but typically it sanctions only those feelings, thoughts and actions which it has historically expressed. For Wittgenstein, "if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreements not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments" (88). Indeed, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (8). The use of language implies endorsement of a coherent, communal life-view by the language users, as well as their commitment to the need for sharing that vision. Marlow claims Kurtz communicates with him by "speak[ing] English to me," thereby demonstrating that "his sympathies were in the right place" (117).

There are occasions when characters must abandon communal judgment as invalid or not truly possible. The resulting chaos of judgments demands great courage to assert individual perception of truth. "An Outpost of Progress" examines the devastating consequences for the agents who previously had adopted unquestioningly prepackaged thoughts. Similar problems cause Marlow to explain why his stories may not be understood by his listeners on board the Nellie: their framework, their basic assumptions differ too radically from those of the African travellers he is describing. He doubts whether his listeners can understand Kurtz's participation in

the "unspeakable" rites. He asks them:

> how can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammeled feet may take him into . . . by the way of silence--utter silence, where no warning voice of a kind neighbor can be heard whispering of public opinion. These little things make all the difference. When they are gone you must fall back upon your own innate strength, upon your own capacity for faithfulness. (116)

If a voiceless setting lacks the historical tracings of community, then it is verbal language that transmits them. Not overly confident in his or his listeners' capacity, Marlow recognizes that the experience is not as important as the attempt to communicate it. Since the old, communal language is not satisfactory, a new, personal one must be found. That language will consist of more than words, but include silences, sounds, gestures, among others.

Cast adrift from their social moorings, individuals must discover their boundaries, either physically--in the Congo--or ontologically: they must create their own versions of reality. Pater calls this creating an idiosyncratic language:

> The writer is vindicating his liberty in the making of a vocabulary, an entire system of composition, for himself, his own <u>true</u> manner . . . . in search of an instrument for the adequate expression of his peculiar sense of the world, he begets a vocabulary faithful to the colouring of his own spirit, and in the strictest sense original. (qtd in Keefe 134)

Marlow, then, must find a way to express the haze of reality in a way his auditors will comprehend. Though he uses words they know, he does not head right for the "kernel," but stays on the "outside," satisfied with "inconclusive experiences"

(51). Even Kurtz, who eventually speaks his own isolating, isolated pronouncement, is proficient at using communal language. The postscript added later to his "pamphlet" and then "apparently forgotten" (118) appears to be his own language, but instead shows Kurtz understands the real language, the intended message of the ivory-hunting entrepreneurs who employ him and the "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" which commissioned the report. He knows how to speak their public language, but he can also speak their covert message in a different language or hand: the postscript, "scrawled . . . in an uneasy hand," contrasts even in appearance with the carefully penned pages of the pamphlet. It would seem that he has transcended his own injunction to always "take care of the motives--right motives--always" (148), and instead is unmasking the Europeans' underlying assumptions. The language is not Kurtz's own because he is not yet seeking "liberty," in Pater's terms, from his social origins. Marlow at this point does not perceive the paradox inherent in all those whom, like Kurtz, Europe had "contributed to the making of" (117). His European language voices a European identity. Kurtz's vocabulary is original only in his dying pronouncement which acknowledges his release from all social structures, leading to the ultimate silence.

Admitting that no kernel of truth exists means seeking

meaning in process, a process such as telling a tale or "pronounc[ing] a judgment" (150). Kurtz had not always cut himself from everything and everyone: for a time, he had "wanted an audience" and had persuaded the Harlequin to listen to him talk "of everything" (127). Marlow himself recognizes his need to communicate his experiences in order to interpret them. He complains that his isolation from the crew and the other passengers on the ship to Africa "seemed to keep me away from the truth of things" (61). Bakhtin's notion that meaning only comes in dialogic process is pertinent here: Marlow feels he is unable, and certainly is unwilling to ascribe meaning alone, without confirmation from the others. Yet he is forced to acknowledge that the world he perceives and the world others perceive are not necessarily identical, and that language can help reveal that difference. How is he to reconcile his understanding of the military purpose of shelling raids with the man-of-war shelling the empty bush? The insanity is "not dissipated by somebody on board assuring me earnestly there was a camp of natives--he called them enemies!--hidden out of sight somewhere" (62). What is to his ears a misnomer reveals rival interpretations of reality. Not long afterwards at the Company's station, he hears an explosion, as workers try to eliminate a cliff that "was not in the way or anything," that is apparently "objectless blasting" (64). As he tries to make sense of a chained parade of

starved Africans being used as human packhorses, no words of explanation come to mind. It is sounds, the sounds of "objectless blasting," that help him come to an understanding:

> Another report from the cliff made me think suddenly of that ship of war I had seen firing into the continent. It was the same kind of ominous voice; but these men could by no stretch of imagination be called enemies. They were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea. (64)

Marlow calls what he hears a "voice," not simply a sound, to acknowledge that it implies a judgment, one which he does not endorse. To the natives no explanation from the Europeans would seem plausible or acceptable; this is more than simple cultural pluralism. By the time he has travelled to Kurtz's station, Marlow is closer to solving that "insoluble mystery." When the Harlequin points out the heads of "rebels" surrounding Kurtz's hut, Marlow "shocked him excessively by laughing. Rebels! What would be the next definition I was to hear? They had been enemies, criminals, workers--and these were rebels" (132). Again, he is doing more than recounting his adventure: he is commenting on the way language shapes his experience. His awareness of the function of language increases the more he is astounded at words representing different realities. Earlier, for example, Marlow overhears the station manager and his uncle denigrating an "English half-caste clerk" who had accompanied Kurtz with the ivory downstream before Kurtz turned around, sending the man on. Marlow remarks on the

irony that this man, who as far as he could tell "had conducted a difficult trip with great prudence and pluck, was invariably alluded to as 'that scoundrel'" (90). By this time, however, such contradictions seem to Marlow a natural component of language.

Newly aware that his understanding derives from language, not from his experiences, Marlow suspects that the sounds he hears, of both the wilderness and the natives, contain meanings to decipher. Most Europeans would only hear "a violent babble of uncouth sounds" when carriers arrive at the station, all speaking together (69).[7] Nothing of the carriers' meaning is perceived by the chief agent or chief accountant, or the sick agent lying in the accountant's office, although the latter at least has a physical excuse of not hearing. Marlow, "startled," asks about him: "What! Dead?" and the accountant answers merely, "No, not yet" (69). But he is wrong. In a sense, all these agents are dead to the human communication employed by the natives. Even Marlow still has trouble remembering that neither his language, nor the world view it speaks, is shared by the Africans. When his carriers protest having to carry a sick, overweight white man, Marlow lectures them: "I made a speech in English with gestures, not one of which was lost to the sixty pairs of eyes before me" (71). Nevertheless, the speech has no impact, because he is not speaking the natives' language, literally or

figuratively.

But Marlow now begins to expect meaning in the sounds and silences he formerly would have ignored. Walking towards the inner station, he hears "a great silence around and above" and occasionally "the tremor of far-off drums . . . perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country" (71). Later, as they steam toward Kurtz's station, Marlow can't tell whether the drum rolls mean "war, peace, or prayer" (95). Unused to attending to aural perceptions, to considering the semiotics of aurality, he is undergoing the ultimate foreign experience, being "cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings" (96). As long as he relies on language, he will remain cut off.

The range of epistemological signs, then, has been expanded to include what he can hear. In the aftermath of the fire, "the silence of the land went home to one's very heart" (80). Struck by the "amazing reality of its concealed life," the way it radiates a truth just beyond comprehension, Marlow is unnerved that the natives are "so silent, so quiet." Moreover, the bush resists easy interpretation:

> There was no sign on the face of nature of this amazing tale that was not so much told as suggested to me in desolate exclamations, completed by shrugs, in interrupted phrases, in hints ending in deep sighs. The woods were unmoved, like a mask. . . . they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, of unapproachable silence (129).

The natives and the bush speak a language not unknown by

Marlow, simply unnoticed. Paradoxically, even silence has a voice. As in "Outpost" and The Nigger, the volume of a remark, the grunts and groans, or here the shrugs and sighs communicate as easily as words--perhaps even more easily. These previously marginalized signs join the drama of semiotics as major, rather than minor characters. The bush reminds Marlow of the past he is beginning to feel connected to, the memories of another reality. Occasionally, "one's past came back to one . . . in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence" (93). In such a progression, silence becomes a presence, not an absence that is known, not foreign; contemporary, not ancient. The silence, the indifference, and the "vengeful aspect" (93) of all of nature to mankind appall Marlow, but he is also distracted by his fledgling attempts to interpret reality with new parameters. Like a blind person first encountering Braille, he struggles to learn the language of the bush: "I had to keep guessing at the channel; I had to discern, mostly by inspiration, the signs of the hidden banks" (93). He must transcend exclusively verbal meaning.

Marlow never goes as far as Kurtz, however, in abandoning his own language or his European assumptions, and in succumbing to the influence of the wilderness. Barely able to crawl toward the native camp, Kurtz is silent, although "there was

still plenty of vigor in his voice" (143). His willing bondage to the wilderness taunts Marlow to reclaim him for civilization. Marlow feels compelled to use verbal persuasion; physical control, although easy enough in Kurtz's state, would not conform to Marlow's European morality. Communicating is difficult because Kurtz has released himself from all constraints Marlow knows, from "anything high or low." The actual words Marlow tries are "common everyday words--the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, or phrases spoken in nightmares" (144). Words released from their constraints can be heard in dreams and nightmares, but will they communicate in the "everyday" world? Only with difficulty. Because Kurtz's is no everyday world, these dissociated words have increased force. The sounds of such words, however, will not communicate to a listener who does not share his assumptions about the world.

Speech must be tried, but the inadequacies of language remain. Said has asserted that language helps maintain lies and encourages a false understanding of life. Extended, this propensity of language becomes a paralysing invitation to silence (Said 86). Language encourages satisfaction with social interdependence; silence reinforces belief in a completed unity with eternal natural forces. Both undermine

the necessary confrontation with individual, isolated mortality. As we have seen, neither Wait's nor Singleton's approaches allow an easy acceptance of mortality. Only rarely does an individual perceive that ultimate requirement, beyond language or silence, beyond action or striving. Marlow relates one such "flash of insight" as his postponed meeting with Kurtz still looms in the future and he wonders about whether he'll be able to talk

> openly with Kurtz; but before I could come to any conclusion it occurred to me that my speech or silence, indeed any action of mine, would be a mere futility. What did it matter what anyone knew or ignored?. . . The essentials of this affair lay deep under the surface, beyond my reach and beyond my power of meddling. (100)

Marlow has finally learned to equate language and silence with action. Yet just as no language may be adequate, no action may suffice. There are times when no active, direct approach will lead to the heart of life's truth. Humans may perceive the outward manifestation, but the essence, even as it controls them, is beyond their grasp: "the inner truth is hidden" (93), Marlow acknowledges gratefully. To Graham, Conrad writes, "Life knows us not and we do not know life" (Watts 65). Worse than that, life is "beyond [our] power of meddling." Conrad's now-famous analogy to a knitting machine reveals his pessimism: "It is a tragic accident--and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it."

(Gene-Aubry 216). No action, no word can now unearth a stable meaning.

Resisting the modern responsibility for creating meaning, Marlow still favors the natural world over the constructed and often malevolent world of humankind. As the "first class agent . . . this paper-mache Mephistopheles" talks on and on, Marlow looks into the forest and at the river which "flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself. . . . Could we handle that dumb thing, or would it handle us?" (81). In addition to the language of power, Marlow succumbs to the logical fallacies that someone must be victor and that human language must oppose silence. The first fallacy displays the typical chauvinism of the nineteenth century male and European. The second reveals the discomfort in a changing philosophy of language. What is clear is the power in silence. Rather than language or silence pointing the direct path to comprehension, Conrad suggests a more oblique approach in his art, using impressionistic techniques, multiple narrators, and disjointed time sequences. Many critics have examined these and other techniques, which are outside the focus of this chapter, but they interest me because of what they suggest about communication. Marlow believes it more than difficult to communicate what matters:

> he was silent for a while.
> ". . . No, it is impossible; it is impossible

> to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence--that which makes its truth, its meaning--its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream--alone . . . ." (82, ellipses Conrad's)

The only escape may be to render impressions, mirroring the "general effect life makes on mankind," as Ford Madox Ford claimed for his collaboration with Conrad (qtd in MacShane 72-73). Even if impressions are the only approach to truth, they generate their own difficulties, as Todd Bender explains:

> The impression of the perceiving mind is quite distinct from the phenomenon stimulating the impression, and although impressions may be the only source of human knowledge, the perceiving intelligence in recognizing the stimulus, apprehends it in terms formulated by the mind itself. . . . Moreover, if there is no direct correspondence between impressions and the world exterior to the mind, there can be no proof that the impressions of one mind correspond to those of any other when faced with the same stimuli. As Walter Pater says in the "Conclusion" to The Renaissance, "the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind." (222)

Impressions are not only entirely idiosyncratic, they may have nothing in common with either the external source of the impression or with others' impressions.

If our dreams and our lives are so separate, how can we communicate at all? We use "common, everyday words," but they only lead to dreamlike feelings. How can we be sure we understand ourselves, with nothing for comparison? The impressions of a single mind carry no intrinsic value or probability of perceived truth. This is what Marlow likes in work, "the chance to find yourself. Your own reality--for

yourself, not for others--what no other man can ever know. They can only see the mere show, and never can tell what it really means" (85). Marlow distinguishes between the reality an individual can learn about himself, in action, in process, and the reality the uninitiated--read, pre-modern--believe is real. Anxiety about our uncertain apprehension of the truth, and doubts that impressions of the truth can be verified by others, form part of Kurtz's "horror." The existence of this "horror" is confirmed, ironically, by its inability to be communicated. Language is suspect and finally judged inadequate since it is based on shared assumptions that contradict the uneasy, but firm, individual perception of an untenable truth. As Conrad wrote to Graham in January, 1898, "there is no morality, no knowledge, and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that . . . is always but a vain and fleeting appearance" (Watts 71).

Despite this broad indictment of language, of sharable truth, Marlow still values Kurtz's pronouncement over silence. Marlow regrets his own lack of assertive knowledge and grasp of life. Unlike Kurtz, when Marlow approaches death, he assumes he cannot fathom the purpose of life. He laments: "I was within a hair's breath of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say" (150). Has he forgotten so soon

the mute eloquence of the jungle and river? Could not his silence constitute a pronouncement about life, "that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (150), as he describes it. Kurtz, on the other hand, the voice, the fellow struggling knowledge-seeker, "had something to say. He said it . . . He had summed up--he had judged" (151). Even his conviction of "the horror" has value in its passion and particularity: "It had the appalling force of glimpsed truth" (151). Contrast the agents' silence or Wait's more selfish recognition of his own mortality. We cannot miss Marlow's comparative praise: "I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry--much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory" (151). Despite this wistful approval, Marlow has inadequately explained his own inability to speak. Surely the "mysterious arrangement" of meaning could not possibly be "summed up."

If Kurtz is "very little more than a voice" (115), there is power enough in Kurtz's words. At the prospect of being too late to see Kurtz alive, Marlow realizes that what he had been anticipating was "a talk with Kurtz. . . . The man presented himself as a voice. Not of course that I did not connect him with some sort of action" (113). But that action, wresting ivory from the bush and its natives, is due to "his ability to talk, his words, the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most

contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness" (113). These contradictory assessments suggest that what is admirable in his talk is precisely the attempt to flex language to meet the untenable flux of life. Even Kurtz's written words, "right motives" and all, impress Marlow: he says of Kurtz's pamphlet, "It made me tingle with enthusiasm. This was the unbounded power of eloquence--of words--of burning noble words" (118). The Intended, too, affirms his power with words: "Who was not his friend who had heard him speak once?" she asks, adding "But you have heard him! You know!" (159). Yet even when that eloquence reveals a sordid message, Marlow admires the courage, the effort. Finally on board and underway, "Kurtz discoursed. A voice! a voice! . . . It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart" (147). Marlow suspends judgment of the message long enough to admire the active attempt to make language one's own.

Kurtz's is not the only significant voice in the novel. Marlow himself is referred to by the frame narrator as "no more to us than a voice" (83), as those aboard the Nellie enjoy the enveloping darkness. This disparaging attitude contrasts sharply with the value Marlow assigns speech, confirming how far Marlow has come. Responding to heckling from his companions on the Thames about suspecting meaning in

the natives' wild and passionate uproar, Marlow also acknowledges the power in his speech: "An appeal to me in this fiendish row--is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced" (97). This curious assertion sounds at once political and religious, suggesting a radical transformation in Marlow's belief in and need for language.

The Intended's own need to speak underscores her concern that in his last moments, Kurtz had been alone, without anyone to hear his discoursing. Her anxiety stems perhaps from the common belief, held formerly by both Marlow and Kurtz, that experience is understood only through language and only with an audience. Rather than her words, however, it is primarily the sound of the Intended's voice that forces Marlow to pronounce his infamous lie, because its special quality connects it to the truth he has been seeking:

> The sound of her low voice seemed to have the accompaniment of all the other sounds, full of mystery, desolation, and sorrow, I had ever heard--the ripple of the river, the soughing of the trees swayed by the wind, the murmurs of the crowds, the faint ring of incomprehensible words cried from afar, the whisper of a voice speaking from beyond the threshold of an eternal darkness. (159)

Marlow, too, needs to speak: Marlow's words and Kurtz's are preserved in the very act of narrating them to the Nellie group.

Marlow's doubts about Kurtz's pronouncement stem from the polyvalent allure of its inscrutability: it seems to have

found a means to say the unsayable. Doubts also accrue because of the paradox of public language describing such an intensely private, insulated vision. "His was an impenetrable darkness" (149), but he struggled to make language express his ideas, convictions, and glimpses of truth. He kneaded the constricting concepts of life, language and community until they became malleable and responsive to his individuality. His perception did not admit of a reconciliation; he took his stand, committing himself eternally by his utterances, rendering a judgment by the art of his words. Even among the evasions and submissions Marlow makes to the Intended, he does not lie about Kurtz when he says "his words will remain" (160). The semiological search for an epistemological stance has been expanded beyond words, but their power, as we will see in the next chapter on Lord Jim, remains.

CHAPTER 3

"DWARFED IN THE TELLING": THE "DIM STILLNESS" IN LORD JIM

> There is a weird power in a spoken word. (174)
>
> Words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge. (313)
>
> Certain silences [are] more lucid than speeches. (304)

According to Frederick Karl, "Conrad saw human behavior in terms of the individual's commitment to certain absolutes, certain givens, and if these fundamentals are breached, then such acts are self-destructive" (28). Conrad explores in Lord Jim just what happens to a man who severs his ties to the absolutes that have formed him. A related problem is how to communicate a world outside of these verities. Once it becomes clear (or relatively clear--nothing in Conrad's world escapes the mist, the chiaroscuro) that values and words of the community do not correspond to the perceptions of the individual, the question becomes one of how to express these new tenuous truths.

As in Heart of Darkness, this novel moves from a nine-

teenth-century vision of the match between word and world to a modernist freedom from this absolute connection. Marlow begins with a view directly descended from early nineteenth-century rhetoricians: that, in the words of Janet Emig, "language needs to be a clear medium so that the reader or hearer can clearly 'see' the thought of the communicator" (6). This approach assumes that there is something clear to see, an assumption Marlow begins to doubt. His initial anxiety that he cannot find the exact words to define Jim clearly to his listeners transforms into the suspicion that no words exist to match the various, ambiguous, and contradictory truths of Jim's experiences.

Conrad, of course, was not the only writer investigating the disjointed, fragmented world at the end of the nineteenth century. John Lester summarizes the increasing discomfort with this problem in his book, Journey Through Despair 1880-1914: "To know that there is an eternal truth consonant to man's being, and to know that man is gifted with a faculty capable of perceiving at least a glimmer of that truth--these were the necessary axioms, and both were, or appeared to be, substantially demolished in the years between 1880 and 1914" (qtd in White 67). If, as George Steiner claims, the "break of the covenant between word and world . . . defines modernity itself" (93), then Conrad belongs unquestionably to this uncomfortable modernist world.

In Lord Jim this discomfort reveals itself in the repeated sensual images of muffled sounds and chiaroscuro. The "dim stillness" that bonds the indistinct perception of both sights and sounds repeats like a refrain the inability to perceive accurately or to communicate with any assurance of precision. Like a playwright or a director inventing a motif that incarnates the play's essence, Conrad repeats this image to remind us of the instability of perception and communication. As Marlow becomes more aware of how language works or does not work, he is left doubting the existence of the reality he had previously known. In Patrick Whitely's words,

> If the truth of an experience is in the narration of its appearances, then language takes on a different role in Conrad. As the mind looks in upon itself in order to discover the truth of its sensations, language begins to lose its referentiality. . . . This characteristic of his language has a connection with the wider problem of appearances and reality. (qtd in White 34)

Not only has Marlow lost any assurance he had in his ability to find the right word, but the very stability of reality is loosened as well.

Jim and Marlow begin the novel believing in a concept of the self prior to, outside of language. Jim has formed a single vision of himself, urged by his preacher father who recognizes only a single correct way of responding to anything, beyond which all is lost. In his father's view, "there is only one faith, one conceivable conduct of life, one manner of dying" (341). Jim has further developed this idea of

himself from romantic novels. He "live[d] in his mind the sea-life of light literature" (6) and, no doubt, tales of the sea that emphasized daring deeds--types of fairy tales. His excitement about going to Patusan with Stein's silver ring as a token for meeting Doramin is intensified because, as he observes, "It's like something you read of in books" (233-34). For similar reasons, Jim admires Doramin and his wife, and his son, Dain Waris because "they are like people in a book, aren't they?" (260). Ironically, the ideas about himself that he thought were idiosyncratic and private instead derive from the public language of novels. The linguistic text reflects the text of the community. Thus in Jim's initial self-concept, the private collapses into the public so that there is no separate self. He must acknowledge that abandoning the Patna means admitting that the self does not coincide with the public notions, and therefore does not exist. His quest becomes, then, the creation of a coherent self outside the requirements of civilized society.

Jim's effort at recalling the "facts" of the Patna affair are like Conrad's own "sincere endeavor" articulated in the Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (xiii): Jim feels that "only a meticulous precision of statement would bring out the true horror behind the appalling face of things" (30). He has to do more than simply recall the sense impressions of the occurrence, for it was these things that "made a whole that

had features, shades of expression, a complicated aspect" (30-31). He clings still to his belief that there is a whole to express. There is a "true horror" to be gotten at beyond the perceptions of the eye or the ear, and somehow he must find the public words to express it. But his private truth and the public one are not the same:

> He wanted to go on talking for truth's sake, perhaps for his own sake also; and while his utterance was deliberate, his mind positively flew round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off for the rest of his kind. . . . This awful activity of mind made him hesitate at times in his speech . . . ." (31, last ellipses Conrad's).

In fact, while on the witness stand Jim "doubted whether he would ever again speak out as long as he lived. The sound of his own truthful statements confirmed his deliberate opinion that speech was of no use to him any longer" (20-21). The suggestion here is that language only works when the private and public visions at least coordinate, an occurrence that seems less and less likely. Like Gradgrind in Dickens' Hard Times, Jim has believed the essentializing creed that "facts, facts, facts" are the way to get to the truth. The paradox of language evident in earlier works emerges: language seems to be the only way to truth, but it also obscures what it attempts to reveal.

The corollary is that glib speech, or at least easy-flowing words, come when the mind is not actively engaged in what is being said, when the speech is more or less automatic.

Eloquence does not carry the exclusive, positive values we might expect. Instead, discomfort is a crucial first sign for recognizing the dissonance between the word and what is meant. When Marlow visits Jim in Patusan, he concedes that "he was not eloquent, but there was deep meaning in the words that followed" (246). Even awkward speech is valuable if it exhibits this "deep meaning." Marlow repeats his assertion:

> He was not eloquent, but there was a dignity in this constitutional reticence, there was a high seriousness in his stammerings. . . . Now and then, though, a word, a sentence, would escape him that showed how deeply, how solemnly, he felt about that work which had given him the certitude of rehabilitation. (248)

It is interesting to note that he still believes in "certitudes" that can be discussed in language, fragmented though it may be. Awkwardly expressed meaning overrides empty eloquence. This "deep meaning" is reminiscent of Kurtz's efforts to make language his own. Jim stammers because his is an effort at personal expression, not the easy loquacious, public speech of a Donkin. Naively, Jim is proud of his rhetorical abilities with Doramin and his followers: "He remembered with pleasure how very eloquent and persuasive he had been" (295). He has not yet acknowledged that language alone cannot communicate.

The first and major casualty of this quest for a coherent self becomes coherence itself: things are not all clear, all light or dark; they are misty, half-seen, shapes and shadows.

Neither are things clearly heard, but rather whispered, barely made out, grasped only by the tone, sounds just louder than silence. The doubts that this awareness raises about reality spill back into his self conception and his belief in communication. His initial faith is strong enough, however, to prevent his following Brierly's fate. Brierly, who seems so convinced of his understanding of absolutes and of his superiority, questions Jim and "was probably holding silent inquiry into his own case. The verdict must have been of unmitigated guilt" as he commits suicide afterwards (58).

Brierly's silent, private discourse is paralleled by Jim's own efforts to understand his actions out of context. Something in Jim's tone when he discusses his rescue after jumping from the Patna makes Marlow feel that he is "at work trying to explain it away" to himself (82). Apparently, he has been unable to do this without audible words. "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" People believe they need an occasion, complete with time and place, to unravel their thoughts. As Wittgenstein observes, "an intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions" (108). Seeking meaning outside the realm of language is laborious, but the secret will be revealed that all meaning is constrained by time and place. Later, in court, as Jim is trying to tell the "truth of this experience," he is conscious of his voice to which everyone seems

to be listening, as if "enslaved by the fascination of his voice. It was very loud, it rang startling in his own ears, it was the only sound audible in the world" (28). This would sound odd to him, as he had not been talking with anyone but himself: "For days, for many days, he had spoken to no one, but had held silent, incoherent, and endless converse with himself" (33). Of course it is "incoherent": no coherent version of reality exists to be expressed. Again the suggestion is that to express individual realities, a private language--a silent language--works better than the public one. We will see in Nostromo these ideas about single conceptions of self, need for a language to reveal the truth of one's existence, reputations, and so on, explored further.

Jim does not doubt that his statements contain truth, but he does suspect the difficulty in persuading others to believe. In Patusan, the opposite situation prevails. Here, the natives trust him completely; the trust "his bare word. . . . they had got into the habit of taking his word for anything and everything" (268). However, complete trust, desirable as it sounds, entails its own complications. Trying to decide whether an old villager should divorce his wife, Jim seems surprised to discover that "the trouble was to get at the truth of anything. . . . His word decided everything. . . . An awful responsibility" (269). Like Marlow, Jim recognizes the power of words and his inability to shape them to

fit the quicksand of reality. Truth is unstable: the truth according to the villagers clashes with that of the old man, his wife, and any truth Jim might decide. If truth can be decided, then its absolute nature is undermined.

Marlow finds some appeal in challenging a single vision or version of reality. His interest in Jim emerges because Jim was "hop[ing] for the impossible . . . the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (50). Part of the fascination in Jim's story--probably for all of us--is that after his jump he is charting his own moral waters, suggesting that private versions or understandings can substitute adequately for public accepted codes of conduct. Yet at the end of the novel, after Jim is shot by Doramin and wordlessly, "with his hand over his lips [falls] forward, dead" (416), Marlow casts doubt on whether Jim has learned anything. Unable or unwilling to make a final statement, Jim dies silent but certain, so unlike Kurtz who dies speaking his perception of the private and public "horror." Marlow reports that Jim has rejected Jewels's acceptance and has gone "away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct" (416). He has not found his own way of creating values, but is still bound to the versions of certain others with whom he shares a cultural, if dead bond. The ideal may now be "shadowy" and no longer clear, as he had first believed, but it still controls Jim's life.

Marlow finds another way of saying this when he claims that Jim always "appeared . . . symbolic. Perhaps that is the real cause of my interest in his fate" (265). To have a meaning beyond oneself, to be symbolic, suggests a sayable, public finality, a challenge to private meaning. His symbolic meaning, however, is meaning for Marlow and thus not necessarily public or communicable to any other person. Perhaps what Marlow seeks, then, is a dialogue between private and public versions of the self. The stability of the subject is challenged in this dialogic process.

One of Jim's tasks seems to be to learn "what to think of" things, in particular of the loud, tumultuous "menace of wind and sea" (9). Conrad emphasizes this assignment by repeating these two phrases twice in as many pages. Significantly, Marlow uses the same imagery as he tries to decide how to judge Jim who is fighting with himself in Marlow's room the night after the sentencing. Although "there was complete silence and stillness in the room, I suffered from that profound disturbance and confusion of thought which is caused by a violent and menacing uproar--of a heavy gale at sea, for instance" (172). Despite his initial disappointment at not actively participating, Jim believes he does not need to have had the experience of trying to rescue the cutter in the collision. "He had enlarged his knowledge more than those who had done the work" (9). Nor does he feel he needs language:

he stands outside of the "noisy crowd of boys" who return from the rescue mission in order to contemplate his certain courage. While the others can discuss their actions and consequences, his silence speaks only to his imagination and conviction, private experiences that need no words, indeed that cannot be spoken.

But later, after the Patna disaster, he is very much in need of language. He fairly desperately needs to tell Marlow his version--or try to--just as Razumov will require in Under Western Eyes. Razumov, in fact, will echo Jim's plea: "I would like somebody to understand--somebody--one person at least! You! Why not you?" (81). After their dinner, thanking Marlow for listening to him, Jim stammers, "You don't know what it is to me. You don't . . . " and then, Marlow notes, "words seemed to fail him" (128). Jim is so careful with his words that he often cannot find the ones he needs. Jim himself, the next evening in Marlow's room, acknowledges the importance of talking and the problems inherent in finding the right word. "'You don't mind me not saying anything appropriate,' he burst out. 'There isn't anything one could say. Last night already you had done me no end of good. Listening to me--you know'" (185). He even admits, at first hesitantly, how important discussing the affair is: "I did not want all this talk. . . . No . . . Yes . . . I won't lie . . . I wanted it: it is the very thing I wanted--there (132,

Conrad's ellipses). He needs language in a context, interlocution, to make sense of his experience. Yet even when Jim is shamed into silence for a moment on the veranda, Marlow is relieved to announce that "he could no more stop telling now than he could have stopped living by the mere exertion of his will" (100). Later Marlow is reminded of this night and again associates Jim's "confessing, explaining" with his "living--living before me" (235). To live is to speak; to speak is to live. It is not only the sympathetic Jim who needs to try to tell his version; the despicable Gentleman Brown seems very anxious that Marlow not depart, "leaving him with his tale untold, with his exaltation unexpressed" (345).

One of the values of public language, then, is that it rescues experience from solipsistic isolation. Despite Marlow's nearly defensive stance regarding his interest in Jim's story, it is clear that the telling of this tale shares the billing with the tale itself. Marlow suggests that he is afraid that Patusan and Jim's experiences might "pass out of existence" if they weren't made discernible by his words: "perhaps it is that feeling which has incited me to tell you the story, to try to hand over to you, as it were, its very existence, its reality--the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion" (323). A transformation has occurred: here he acknowledges that the truth only exists in the telling; there is no a priori truth to be gotten at, but a "moment of

illusion" revealed in the telling. Jim moves from certainty about a whole and guiding reality, through attempts to create his own values and words for the world, to a final return to an externally-based reality. Marlow also awakens to the mismatch between word and world, followed by a recognition that no single reality exists, but here he parts with Jim and resides with a final belief that reality exists only in context, in the eyes and ears of the beholder. If Marlow and the reader are disquieted by the fact that Jim has not learned any final truth, this seems in the end appropriate: Jim seems to have given in to an external truth, while we have acknowledged that there is nothing final to learn, just as there is no final word to express it. These are the concerns and the conflicts of the modernist sensibility. In Irving Howe's words, modernism "keeps approaching--sometimes even penetrating--the limits of solipsism, the view expressed by the German poet Gottfried Benn when he writes that 'there is no outer reality, there is only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds out of its own creativity'" (qtd. in Howe 15).

Indeed, when Marlow ends his narrative of Jim, his listeners have no comment, but drift away: there is no single truth that they all have received; instead, they have learned separate truths: "Each of them seemed to carry away his own impression, to carry it away with him like a secret" (337).

The unnamed listener later reads in Marlow's packet that Jim had no final message for Marlow to deliver to his family. "That was all then--and there will be nothing more; there shall be no message, unless such as each of us can interpret for himself from the language of facts, that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words" (340). No matter how well a speaker chooses his words, no final word, meaning, or truth will emerge to be communicated.

Reality is tenuous because it is always only one person's version of something larger, ineffable, inconceivable. Marlow admits to the unnamed listener that the variant he has constructed would not be the same as Jim's, which would include

> his careless yet feeling voice, with his offhand manner, a little puzzled, a little bothered, a little hurt, but now and then by a word or a phrase giving one of those glimpses of his very own self that were never any good for purposes of orientation. (343)

Matching versions of reality with language requires including the context: the time and place, the mood and tone of both the speaker and perceiver. Even Marlow is uncomfortable at having to face Jim's new versions of reality, and is typically distressed about his ability to express it.

> I can't explain to you who haven't seen him and who hear his words only at second hand the mixed nature of my feelings. It seems to me I was being made to comprehend the Inconceivable--and I know nothing to compare with the discomfort of such a sensation. I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of false-

hood. (93)

Marlow claims this experience affects him, as it surely did Brierly, "as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself" (93), which has been rigid and languagebound. Reticent, as always, about pronouncing on the meaning of an event, Marlow nonetheless addresses the extraordinary significance of this revelation and hints at exactly the problem suggested by Jim's jump and his efforts to understand it. If the rigid conception of self is the only one that has been allowed or imagined, and it shatters, then that self will flounder. Unmoored, we drift. Jim, fortunately, has the protective Marlow to help ground him again and again, but later Conradian heroes, notably Decoud and Razumov, are not so lucky. Why is falsehood more sincere than truth? Apparently because it does not automatically follow conventional explanations, but instead creates its own individual version.

If no single reality exists, shared by all, then of course one's perceptions are difficult to explain. Marlow is not the only one who is challenged by describing Jim clearly. Despite Cornelius' attempts to paint Jim in the most lurid light, Brown "could not make out clearly what sort of man this Jim could be. 'What's his name? Jim! Jim! That's not enough for a man's name'" (367). Enough for whom? Certainly it removes him from the public convention by which a last name

would connect him with a family, if not a nationality. But there are other, less rigid reasons for naming. One of the most significant naming events in Conrad is Jim's naming of Jewel, whose metaphorical name, ironically, is taken literally by neighboring fortune seekers. Jim's ability to name "the girl," as Marlow calls her throughout the novel, has to do with location and change of culture: Marlow declares that at some distance from organized, civilized communication, "the haggard utilitarian lies of our civilization wither and die, to be replaced by the pure exercises of imagination, that have the futility, often the charm, and sometimes the deep hidden truthfulness, of works of art" (282). It appears that civilization, among its other evils, stifles works of creativity. Art, creatively uncivilized, reveals extra-lingual truths as well.

Yet language can not only reveal, but can create truths. When Brierly accosts Marlow about his role: "You call yourself a seaman, I suppose?" Marlow tells his listeners, "I said that's what I called myself and I hoped I was too." For Brierly, the name is a precise prescription for action. He tells Marlow, "all you fellows have no sense of dignity; you don't think enough of what you are supposed to be" (67). A name confers upon the named an established set of actions and attitudes, and woe be to those who do not observe the rules. Thus Jim's jump involves an escape from the guidelines of the

ethical seaman, a "breach" of the absolutes to which he had subscribed.

Naming can also be very important because of its relationship to reputation, a concept typically taken as stable, but instead, like all of reality, ever-changing. When Jim gets in a brawl with a man who insults him, Marlow is afraid he will "lose his name of an inoffensive, if aggravating, fool, and acquire that of a common loafer. For all my confidence in him I could not help reflecting that in such cases from the name to the thing itself is but a step" (200). A magical power resides in a name, as if it confers on the named its characteristics. This helps explain Marlow's fear: if the self is so flexible, so unstable, that a single name can revise it, then, yes, great care must be taken to avoid undesirable reputations.

Even when the reputation is positive, its meaning still depends on context, the where and the how of its significance. Jim's reputation in Patusan differed categorically from a western, civilized fame:

> his fame, remember, was the greatest thing around for many a day's journey. You would have to paddle, pole, or track a long, weary way through the jungle before you passed beyond the reach of its voice. Its voice was not the trumpeting of the disreputable goddess we all know--not blatant--not brazen. It took its tone from the stillness and gloom of the land without a past, where his word was the one truth of every passing day. It shared something of the nature of that silence through which it accompanied you into unexplored depths, heard continuously by your side, penetrating, far-

> reaching--tinged with wonder and mystery on the lips of whispering men. (272)

Marlow explains the difficulty of accurately expressing this reputation whose instability is caused in large part by the change in context. The importance of immediate, rather than historical, reported or assumed context, links Conrad's novel with the modernist distaste for an historical continuum. Not only, as Georg Lukacs claims, does "modernism [despair] of human history," but as Howe asserts, "the modern world has lost the belief in a collective destiny" (qtd. in Howe 17, 34). With no common past or future, the present context is all humans can share or count on.

Context affects not only naming, the denominating function, but the descriptive, adjectival one as well. Marlow notes that the pepper traders who went to Patusan in the seventeenth century defended themselves differently than we do: we would agree that they were heroic, but we would also call them "pathetic" and "[obedient] to an inward voice" (226-27). This altered emphasis has to do with the changes in culture and era, where adventure for its own sake--or for material interests--is less important than adventure for morally approved reasons (although the irony here is thick for a twentieth-century reader!) Thus Jim cannot hope to find the self he expects outside of his foundation culture. The particulars of a situation may even add up logically to opposing conclusions: as Marlow notes in Patusan, all Jim's

"conquests, the trust, the fame, the friendships, the love--all these things that made him master had made him a captive, too" (247). Language reveals the instability of reality: words express judgments about the perception of reality, while in fact they make the world what it is for the speaker. As Wittgenstein puts it, "One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (48). There is no absolute nature to be discovered, but only a perception to be recognized, a point of view in a particular context to be acknowledged.

As the Marlow of Heart of Darkness discovered, the terms used for the natives revealed the attitudes of the speaker, and here, too, words have the power to unmask meaning. While Jim struggles silently with himself on Marlow's balcony, Marlow imagines the role he could play if he spoke:

> I had a sense of responsibility. If I spoke, would that motionless and suffering youth leap into the obscurity--clutch at the straw? I found out how difficult it may be sometimes to make a sound. There is a weird power in a spoken word. And why the devil not? . . . And a word carries far--very far--deals destruction through time as the bullets go flying through space. (174)

The "time" and "space" of a word's context contribute enormously to its meaning. Marlow's anxiety about the power of language continues when Jim is driven inside by the thunderstorm and subsequently leaves. Marlow admits that he, "who a moment ago had been so sure of the power of words, and now was

afraid to speak," was like one who "dares not move for fear of losing a slippery hold. . . . It was the fear of losing him that kept me silent . . ." (178-80). Jim is indeed slippery, in part because he does not yet understand his own motivation nor his self-created place in the world. Nonetheless, Marlow at this point still believes in the "power of words."

Jim's inconclusive attempt to create his own context for understanding in the refuge of Marlow's room is mirrored in the repeated image of flickering light in silence or near-silence. Marlow begins describing the "massive shadows" and "complete silence" of his room, a "dim stillness," as he terms it, an intriguing synesthesia, a mingling of the two primary senses (172-73). On the balcony, lit by flickers of candle-light, Jim's back is "faintly visible," and he is silent. The thunderstorm acts as a sort of objective correlative to Jim's interior struggle, glaring its light, blaring its sound:

> An abrupt, heavy rumble made me lift my head. The noise seemed to roll away, and suddenly a searching and violent glare fell on the blind face of the night. . . . The growl of the thunder increased steadily while I looked at him, distinct and black, planted solidly upon the shore of a sea of light. (177)

Even the leaking water-pipe echoes his distress, as "just outside the window a parody of blubbering woe with funny sobs and gurgling lamentations, interrupted by jerky spasms of silence . . . . (178, Conrad's ellipses). And all this is against the usual background of "dim stillness," the phrase

repeated again (181).

Marlow's sensitivity to tone, tags, syntax and rhetoric makes him aware of linguistic meaning beyond denotation. Language can create and display intimacy: The half-caste master of the boat taking Jim to Patusan has been yammering volubly, speaking a "flowing English [that] seemed to be derived from a dictionary compiled by a lunatic" (238).[8] As Marlow and Jim say their goodbyes, Marlow reflects that

> the absurd chatter of the half-caste had given more reality to the miserable dangers of his path than Stein's careful statements. On that occasion the sort of formality that had been always present in our intercourse vanished from our speech; I believe I called him "dear boy," and he tacked on the words "old man" to some half-uttered expression of gratitude. . . . There was a moment of real and profound intimacy, unexpected and short-lived like a glimpse of some everlasting, of some saving truth. (240-41)

The tongue-in-cheek irony apparent in similar scenes in "An Outpost of Progress" is gone; here Marlow seems genuinely struck by the emotional effect of patterned speech. The emotional reality is experienced only through its expression.

Not only contextual sounds, but the sounds of speech itself contribute to meaning. Jim defends himself against what he thinks is a slur by Marlow's companion, who has seen a "wretched cur," literally, a dog. As Jim speaks, Marlow attends to his tone: "I don't know what in these words, or perhaps just the intonation of that phrase, induced me suddenly to make all possible allowances for him" (72). However, it is not always easy to tell what tone means. When

Marlow and Jim dine together, Marlow observes that "he talked soberly, with a sort of composed unreserve, and with a quiet bearing that might have been the outcome of manly self-control, of impudence, of callousness, of a colossal unconsciousness, of a gigantic deception. Who can tell!" (78). Marlow tries to cover all the possibilities, but apparently tone does not always clarify. But Marlow works very hard to glean what is possible from the way Jim expresses himself. When Jim cries out about "a chance missed," Marlow must expand upon the words themselves to tell us that "the ring of the last 'missed' resembled a cry wrung out by pain" (83). To his hosts and listeners, Marlow protests, "I am missing innumerable shades--they were so fine, so difficult to render in colourless words" (94). This seems more than simple humility. Marlow observes both the complicated nature of the situation and the limitations of language. Marlow expects his listeners to be equally sensitive to his tone and the meaning beyond the words: explaining his hope that Jim would not be sentenced to execution by the court, Marlow admits he is not sure why, "but if you haven't got a sort of notion by this time, then I must have been very obscure in my narrative, or you too sleepy to seize upon the sense of my words" (152).

Communication often occurs almost in spite of language. After some attempts at reaching an understanding about the "cur" incident, Jim hurries away with Marlow in pursuit,

partly to ask if Jim is running away, partly to stammer something conciliatory: "The stupidity of the phrase appalled me while I was trying to finish it, but the power of sentences has nothing to do with their sense or the logic of their construction. My idiotic mumble seemed to please him" (75). Marlow is accustomed only to interpretation by means of language and at first seems unsettled by extra-lingual communication. When Marlow says something sympathetic, Jim grasps Marlow's hand and "glared fixedly. I <u>was</u> startled. 'It must be awfully hard,' I stammered, confused by this display of speechless feeling" (78). Marlow's hesitation in interpreting this silent communication of the glare and hand grasp, derives no doubt from his habitual attention to verbal communication. Yet he, too, reflects this confusion in extra-linguistic signs: like Jim, the sincerity of his response is evidenced in stammers, rather than in eloquence. Marlow is also sensitive to verbal silences: listening to Jim's attempts to explain his jump, Marlow admits that "these were things he could not explain to the court--and not even to me; but I would have been little fitted for the reception of his confidences had I not been able at times to understand the pauses between the words" (105). Speaking, then, creates a complex semiological system. The speed, including length of time between words, as well as the cadence, modulation, volume--all these must be considered in interpretation.

Attending only to diction will not lead to a complete understanding. Tone, as we have seen, is a powerful contributor to meaning. The emphasis on tone transforms the narrative into dialogues with stage directions, in order to access meaning. Using the language of the dramatist, Marlow describes Cornelius who complains to him "in very weak ejaculations, mingled with miserable plaints and groans, coming out with a heave of the shoulders as though he had been overtaken by a deadly fit of sickness. It was an inexpressibly grotesque and vile performance" (329). Similarly, it is tone that defines the scene when Jewel is describing her mother's death. She concludes, Marlow notes, "in an imperturbable monotone, which more than anything else. . . more than mere words could do, troubled my mind profoundly with the passive, irremediable horror of the scene" (313). Tone can establish meaning almost by itself. More and more frequently, Marlow focusses on tone rather than vocabulary, as a way of getting at Jewel's meaning. He describes her "barely audible intensity of tone," her "tone of doubt" (317), and when he finally tells her "brutally" that Jim is "not good enough," her response is measured by the change in her tone: "Without raising her voice, she threw into it an infinity of scathing contempt, bitterness, and despair" (318). Marlow and Jewel modulate their voices as they discuss Jim's qualities: "we subdued our tones to a mysterious pitch. . . . 'More brave,' she went on

in a changed tone" (314). The emphasis on tone is extended so that these stage directions replace dialogue as a way of explaining meaning. Although characters generally believe communicating is only possible and worthwhile with people with whom they share basic cultural assumptions, Marlow discovers what Jim must have intuited, that despite their differences in culture, Jewel shares understandings outside of language. Jewel asks Marlow about Jim's secret:

> 'Will it be a sign--a call?' . . . A sign, a call! How telling in its expression was her ignorance! A few words! How she came to know them, how she came to pronounce them, I can't imagine. Women find their inspiration in the stress of moments that for us are merely awful, absurd, or futile. To discover that she had a voice at all was enough to strike awe into the heart. Had a spurned stone cried out in pain it could not have appeared a greater and more pitiful miracle. (315)

More comfortable with her silences than with her verbal attempt at making sense of their discourse, the European Marlow substitutes gender differences for his criticism. Jewel initially has two strikes against her in Marlow's view: as a woman and a non-European, she cannot be expected to use the male form of control and power: language. Readers, of course, are not surprised that she understands that minimal verbal interaction is needed among those who share understandings.

Tone and additional sounds can, in some contexts, replace the need for communal speech. Jim and Jewel are superbly suited for each other, Marlow reports, in part because they

can communicate so well outside of language: "Their soft murmurs reached me, penetrating, tender, with a calm sad note in the stillness of the night, like a self-communion of one being carried on in two tones" (284).[9] The couple can communicate with no words at all, as well. After waking Jim one night in Cornelius' house, Jewel persuades him to become concerned about an attack on his life: "A sobbing catch of her breath affected him beyond the power of words" (299). Marlow perceives that words are not the only entity to have a "weird power": certain sounds and silences rival words as creators of meaning. After Jim has dispatched the men who had apparently come to murder him, he and Jewel share a long silent moment of great intensity:

> He did not tell me what it was he said when at last he recovered his voice. I don't suppose he could be very eloquent . . . there are moments when our souls, as if freed from their dark envelope, glow with an exquisite sensibility that makes certain silences more lucid than speeches. (304)

This reveals a change from Jim's earlier assumptions that, as on the Narcissus, silence indicates death, sounds life. Certain the Patna has sunk, the men in the lifeboat gaze silently at the fog, straining to hear the cries of the drowning pilgrims. At the time, Jim "became conscious of the silence. . . . A silence of the sea, of the sky merged into one indefinite immensity still as death around these saved, palpitating lives" (114). Marlow tells his listeners that Jim felt "annihilat[ed]" because of the lack of sights or sounds.

In contrast, when the others in the boat discover identity and yell at him hatefully, Jim ironically feels reconnected with life. "Yap! yap. Bow-ow-ow-ow-ow! Yap! yap! It was sweet to hear them; it kept me alive, I tell you. It saved my life. At it they went, as if trying to drive me overboard with the noise!" (118).

Among the natives of Patusan, however, silence reveals a new kind of strength and ability to communicate. Jewel watches Marlow and Jim talk, her eyes "fastened on our lips, as though each pronounced word had a visible shape" (283). The act of speaking creates a meaning to her unperceived by the speakers. She uses her own silence as a defense, too, to Cornelius' abusive words: "she would hold out full of scorn, confronting him in silence" (288). She also needs no words to register her doubt of Marlow's version of Jim's situation. "She listened without a word, and her stillness now was like the protest of an invincible unbelief" (317-18). Her silence supports the observation that language can only be effective where there are shared assumptions. Tamb' Itam also watches Jim like a guardian, "silent . . . without a sound" (284). In fact, he rarely talks, even to Jim. "Talking, he seemed to imply, was no business of his" (284). Perhaps talking to Jim means trying to bridge chasms of cultural assumptions. Perhaps, like Jewel, talking at all implies for him an additional layer of agreement these interdependent natives do

not need to express.

Near-silence describes Doramin's communications as well. He "was never known to raise his voice. It was a hoarse and powerful murmur, slightly veiled as if heard from a distance." Furthermore, his relationship with his wife was cloaked in this silence: "nobody, as far as I know, had ever heard them exchange a single word. When they sat in state by the wide opening it was in silence" (259-60). His son, Dain Waris, also had a "silent disposition" which revealed "to the Western eye, so often concerned with mere surfaces, the hidden possibilities of races and lands over which hangs the mystery of unrecorded ages" (262). By the novel's end Marlow himself has transformed his anxiety about silences into an acceptance. At their last meeting on the beach, he is startled to hear Jim's voice coming "out of the great silence of earth, sky, and sea, which had mastered my very thoughts" (335). Almost won over to the natives' less linguistic version of reality, Marlow understands he must attempt to integrate Jim's ever-European approach, while remaining aware of the impact of context.

Marlow has also learned that dialogue only works if there is shared experience. Marlow believes he and the French lieutenant have been discussing fear, courage and honor in oblique connection with Jim's case, when suddenly the French-man pronounces his summative dismissal of Jim, because, he

says, "when the honor is gone--ah ça! par exemple --I can offer no opinion . . . because--monsieur--I know nothing of it." Annoyed, Marlow anticipates the end of their dialogue. They now "faced each other mutely. . . . Hang the fellow! he had pricked the bubble. The blight of futility that lies in wait for men's speeches had fallen upon our conversation, and made it a thing of empty sounds" (148). Simply exchanging words does not assure that they will have any use for the speakers. Futile language, language with no use or effect, as Wittgenstein observes, loses its meaning (110). Theirs was no dialogic search for meaning; they retreated instead into static, monologic positions. Egstrom, perpetually scolded by Blake, would occasionally "emit a bothered perfunctory 'Sssh,' which neither produced nor was expected to produce the slightest effect" (191). This kind of automatic speech is anathema to Marlow.

Normally, speech seeks communal agreement on meaning of context, content, and implications of the conversation. Silence suggests the opposite: chaos, disagreement, stasis. As the few officers prepare to abandon the Patna, Jim recalls their joint sounds: "they wheezed, they shoved, they cursed the boat, the ship, each other--cursed me. All in mutters. I didn't move. I didn't speak" (92). His silence indicates his difference, that he is not part of the plan to leave the ship. As they struggle to free the life boat, certain that he

is not with them, they cease communicating with him: "They had given him up as if indeed he had been too far, too hopelessly separated from themselves, to be worth an appealing word, a glance, or a sign" (104). These basic assumptions about how and when communication succeeds include all of the trappings of order and European civilization. Jewel's description of her mother's death drives Marlow "out of [his] conception of existence," a tortoise-like shelter, he suggests:

> For a moment I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive. But still--it was only a moment: I went back into my shell directly. One must--don't you know?--though I seemed to have lost all my words in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale. These came back, too, very soon, for words also belong to the sheltering conception of light and order which is our refuge. (313)

Words, that is, create a safe view of the world, so safe that glimpses of the world of chaos that exists without language, that "dim stillness," are rare.

Conrad suggests that where language is the normal human communication, its loss indicates a loss of civilized behavior. At the end of the novel, Marlow describes Gentleman Brown and his fourteen men, holed up, waiting in silence: not only did they not talk to each other, but "round their position everything was still, dark, silent. They seemed to be forgotten . . .as if they had been dead already" (360).

When Cornelius is finally prevailed upon by Kassim to speak to Brown, the latter is "overjoyed. If he was spoken to he was no longer a hunted wild beast" (365). But of course, Brown and his men are not much better than animals: when they are leaving and Brown promises his men they will get a chance to shoot at the natives, "low growls answered that speech" (401). Marlow implies a similarity when he describes the more sympathetic Doramin making "gurgling, choking, inhuman sounds" that reveal his pain and anger, just before he shoots Jim for the death of his son, Dain Waris (415), but as we have already seen, the people of Patusan can communicate outside of language. After one of Brown's men shoots a villager to demonstrate their power, one of his men is shot in retaliation. A messenger, "in the sonorous inflated tone of a herald," announces the end of all communal bonds between them, by refusing any further communication: "there would be no faith, no compassion, no speech, no peace" (375). For the natives, any of these four syntactically equal terms are means of communicating; for the Europeans, only speech is acceptable.

Despite their power, words are not omnipotent. Sometimes there is behavior for which no word seems appropriate. Marlow is annoyed with Jim for abandoning his position with Egstrom and Blake. "'Oh! you--you--' I began, and had to cast about for a suitable word, but before I became aware that there was

no name that would just do, he was gone" (192). Similarly, Jewel stops Marlow, seeking something from him: "She wanted an assurance, a statement, a promise, an explanation--I don't know how to call it: the thing has no name" (307). This is as much an admission of the depth of complication as the it is of the inadequacy of language to communicate. When Marlow is trying to explain Jim's status in the world to the doubting Jewel, to reassure her, he still is frustrated by his inability to make the words work: "It was impossible to make her understand. I chafed silently at my impotence" (316).

Marlow is not alone in his frustration. He reports that as Jim tries to explain in writing the circumstances of Dain Waris' death, he must face the appearance of betrayal that he cannot explain in language. After a couple of attempts, he "gave it up. There's nothing more; he had seen a broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span. I can understand this. He was bvercome by the inexplicable" (341). Jim can find no words to communicate his situation. This inability, so familiar to Marlow, acquires a more universal applicability because it belongs to another meaning-seeker.

Marlow's task, like Conrad's which he announces in his 1917 Author's Note, is "to seek fit words for his meaning" (ix), a task he continually doubts he is fulfilling adequately. As we have seen, the assumption here is that meaning can be perceived outside of language: it is fixed, established,

ready to be expressed, but only the very good and careful communicator can express this meaning to others. In the course of the novel, Marlow learns that meaning is not out there, but is in the hearing (of tone, innuendo, expression), in the observation, in the telling. It is at Stein's that this belief in "absolute truth" begins to erode, punctuated, as if by a refrain, by the repeated collage of indistinct images and sounds. Marlow begins to abandon his need for absolute clarity in sight or sound or meaning. At Stein's, "the whisper of his conviction seemed to open before me a vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn--or was it, perchance, at the coming of the night?" (215). Later, as he and Stein make their way upstairs to bed, Marlow sees Jim's

> imperishable reality... vividly, as though in our progress through the lofty silent rooms amongst fleeting gleams of light and the sudden revelations of human figures stealing with flickering flames within unfathomable and pellucid depths, we had approached nearer to absolute Truth, which, like Beauty itself, floats elusive, obscure, halfsubmerged, in the silent still waters of mystery. (216).

To emphasize the image and the point, the next Chapter 21 begins with Marlow talking directly to his listeners: "'I don't suppose any of you had ever heard of Patusan?' Marlow resumed, after a silence occupied in the careful lighting of a cigar" (218). We see again the flickering light, hear the tentative statement emerge from the silence. Marlow connects

Jim with home, England, which somehow should have provided him the perspective to understand Jim. But, he claims, "I cannot say I had ever seen him distinctly--not even to this day, after I had my last view of him; but it seemed to me that the less I understood the more I was bound to him in the name of that doubt which is the inseparable part of our knowledge" (221). Marlow has changed from his initial view that the indistinct perception is caused by Jim himself or by Marlow's inadequacy. Knowledge, he would now say, is not the complete whole it is believed to be, but rather an intermittent grasp, full of holes and doubts, a veiled, muffled grasp of the situation to be perceived.

This linking of indistinct sights and sounds continues throughout the novel, noted earlier in the flickering lights and sounds meeting Jim on Marlow's balcony. As Jim sails off finally to Patusan, Marlow remembers "I heard an indistinct shout. . . . My eyes were too dazzled by the glitter of the sea below his feet to see him clearly; I am fated never to see him clearly" (241)--or to hear him clearly, for that matter! Marlow claims he doesn't know whether his last view of Jim was "still veiled," but he describes Jim as a "tiny, white speck that seemed to catch all the light left in the darkened world" (336).

In his attempts to describe Jim's reality, Marlow has felt pressured to find the precise, final word, although he

acknowledges that

> the last word is not said,--probably shall never be said. Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention? I have given up expecting those last words, whose ring, if they could only be pronounced, would shake both heaven and earth. There is never time to say our last word--the last word of our love, of our desire, faith, remorse, submission, revolt. The heaven and the earth must not be shaken. I suppose--at least, not by us who know so many truths about either. My last words about Jim shall be few. I affirm he had achieved greatness; but the thing would be dwarfed in the telling, or rather in the hearing. (225)

Marlow makes an important transition, from doubting himself and doubting the ability of words to communicate, to doubting his listeners: "Frankly, it is not my words that I mistrust but your minds. I could be eloquent were I not afraid you fellows had starved your imaginations to feed your bodies" (225). It is possible that Marlow is simply seeking excuses for inability of his words to communicate to the listeners the exact nature of Jim's experience. Does he feel he can be eloquent? He still finds words inadequate: Describing the natives' ecstatic response to Jim's successful storming of the fortress, Marlow concedes that "All this, as I've warned you, gets dwarfed in the telling. I can't with mere words convey to you the impression of his total and utter isolation" (272). Or is he still avoiding his own sense of inadequacy? He may not be able to tell, for as he said of Jim, "no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the

grim shadow of self-knowledge" (80).

Marlow feels he cannot find or make words to recall Jewel's exact meaning or even her sound.

> I believe she supposed I could with a word whisk Jim away out of her very arms. . . . This is my impression, and it is all I can give you. . . . She made me believe her, but there is no word that on my lips could render the effect of the headlong and vehement whisper, of the soft, passionate tones, of the sudden breathless pause. . . . (308)

This is like a private language: she is expressing private emotions in her own feminine language. Jewel communicates with a variety of sounds and expressive intensities that Marlow can understand at the time, but cannot reproduce out of context. However, even then it was difficult to reconcile private and public, to conclude public, expressible facts from private language and tone. Marlow tells Jewel that Jim will never leave her: "it was the only possible conclusions from the facts of the case. It was not made more certain by her whispering in a tone in which one speaks to oneself" (309). Marlow empathizes enough to understand this private language at the time, but can only barely translate it to another time or place, another context.

Since no words exist for those feelings or actions outside communal values, silence or disjointed dialogue occurs in those cases. Early in the novel, in the rescue boat, as the men try to regain his confidence and complicity (he has been holding them at bay with a stick for hours) Jim is

silent: "I said nothing. There are no words for the sort of things I wanted to say. If I had opened my lips just then I would have simply howled like an animal" (124).

Indeed, when Jim and Brown finally meet, they can barely talk to each other because their basic assumptions are so radically opposed. Marlow describes "this strange conversation between those two men, separated only by the muddy bed of a creek, but standing on the opposite poles of that conception of life which includes all mankind" (380-81). Brown tries to even this out by getting them to agree "that we are both dead men, and let us talk on that basis, as equals. We are all equal before death" (381). The way Brown eventually gets Jim to deal with him is by establishing a Wittgensteinian common ground. He asks Jim if he would really think of others if he had to try to save his own life, and of course this exposes Jim's ever raw sore:

> there ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle reference to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts. (387)

Because they can talk, Jim is convinced his nature is fixed, not fluid as he had begun to trust.

As he prepares to leave Patusan for the last time, Marlow recognizes the relationship between the perceiving consciousness and the notion of reality or existence. "I stood there long enough for the sense of utter solitude to get hold of me

so completely that all I had lately seen, all I had heard, and the very human speech itself, seemed to have passed away out of existence, living only for a while longer in my memory, as though I had been the last of mankind" (323). Marlow's tale has been necessary, of course, to make us aware of Jim's story, but also to confirm Marlow's own human connections. Listening to Jim the last day they are together, Marlow is perplexed by the murkiness of sight.

> I don't know why, listening to him, I should have noted so distinctly the gradual darkening of the river, of the air; the irresistible slow work of the night settling silently on all the visible forms, effacing the outlines, burying the shapes deeper and deeper, like a steady fall of impalpable black dust. (306)

We can answer Marlow's uncertainty: it has something to do with the fact that Jim's speech, indeed any speech, no longer has the same clear outlines or shapes or form that Marlow and Jim once believed it did. Marlow is finding a metaphorical, artistic function similar to the one Jim found with Jewel, a "dim stillness" that creates its own reality out of shards of sights and sounds, rather than adopting a false, ready-made, "coherent" one.

CHAPTER 4

LANGUAGE, ACTION, AND THE MYTH OF CONSISTENCY

> In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. (N 497)
>
> Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over the Fates. (N 66)
>
> A notion grows in a mind sometimes till it acquires an outward existence, an independent power of its own, and even a suggestive voice. (SA 133)

In the next two novels, Nostromo and The Secret Agent, Conrad explores the pathology of characters who believe in the power of language to define self and world. Characters begin the novels without questioning the role of language in their understanding. Descriptive terms seem to confer a permanent, stable identity that is confirmed with a character's every action: a dedicated journalist will always act one way, for instance, a terrorist another. Language is believed to describe the world and prescribe possibilities of action, rather than construct either. I will call this hard-held

belief the "myth of consistency." This myth forecasts a limited range of possible experiences as well as actions for the characters. It is an enabling fiction, but one that characters have forgotten is a fiction. While characters envision these selves as fixed, impermeable, their experiences over the course of the novels fracture their assumptions and hence the selves they had never questioned previously. If the self is not impermeable, if there is no consistency, what happens to the notion of self?

One of the ways human beings reflect their beliefs and explain their experiences is by creating myths. But this process is also suppressed: like language, myth is perceived as truth, when instead it is system of signs and beliefs (Barthes 131). Unmasking the myths of human self-control, self-creation and self-motivation, Conrad examines the difficult meeting between the individual who perceives life as a series of images, and the community which encourages belief in a continuous, coherent reality. The individual believes initially that his free actions have consequences within his community and upon the universe: control originates from the individual and radiates out toward society and beyond. But this language-based certainty is revealed to be inadequate when these characters encounter the un-named and un-tamed events that shatter the selves they thought they knew. Conrad blames language for the misguided belief that humans

grasp the whole of unknowable life.

As the primary tool that sustains myths, language is especially vulnerable to mythologizing, claims Barthes, because it is expressive--it tries to mean something. Almost always ambiguous, language is subject to distortion in interpretation (Barthes 131). Said contends that "the study of language recovers the conscious choices by which man established his identity and his authority: language preserves the traces of these choices" (Said 91). Ordinary language use maintains an unconscious subscription to ancient decisions which are not necessarily manifested in contemporary individual lives. Human belief in the absolute and referential meaning of words indicates an habitual trust in society's best intentions for the individual. When characters adopt categories into which experience is divided, they unwittingly commit themselves to receiving rather than creating meaning. A power usually associated with speaking, that of forging identity, is thus lost. Mrs. Gould, for instance, "was highly gifted in the art of human intercourse which consists in delicate shades of self forgetfulness and in the suggestion of universal comprehension" (46). Language use confirms one's humanity and social existence, rather than individuality.

Nostromo is the novel that finally explodes the assumption that existence fits into neat, discernible categories. Whereas Marlow has suspected the mismatch between experience

and language, but lied his way around it in Heart of Darkness, or tenuously faced it in Lord Jim, now the confirmation of this truth causes characters to despair. Unable to perceive actively the cosmic continuum that assured the Romantics, and not yet comfortable with the emerging modern idea, after Pater, that reality is simply an individual invention, Conrad's characters flounder in both Nostromo and The Secret Agent. The tragic trope of Nostromo, where characters themselves attain an awareness of the inadequacy of the heroic notion of self, is recast as a tragicomedy in The Secret Agent whose anarchists try to extricate themselves from societal categories but find themselves unable to function without a human network. The myth of consistency is so deeply entrenched that Conrad himself seems dissatisfied with a single parry, and thus attacks it in the second novel from a different perspective. Whereas in Nostromo characters experience anagnorisis, the painful new knowledge of self that ends ultimately in isolation from the community; in The Secret Agent it is the reader who does the work of recognizing that formerly functional paradigms do not work.

Discovering the self is one of the main movements in Nostromo;[10] most characters believe that their only path to that discovery involves great self consciousness, through action and language. Because they have assumed language to be the individual's most personal form of action, characters are

shocked to discover it reveals instead community values and ideas. Emphasizing an objectivity in meaning and value, language clashes with individuals' perceptions of themselves and their world. The numerous epithetical phrases that follow or replace characters' names exemplify the tendency of language to construct and reinforce expectations of consistency, whereby the community views personality as permanent. Although the community may benefit from acting as though personality and character are permanent, epithets trick both characters and readers into concluding that characters actually have a kind of wholeness or completeness. Epithets function as a synechdoche for both language and myth, in that they compress the simplifying and stabilizing tendencies in both.

That personality is permanent seems proven by the unvarying catalogue of characteristics which follow or replace most character's names with the regularity of Homeric epithets. Conrad's purpose was most likely multiple, making of readers accomplices by disingenuously persuading them of the supposed truth of established reputations. He seems intent on unmasking characters' beliefs in the stable, absolute, socially-bestowed nature of their own personalities. Conrad also mocks the reader's desire for wholeness of perception in the novel's narrative structure. Not only must the reader of Nostromo struggle for chronology, but also for "objective" truth. One

of the aims of the "roundabout narrative approach" Conrad and Ford created was the truest-to-life portrayal of knowledge acquisition: perceptions don't fit together all at once, but only gradually cohere and make sense. The narrative does not have a "hesitation to begin," as Edward Said says (132), but instead provides a continual ironic counterpoint to the novel's characters and readers who all believe they are thinking in continuous wholes and who are shocked by perpetual anomalies.

Unlike the world of Lord Jim where names and epithets are accused of the uncanny power of producing the characteristics they describe, here words have lost their power to harm or save. In Nostromo, epithets have replaced characters' self-forged self-concepts: characters adopt public definitions of self as objective truth, believing personality to be an isolatable, stable force capable of affecting people and events. By the end of the novel, however, most characters' self definitions have been exploded, and they have abandoned the myth of the efficacy of human action. Characters gain a tragic dignity because of their awareness of this loss. As Conrad wrote to Cunninghame Graham, "What makes mankind tragic is not that they are victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it" (Karl and Davies 30). Self-explosions are both more obvious, more concrete, and tragicomic in The Secret Agent, where characters discuss the irony of epithets explic-

itly, but feel no compulsion to act on their awareness. Adolf Verloc, husband of Winnie and always dubbed the "anarchist," experiences only a vague unease at the incontrovertible maxim that "anarchists don't marry" (SA 42). Epithets do more than mock self-perceptions when definitions of world and self are literally exploded with the bomb Stevie carries.

Epithets describe not only social perception, then, but eventually personal perception as well. Situating the story in the competing frames of public and personal history, the frame narrator of Nostromo introduces the scene and the actors in deceptively simple terms. By the end of the first part of the novel, a reader has caught several glimpses of Nostromo, each time with one or more elements of his final catechism: "the lordly Capataz de Cargadores, the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo, the Mediterranean sailor come ashore casually to try his luck in Costaguana" (130). Don Martin Decoud is described repeatedly as "the Journalist of Sulaco" (159), or "the exotic dandy of the Parisean boulevard" (229), just as Giorgio Viola is usually described with at least a portion of his credentials: "sailor, champion of oppressed humanity, enemy of kings, and by the grace of Mrs. Gould, hotelkeeper of the Sulaco harbor" (467). These epithetical labels recur so frequently that they attain the aura of objective description for the reader, and of accurate characterization for the characters themselves. Nostromo,

Decoud, and Viola, for instance, all work hard to live up to these heroic descriptions, and their efforts contribute to the tragic action of the novel.

One of the ways the novel slowly unmasks the heroic stability of these phrases is to use epithets ironically. Little comfort comes from the nonchalant repetition of formerly descriptive phrases when they describe "the body of Señor Hirsch, enterprising businessman from Esmerelda" (448). Every time his tortured, hanging body is mentioned, a variation of the melody of his description is replayed, revealing the terrible inadequacy and lack of power inherent in such descriptions. Nostromo, "the fearless Capataz de Cargadores," feels fear for the first time when he asks Old Viola for a daughter to marry. "He was afraid, because, neither dead nor alive, like the gringos on Azuera, he belonged body and soul to the unlawfulness of his audacity. He was afraid of being forbidden the island" (531). The reader is not surprised, but only because by now his slavelike disintegration is complete; all his supposedly free actions have made him a slave to a false sense of himself. An even more poignant failure of social description for individual reality occurs as Decoud faces the solitude of the island: "The brilliant 'Son Decoud', the spoiled darling of the family, the lover of Antonia, and journalist of Sulaco, was not fit to grapple with himself single-handed" (497). The objective reporter, defined

only in his relation to others, is unable to face subjective solitude. Without society as a foil and a boost, his self-perception dissolves. Epithets are meaningless without the social context; by themselves they create neither identity nor meaning.

The relationship among the individual, society, and language forms the web of issues that inextricably tangles Charles Gould, nicknamed "King of Sulaco," whose "English, rock-like quality of character was his best safeguard" (86). This rock-like stability extends over Gould's world: he believes, as Said puts it, that "underneath everything there is a benign continuity." Understanding this continuity is an act of "egoism," however, the purpose of which "is a sense of mastery over life" (Said 113-114). Conrad demonstrates in this and subsequent novels that no one has mastery over his own experience, much less that of others. Gould's belief in the "benign continuity" is mirrored darkly in Conrad's own belief in "an externality beyond human comprehension" (Whitely 43). In a typical offhand comment that confirms this view, Conrad writes in Nostromo that the local Indians "were ignorant and in other respects did not differ appreciably from the rest of mankind which puts infinite trust in its own creations" (398). One of those creations is language: people believe that through language they understand reality, and through their actions they affect it.

One of the ways characters unearth their personalities is in conversations. In this novel, unlike The Secret Agent of three years later, the problem is not that conversations simply miss because the expectations and conventions adopted by the two participants in an interview are at cross purposes. In Nostromo a primary anxiety derives from whether or not conversations occur at all. Characters invest the act of speaking with great significance. Hiding all day in the bushes of the convent, Señor Hirsch "thought he would die from the fear of silence" (271). This silence refers specifically to his own absence of speech. Yet when Colonel Sotillo hangs Hirsch by his wrists and demands answers, the merchant discovers the power of silence: "For a word, for one little word, [Sotillo] felt he would have knelt, cringed, grovelled on the floor" (448). Hirsch confirms his social power by asserting his control over language and silence. This echoes the anxiety felt by Gentleman Brown as he awaits communication from the Patusan natives to confirm that he belongs still to the human community. Just as Jewel's silent defense against Cornelius' verbal attacks frustrated him more than any attempt at repartee, Hirsch's final non-verbal statement contains more power than any denouncement or harangue could possibly have had.

Instead of language being completely under characters' control, their individual means of self-assertion, its use or

non-use functions communally and confirms or denies relationships with others. At the death of his wife, Old Viola "discovered all the extent of his dependence upon the silenced voice of the woman. It was her voice that he missed" (467). Their powerful, fertile union had engendered conversations throughout their marriage, and so to Giorgio Viola, silence means the end of a part of him.[11] Pedrito Montero invokes the importance of language in his attempts to talk to Charles Gould from a position of authority: "he was now conversing, [Pedrito] reminded him, with the brother of the master of the country." Despite Pedrito's efforts, "the firm attitude of Charles Gould who had not once, so far, pronounced the word 'Excellency', diminished him in his own eyes" (404). To a certain extent, characters are not more than what others call them, a fact that helps explain the power in epithets. Conrad expands this notion further in The Secret Agent, using epithetical role titles for his characters more often than their proper names in order to mock the expectations of exclusive, singular roles: "the secret agent," for example, describes only one of the many aspects of Adolf Verloc--and it does not even do that very well.

By far the most critical use of language, then, is its confirmation of one's humanity. But for those who have adopted society's definition of them, rather than accepting their interior one or actively forging their own, language

also dupes them into a misguided feeling of individuality. Just as Old Viola realizes too late that he needs conversation, the semiotic of communal speech, to feel whole, Martin Decoud is overwhelmed with paralysing indifference in the face of absolute silence. In fact "the truth was that he died from solitude, the enemy known only to few on this earth, and whom only the simplest of us are fit to withstand" (496). Such simple men who could stand such isolation and silence once sailed the Narcissus; but no longer. Decoud's first day on the island "had been a day of absolute silence--the first he had known in his life" (496). For Decoud, the man of words, the impossible situation becomes life threatening: "The solitude appeared like a great void, and silence of the gulf like a tense, thin cord . . . stretched to the breaking, with his life, his vain life, suspended to it like a weight" (498-99).[12] Language not only confirms life, but also justifies it; without language, life is simply dead weight, superfluous. Unable to face a meaningless, non-verbal limbo, the "dedicated journalist of Sulaco" decides to act; he rows out to sea where he believes the cord of silence might snap. As with Señor Hirsch, the irony of the inappropriate former epithet is palpable. Neither land, Decoud's usual habitat, nor sea makes an effort to comfort or sustain him: as the cord of silence breaks with his suicide, the gulf water receives him, "untroubled by the fall of his body" (501). His active response to

silence has revealed some integrity, however.[13] Unable to perform in his normal journalistic mode, intellectually and consciously, Decoud attempts a more physical response. To live, in Decoud's terms, is not merely to be alive or to be living; he requires a more transitive tense of the infinitive.

Decoud's death from solitude suggests that individual life itself continues only in response to social encouragement and justification. Like Jim who needs interpersonal speech to feel alive, Decoud requires physical social interaction to believe in himself: "After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature" (497). In the era of the Narcissus Decoud's unconscious submission would have saved him at this point. But that time is past and Martin Decoud is too thoroughly inoculated with the need of personal assertion:

> In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. Decoud lost all belief in the reality of his action past and to come . . . . He beheld the universe as a succession of incomprehensible images . . . . Everything had failed ignominiously. . . And all exertion seemed senseless. (497-98, emphasis added)

Characters subscribe to the myth that their lives influence their world and the universe: action provides a sense of mastery over the fates because it enforces feelings

of directed individuality in the face of overwhelming, indifferent chaos. However, the self has no perceivable niche, because the concept of personality has been eroded; and events have lost their predetermined value, because their permanent social significance has been unmasked. As a result, the blur of received data is no more than "incomprehensible images." Once faith in human society goes, with its attendant faith in language, even action seems senseless. Yet if the efficacy of action has always been only illusory, then Decoud has unmasked a vital, if painful understanding. Conrad seems to advocate an almost existential effort to remake the self continually, doubting any linguistic, social assurance of stability or finality.

The self-questioning Decoud experiences in solitude can occur also in the midst of society. Compelled by Decoud's death to question his own "inaccessible position" as a force that may have sent the journalist on his fatal adventure, Charles Gould is still unaware of the nature or hierarchy of force. He sees the San Tomé silver mine as the governing force in his life and as "an institution, a rallying point for everything in the province that needed order and stability to live" (110). Yet there is nothing objectively powerful about this material object, the mine; its value and force are human constructs. In fact, it is Charles Gould himself, "the embodiment of the San Tomé mine," who possesses the power. As

Antonia, begging for his personal political assurances, cries, "It is your character that is the inexhaustible treasure which may save us all yet; your character, Carlos, not your wealth" (361).

Conrad seems critical of this meaning formed exclusively in the social realm. To many of his characters, life seems meaningful only when action is community-related, when conversations confirm one's place in society and confer an identity. Like Jim, who is so grateful to Marlow for the chance to relate his version of reality, unable to make sense of his experience without language, Decoud has not interiorized society enough to withstand living alone. He has formed no substitute for communal language. Once he loses faith that the community will respond to him the way he has always expected it to--and his doubts very soon conquer him--he loses his reason for living.

Functioning as it does in the communal arena, language emphasizes objectivity. Roland Barthes' suspicions of any event's apparently objective meaning suggests that language obscures the tentative, ever-changing, and historical meaning of events. "The very principle of myth," Barthes observes, in a passage that can refer also to language, is that "it transforms history into nature" (129)--and by "nature" he has in mind a platonic ideal, something that seems natural and permanent. To concur on meaning enough to use the same words

means that more than subjective truth exists. As Wittgenstein observes, to agree on the language is to agree on the "form of life" (88). Meaning is not out there somewhere, waiting for a word to describe it; it is a convention, an agreement that one person's private perception approximates another person's. Meaning is "only comparable to consciousness itself" (Wittgenstein 113). Conrad's approach seems designed to bring his characters from the Romantic dependence on a public concurrence for meaning, past a Victorian belief in the individual as creator of meaning and value, toward an existential, modern need for effort to create individual meaning without belief that it can be done. As Michael Levenson traces so persuasively in A Genealogy of Modernism, the tension between individual relativity and communal absolutism is resolved for Pater and many modernists in an active consciousness. Although in earlier Conrad works, awareness must incorporate instinct, the unconscious, and a fidelity without will, in the Marlow works, as Levenson points out, "the virtues of consciousness" are revealed (34). By the time Conrad writes Nostromo and The Secret Agent, consciousness has become a charged term in his fiction. Characters struggle again to abandon belief in a knowable, underlying universe in favor of the primacy of personal experience, individual knowledge and private language. Unable to make this leap, they come instead in Nostromo to see humankind divorced from the eternal, able

neither to affect it or be affected by it.

Without the nurturing agreement on meaning, language withers. When Decoud and Nostromo float together in the damaged lighter, still safeguarding the silver,

> each of them was as if utterly alone with his task. It did not occur to them to speak. . . . This common danger brought their differences in aim, in view, in character, and in position, into absolute prominence in the private vision of each. There was no bond of conviction, of common idea . . . . Therefore they had nothing to say to each other. (295)

Verbal exchanges, often thought by characters to be the means of unifying positions and ideas, appear instead to be the result of such unity. Charles Gould recognizes the undeserved faith in language to solve problems caused by opposing values. As the prominent citizens of Sulaco listen to his advice about dealing with Montero, "the feeling of pity for those men, putting all their trust into words of some sort while murder and rapine stalked over the land, had betrayed him into what seemed empty loquacity" (367-68). Gould sees language as empty of action and as such, useless. Language not only may be impossible, it may have little value when the basic tenets of understanding conflict.

It is certainly not valuable during Captain Mitchell's temporary capture and razzing. The captive seems upset not so much by his specific treatment as by its disregard for his notions of reality and order in the world: "His captors held him tightly, disregarding his declaration that he was an

Englishman and his loud demands to be taken at once before their commanding officer. Finally he lapsed into dignified silence" (327-28). Captain Mitchell's entire self-conception is bound up with his notion of being An Englishman; the term confers upon him certain rights and requires from others certain behaviors. Like Jim, he cannot conceive of his function or his world without these constraining, ordering parameters. That language can report his treatment in such passive, supposedly impartial, objective terms ironically reveals its preposterous indifference. The official "objective" description will never correspond to the individual's perception.

> During the passage from the wharf to the Custom House it is to be feared that Captain Mitchell was subjected to certain indignities at the hands of the soldiers--such as jerks, thumps on the neck, forcible application of the butt of a rifle to the small of his back. Their ideas of speed were not in accord with his notion of dignity. . . It was as if the world were coming to an end. (328)

Conrad could indict language on this paragraph alone: if such experiences can be described in these words, then how accurate is language for the individual? It must only function for public purposes. The diction here is that of the Geneva Accord in its official acquiescence to certain atrocities. This "official" view does not at all match Captain Mitchell's, whose sense of reality depends on the fulfillment of his expectations. He rejects the justifications of his captors; such abuse is not endured by an Englishman. The dissolution

of his sense of the world, his understanding of reality, is caused by divergent definitions. With no version to substitute if his world really dissolves, his delayed submission reflects the tenacity of self-perception even in the face of public denial.

Captain Mitchell, like many other characters, believes that society bestows the force of his personality. Nostromo concurs that maintaining a self-image requires continued confirmation of his personality by others. Lacking Jim's opportunity to narrate himself, creating his own words to describe himself, or Decoud's ability to write versions of himself to his sister, Nostromo has adopted outright others' views of his personality. He is shocked that his reputation and the most "desperate affair" of his life matter little to Dr. Monygham, whom he takes as Sulaco's representative. Enraged and bitter, Nostromo momentarily revives at a glimmer of hope, "what seem[s] a sign of some faint interest in such things as had befallen him." Indeed, "the continuance of that interest . . . would have restored to him his personality, the only thing lost in the desperate affair" (433-34). This contradicts the normal myth of personality as a set of characteristics the self creates; for him personality is externally formed. Thus when the doctor's concern focuses more on the silver's political value than on Nostromo's integrity, Nostromo is surprised, enraged, and thoroughly

disillusioned: "he seemed to come out of it a changed man" (434). Ironically, however, others perceive personality as a strong, innate force. Monygham has praised him as "unique. . . . There was something in the genius of that Genoese seaman which dominated in the destinies of great enterprises and of many people, the fortunes of Charles Gould, the fate of an admirable woman" (452). He also tells Mrs. Gould that Nostromo "has some continuity and force. Nothing will put an end to him" (512). Captain Mitchell, too, speaks eagerly of Nostromo's "force of character" (13). Monygham and Mitchell exemplify the tendency of the community to expect and admire fixed personality.

Once a personality is acknowledged publicly, a character's reputation follows him doggedly. As the engineer-in-chief says, praising Charles Gould's actions, "Haven't they come to calling him 'El Rey de Sulaco' in Sta Marta. A nickname may be the best record of success" (316). If so, Nostromo, whose real name we hardly know until the end of the novel when his success is no longer his, but stolen, is the novel's best example of success. Positive reputations, in fact, derive from communal participation and acceptance; a loner or a true foreigner is never viewed favorably. Of course, "foreigner" is not a very useful distinguishing term in the South American country of Costaguana, as most of its leaders and many of its citizens are British or European.

Nevertheless, "Dr. Monygham was not liked by the Europeans of Sulaco. His outward appearance of an outcast, which he preserved even in Mrs. Gould's drawing room, provoked unfavorable criticism" (310-11). But the cynical Dr. Monygham has no interest in public approval or definition. Conrad may be practicing for the anarchists he will write about in his next important novels.

Reputations, like epithets, admit contradictory evidence sparingly. Even the outcast Dr. Monygham's

> misanthropic mistrust of mankind . . . did not lift him sufficiently above common weakness. He was under the spell of an established reputation. Trumpeted by Captain Mitchell, grown in repetition, and fixed in general assent, Nostromo's faithfulness had never been questioned by Dr. Monygham as a fact. . . . It seemed to be a part of the man, like his whiskers or his teeth. (432, emphasis added)

In fact, it is rare to have "a certain kind of imagination" (338) which can perceive the true whole from the limited, named parts. Lord Jim believes his jump to be inconsistent with his heroic personality, but Conrad insists that the anomaly is only apparent, that his complete character includes such variations. Nostromo's narrator refers to "characteristic, illuminating trifles of expression, action or movement" (338) which a penetrating observer can glean from a person or event. In spite of Nostromo's inability to kill Hirsch on the lighter, which act would have been "consistent with the desperate character of the affair" (281), Captain Mitchell is right in his assessment that it "was no mistake.

It was a fatality. . . . A fatality if ever there was one--and to my mind he [Nostromo] has never been the same man since" (131). Actions can broaden narrow definitions of self, but they do not reflect radical departures from the nature of existence. It is often when a character is least expecting it that he can cease being "the same man." Decoud becomes aware in the lighter of Nostromo's atypical behavior: "The usual characteristic quietness of the man was gone. It was not equal to the situation as he conceived it. Something deeper, something unsuspected by everyone, had come to the surface" (282). Decoud's surprise derives from society's narrow view of the actions that display Nostromo's personality as much as from Nostromo's atypical actions. It is ironic that even as "Nostromo is the quintessential man of action who is working to secure his great reputation even more firmly" (Said 129), his actions undermine that very reputation. Despite Nostromo's determination to make to have the leaders of Sulaco "learn I am just the man they take me for" (267), it is precisely his actions during this affair that transform his reputation, truly reveal his motivations, and forever corrupt the integrity of his personality. Like Lord Jim, Nostromo remains unaware of his true nature. It is only a Marlow or a Mrs. Gould, as we shall see shortly, who exercises that rare imagination which perceives the whole personality.

Just as language does not suffice in expressing the range

of actions that comprise individuality, so it lacks usefulness in dealing with anomalies. In General Barrios' presence,

> Mrs. Gould heroically concealed her dismay at the appearance of men and events so remote from her racial conventions, dismay too deep to be uttered in words even to her husband. She understood his voiceless reserve better now. Their confidential intercourse fell, not in moments of privacy, but precisely in public, when the quick meeting of their glances would comment upon some fresh turn of events. She had gone to his school of uncompromising silence, the only one possible, since so much that seemed shocking, weird, and grotesque . . . had to be accepted as normal in this country. (165)

Language manages the expected, normal occurrences in communal experience; it fails in public expression of individual, accidental or "weird" events. As in Conrad's other works, verbal communication is only possible when certain cultural assumptions are shared. The usually communicative Goulds can find no words to express the affront to their "racial conventions."[14]

One way Conrad unmasks the false sanctity of reputation is to insert true characteristics into the typical epithetical descriptions of the members of a temporary tableau:

> Mrs. Gould slipped her hand through the arm of the unworthy daughter of Old Viola, the immaculate republican, the hero without a stain. Slowly, . . . the head of the girl who would have followed a thief to the end of the world, rested on the shoulder of Doña Emilia, the first lady of Sulaco, the wife of the Señor Administrator of the San Tomé mine. (561, emphasis added)

It is only in Nostromo's last moments alive, when he reveals his secret and thus the true range of his nature to Mrs.

Gould, that she can pierce his reputation. Nostromo had already betrayed his own reputation, breaking the spell, as he says, by calling himself "Nostromo the thief" (558). No one is sure of the nature of the betrayal: "He did not say by whom or by what he was dying betrayed" (559). Even Conrad in his 1917 Author's Note maintains the secret, hinting only at a kind of dialectic between community and individual: "he is still of the People . . . with a private history of his own" (13). But the real betrayal, it can be inferred, lies in humankind's occasional lapse in its belief in consistency. Would Nostromo have risked his life and reputation if he had suspected that silver--or he--might lose its value to the community?

Certainly not. Nostromo's expectations that life will continue its normal patterns and values affect his actions--his judgments and decisions. He has been betrayed by language which encourages its users to subscribe to its categories and to its descriptions. Moreover, these characteristics of language glow with the authenticity of scientific sanction, a concept explored more extensively in The Secret Agent. When Nostromo first tells Giselle that he loves her, not her sister, she is incredulous. But shortly she believes his every word: "She had lost the notion of all impossibility. Anything could happen on this night of wonder" (539-40). At her age, her expectations of imaginable occurrences are not so

deeply rooted that one major aberration can not shake her foundation; if the impossible happens once, why not again? Her father, on the other hand, whose age is emphasized always, has an unflappable faith in the continuity of the nature of things. His youthful discomfort with his expectations has receded. Old Giorgio had been faithful to Garibaldi, "the fiery apostle of independence," even after the latter was imprisoned, "a catastrophe that had instilled into him a gloomy doubt of ever being able to understand the ways of divine justice" (29). His belief in that justice does not diminish, merely his expectation of comprehending it. When Linda tells him he has killed Nostromo, "the old man smiled under his thick moustache. Women had such strange fancies" (564). Her statement is impossible: it will not fit with his expected or imaginable reality.

As Captain Mitchell demonstrates, human beings cling tenaciously to their expectations of consistency, but Conrad recommends that provisions be made for validating "the impossible." One reason for Dr. Monygham's bitter cynicism is the impossibility of his love for Emilia Gould. His silent worship of her affects all his expectations, and even his profession underscores human impotency. He reveals his sad vision to the engineer-in-chief, complaining about Mrs. Viola's death: "I should certainly have liked to ease the last moments of the poor woman. And I can't. It's impossi-

ble. Have you met the impossible face to face--or have you . . . no such word in your dictionary?" (318).[15] Not Dr. Monygham, Nostromo, Giselle or Old Giorgio can recommend an approach to the impossible. Mrs. Gould's response, on the other hand, reading Nostromo's confession and eyes "with the genius of sympathetic intuition" (560), seems to be best: she is "appalled" but not fundamentally shaken. She experiences "the first and only moment of bitterness in her life" (561), but her basic beliefs and her character remain unchanged. Ironically, those who can accept anomalies are actually more stable than those who think themselves stable but cannot entertain change.

The myth of consistency is powerful, however, and often placed in the positive frame of impenetrability. Conrad seems inordinately fond of this word: in all the works discussed so far "impenetrable" describes landscapes, intentions, faces, and characters, so that it acquires the status of explanatory myth. In "An Outpost of Progress" the bush is impenetrable; in The Nigger of the "Narcissus" the sea and the sky are impenetrable, as are the unconscious old guard; and in Heart of Darkness the forest is impenetrable. In each of these cases, the characters are cut off from the comprehension of their physical, natural surroundings, as if they were refused access to what should be a natural union: a Romantic world gone perverse. But in these two later, more political novels,

it is the characters who are impenetrable, who feel they are stable and secure in their roles.[16] Winnie Verloc, in The Secret Agent, convinces herself that she is content with her roles as wife, daughter and protecting sister, and although she feels exhilaratingly free when those social bonds are broken, she is then unable to live within human society. However, until Stevie's death, much is made of whether or not a given action is in keeping with her character, which is advertised, with epithetical regularity, as impermeable.

To be described as impenetrable denotes a confidence in one's single, nameable role or identity. The descriptions of Charles Gould emphasize "his English impenetrability" (189) that creates his identity by means of his father's silver mine. He shows "imperturbable assurance," making decisions so that "the mine preserved its identity . . . and it remained dependent on himself alone" (82). The myth of impenetrability suggests that an individual can predict precisely an unchanging context for his single role so that flexible response is unnecessary. Yet even the rock-like Charles Gould finally recognizes that impenetrability is a mask, that he needs a flexible relation between his many selves and society. When Dr. Monygham tells him the tale of the lost Decoud and silver, as Hirsch had related it, Gould's

> face was calm with that immobility of expression which betrays the intensity of a mental struggle. He felt that this accident had brought to a point all the consequences involved in his line of con-

> duct, with its conscious and subconscious intentions. There must be an end now of this silent reserve, of that air of impenetrability behind which he had been safeguarding his dignity. It was the least ignoble form of dissembling forced upon him by that parody of civilized institutions which offended his intelligence, his uprightness, and his sense of right. (378)

He recognizes a plurality and impermanence he had previously dismissed in reality and human response. He admits his pose of impenetrability, "consciously and subconsciously" adopted to try to reconcile the distractions and anomalies which threatened to dissuade him from the single goal he espoused. Nonetheless, he does not question his own "intelligence . . . uprightness . . [or] sense of right": these characteristics define him. The narrative voice confirms the validity of Gould's apprehensions: "He was like his father. He had no ironic eye. He was not amused at the absurdities that prevail in this world. They hurt him in his innate gravity. He felt that the miserable death of poor Decoud took from him his inaccessible position of a force in the background" (378, emphasis added). Having an ironic eye would allow him to penetrate others and be penetrated as well. It would allow him to escape a bit from his straight-jacketed expectations.

Nostromo's character appears impenetrable as well. Nostromo has always agreed with society's perception of him as "a perfectly incorruptible fellow" (127), but his self image begins to shatter in the aftermath of the silver episode. The narrator analyzes the change as Nostromo awakes after swimming

away from Decoud and the silver:

> The Capataz of the Sulaco Cargadores had lived in splendour and publicity up to the very moment, as it were, when he took charge of the lighter. . . . [Even his last acts] performed in obscurity and without witness [had the] characteristics of splendour and publicity, as was in keeping with his reputation. But this awakening in solitude . . . had no such characteristics. . . . The necessity of living concealed somehow for God knows how long, which assailed him on his return to consciousness, made everything that had gone before for years appear vain and foolish, like a flattering dream come suddenly to an end. (414)

Perhaps this is the "dream of our language" Wittgenstein speaks of (113), and Nostromo is questioning the myth of consistency language perpetuates. Formerly, his actions were consistent with his public image which he believed described his true being. But his awakening is to more than physical consciousness. His self image has suffered a sea change; the first hint has appeared of the doubt which culminates in his fatal loss of faith. The consciousness that makes mankind tragic assails Nostromo here.

Nostromo is unable to imagine his life without its normal parameters. His own perception of his immutable prestige is ordered by the myth of consistency: the past cannot be real if it is not on a continuum with the present. This myth affects perception of events and personalities alike. Nostromo believes that "his fidelity had been taken advantage of" (417), that the bonds of respect he had established in the town had been broken. His first reaction is to think of

Sulaco as "a town that had no existence" (415). Belief in objective reality dissolves if it cannot remain in relation to the perceiver. Awakening after his swim, however, "the Capataz de Cargadores, on a revulsion of subjectiveness, exasperated almost to insanity, beheld all his world without faith and courage. He had been betrayed!" (418). He sees an owl whose cry "announces calamity and death in the popular belief" and

> in the downfall of all the realities that made up his force, he was affected by the superstition . . . . The cry of the ill-omened bird, the first sound he was to hear on his return, was a fitting welcome for his betrayed individuality. The unseen powers which he had offended by refusing to bring a priest to a dying woman were lifting up their voice against him. She was dead. With admirable and human consistency he referred everything to himself. (418-19)

Such consistency is admirable because it is an active, imaginative explanation of otherwise irrational, unexplainable events. Yet Conrad is mocking the hollowness of an inflexible or narrow self-image that can admit no anomaly. Indeed, Nostromo's solution is as single-minded as his perception of the problem:

> His imagination had seized upon the clear and simple notion of betrayal to account for the dazed feeling of enlightenment as to being done for, of having inadvertently gone out of his existence on an issue in which his personality had not been taken into account. A man betrayed is a man destroyed. (419-20)

In his mind, personality is a fixed entity, as solid and immutable as he believes his physical body to be. As he first

discerns a situation outside his expectations, he creates a myth to explain what he feels is beyond his existence. Chronologically, only he and Decoud know what has befallen them and the silver, but Nostromo, a thoroughly social creation, must blame his creator, society, for betraying him. He believes that the aberration of his personality, the performance previously unimaginable in his existence, was forced upon him by society's demands. However, because of his strong faith in his single role and society's support of it, in these first dazed moments he fixes upon a force entirely extra-human as the ultimate expression. It is the myth of consistency that prevents him now from allowing apparently inappropriate behavior into his self-image.

Decoud, too, is vulnerable to this myth. His disintegration and suicide are all the more significant because he has been one of the few characters who is skeptical and self-conscious about his own motives and actions. He tells Mrs. Gould that he came to Sulaco "on a fool's errand, and perhaps impelled by some treason of fate lurking behind the unaccountable turns of a man's life. But I don't matter, I am not a sentimentalist" (218). Nostromo's arrival in Sulaco had been similarly undirected. This awareness that life takes "unaccountable turns" seems to oppose the myth of consistency, but Decoud finally cannot resist this myth. Originally aware of man's insignificance in the greater schemes of fate, Decoud

can observe with irony, unavailable to Gould or most other characters, others' attempts at political and moral change. His social enthusiasm, even, is consciously adopted. Unlike Gould, he does not act in order to achieve an ideal, or only when there is "a sentimental basis for his action" (216); instead he involves himself in Costaguanan political life for many reasons, including his desire to woo and perhaps win Antonia Avellanos. Decoud's values are multiple (he asks Mrs. Gould, "are you aware to what point he has idealized the existence, the worth, the meaning of the San Tomé mine?" (214)), whereas Charles Gould "cannot act or exist without idealizing every simple feeling, desire and achievement" (214-15). To idealize means to narrow the significance, simplifying and elevating the causes, events and expected consequences. Decoud's multiplicity had always manifested itself in his satirical attitude and clear sighted unmasking of others' automatic idealism. But even the multiple approach of the non-idealist is not hedge enough against the lifelong propaganda of the myth of the singular, the consistent personality, the narrow idealism. Alone for the first time in his life, Decoud has only his own perceptions to unmask, and "solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place" (497). He cannot stand the echoing memories of phrases and personalities which make no sense in

his new solitary state, and he welcomes death to conquer his life without myth. The supposedly mythless man, so disdainful of others' need for simplifying myths, is prey himself to his own series of "affectations."

Decoud and Nostromo are two subscribers to the myth of consistency which, in turn, breeds the myth of incorruptibility, another of the novel's synonyms for impenetrability. But the novel shows both characters to be wrong. Decoud cannot imagine any change occurring in Nostromo's being when the Capataz returns to Sulaco: "Your wonderful reputation will make them attach great value to your words," he assures Nostromo who himself is convinced that "'silver is an incorruptible metal that can be trusted to keep its value for ever. . . An incorruptible metal, ' [Nostromo] repeated . . . . 'As some men are said to be,' Decoud pronounced, inscrutably" (300). Incorruptibility, like impenetrability, is a reassuring myth. Yet nothing and nobody can maintain the same value or reputation forever, because the latter are subjective, not objective, absolute characteristics. Just as Nostromo is shown to be corrupted finally by the silver which had helped him earn his reputation--he is finally the silver's slave, no better than a thief--so the silver's value "betrays" Nostromo's confidence in it. On his deathbed, when he wants to pass on the treasure to the next least corruptible citizen of Sulaco, he is told by Mrs. Gould that the silver has, indeed,

lost its value: "No one misses it now. Let it be lost forever" (560). With the last stable basis of his life defrocked, Nostromo dies without his own kind of priest, the symbol of permanent value in his life.

Value is subjective; nothing is permanent or objectively true. Said understates Nostromo's point when he suggests that "the trouble is that silver seems to provoke visions of concrete power and achievement in the mind of its devotees. Men want to model their lives into perfect, hard blocks of silver; yet they do not realize that such lives will be stunted and selfish" (Said 109). More precisely, human beings expect they can imitate the apparent permanence and value of the silver, when they simply cannot. This is the problem with Nostromo's life "whose very essence, value, reality consisted in its reflection from the admiring eyes of men" (525). People demand, expect, and desperately want to believe in consistency, both personal and social. But Conrad insists that corruption is possible, if not probable: "A transgression, a crime, entering a man's existence, eats it up like a malignant growth, consumes it like a fever" (523). The impenetrability of a consistent personality is a myth. Value is not determined in any absolute sense, or in a vacuum; no silver, no person, no action has unimpeachable worth.

Religion is given a chance to explain value, as well. Father Roman appears to have reached Decoud's conclusions

about the value of the multiple, anti-ideal approach from his own religious angle. He

> had no illusions as to [his flock's] fate, not from penetration but from long experience of political atrocities, which seemed to him fatal and unavoidable in the life of a State. The working of the usual public institutions presented itself to him most distinctly as a series of calamities overtaking private individuals and flowing logically from each other through hate, revenge, folly and rapacity, as though they had been part of divine dispensation. (398-99)

Human insignificance in relation to the divine is an old theme, but the fact that it is perceived by a representative of the Church is undermined because Father Roman's religious integrity is exposed within several lines: "the workers of the San Tomé mine . . .were dear to his sacerdotal supremacy. Mrs. Gould's earnest interest in the concerns of these people enhanced their importance in the priest's eyes, because it really augmented his own" (399). Although he has no illusion about human actions' influence, he is not divinely inspired at all; he requires the same social justification as Decoud and Nostromo.

In the novel Conrad explodes the notions of human actions' efficacy in the face of "the natural order of things" (393), a concept the Costaguanans accept without question. Describing the Monterist revolution, the narrator indicates that "the fundamental causes were the same as ever, rooted in the political immaturity of the people, in the indolence of the upper classes and mental darkness of the lower" (387).

The inference is that for all the revolutionary fervor, the takeover was more or less inevitable, considering the immutable nature of mankind and the universe. Nevertheless, most people fervently believe that their action will affect their immediate destiny, if not that of the world. This belief system is thrown on its head. Instead of the world and character being immutable, but subject to human actions, the opposite is true: the world and its inhabitants are ever-changing, and human beings can do nothing to alter fate. Martin Decoud's skepticism pierces the inside perception of Costaguanan politics in his description to "his French associates": "It is screamingly funny, the blood flows all the time, and the actors believe themselves to be influencing the fate of the universe" (152).

The actors, of course, do not have to be shedding blood to believe in the power of their efforts. Conrad's narrator finds humankind's illusions less amusing, if more justifiable, especially in the face of impotence. The young Charles Gould, for example, mourns his father, whose

> breathing image was no longer in his power. This consideration, closely affecting his own identity, filled his breast with a mournful and angry desire for action. In this his instinct was unerring. Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions. Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over the Fates. (66)

Action seems here to be lauded; but note that the efficacy of action is illusory; the "sense of mastery" is, after all, only

a deceptive, if comforting impression, not mastery itself. Perhaps this is why characters so cheerfully and unthinkingly use language, as an active method of organizing and understanding their surroundings. Events must be evaluated according to human interaction with them. The nameless engineer-in-chief, whose significance may lie only in his named function, pronounces to Dr. Monygham that "things seem to be worth nothing but what they are in themselves. I begin to believe that the only solid thing about them is the spiritual value which everyone discovers in his own form of activity--" (318). The skeptical doctor interrupts to christen the engineer's belief "Self-flattery. Food for that vanity which makes the world go round" (26). In nearly echoing the narrator of two hundred pages earlier (see above quotation from N 66) and Nostromo's awakening (see my p. 134, quotation from N 414), Dr. Monygham strongly supports Conrad's message: people come to think of themselves as more powerful and self-motivated than they are, and, as we have come to suspect, values are not inherent, but only applied by means of action and language, and adopted as inherent by society.

In the face of life and death matters, Conrad finally confirms all the suspicions. First, human activity is ineffective and its worth deceptive. During the revolution, Charles Gould sees wounded natives and "the cruel futility of things stood unveiled in the levity and sufferings of the

incorrigible people; the cruel futility of lives and deaths thrown away in the vain endeavor to attain an enduring solution to the problem." Nothing succeeds; nothing lasts, but "to him, as to all of us, the compromise with his conscience appeared uglier than ever in the light of failure" (364, emphasis added). Persistent, in other words, is the rueful belief that different decisions and actions still might have been effective, that a Sisyphean fate is accidental. A more desperate and solitary position, however, produces Decoud's alternating pessimism and tentative hope: He had not rowed away on the third day "partly at the whisper of lingering hope that Nostromo would return, partly from the conviction of the utter uselessness of all effort" (500).

Second, the universe is, after all, continuous, impenetrable, unknowable as it makes its apparently arbitrary decisions about human lives. In a slightly enigmatic sequence, Conrad confirms Nostromo's conceitedness as well as the universe's indifferent perpetuity. Paranoid about the building of the lighthouse on his treasure island,

> the incomparable Nostromo . . . subjective almost to insanity, looked suicide deliberately in the face . . . [but] he could not imagine himself dead. He was possessed too strongly by the sense of his own existence, a thing of infinite duration in its changes, to grasp the notion of finality. The earth goes on forever. (525-26)

Humans' discomfort lies in the universe's continual affront to their subjectivity. The human definition of "forever" is not

found in the universe's dictionary.

Finally, Conrad admits Nature's indifference to human striving, in tones reminiscent of Marlow's vision in Heart of Darkness: "Droll thing life is--that mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose" (HD 284). Conrad's letter to Graham could be describing a Costaguanan reaction to Marlow's pessimism:

> We can't return to nature, since we can't change our place in it. Our refuge is in stupidity, in drunkenness of all kinds, in lies, in beliefs, in murder, thieving, reforming--in negation, in contempt--each man according to the promptings of his particular devil. There is no morality, no knowledge and no hope; there is only the consciousness of ourselves which drives us about a world that . . . is always but a vain and fleeting appearance. (Karl and Davies 30)

Conrad reconfirms in Nostromo man's status as "victim," not as independent actor:

> A victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity, the brilliant Don Martin Decoud, weighted down by the bars of the San Tomé silver, disappeared without a trace, swallowed up by the universal indifference of things. . . . [And] the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores [was] victim of the disenchanted vanity which is the reward of audacious action. (501)

The universe is not impressed by human effort. Conrad implies that disillusionment is inevitable, as the human impulse towards audacity in intellect or action asserts individuality against communal or universal nonchalance. The modernist vision is that ours is an ever-private language, despite our desire to perceive it as communal. Language is in part to

blame for this disillusionment, as Conrad reveals in his ironic epithets "brilliant" and "magnificent." Conrad is surely here the modernist writer Irving Howe defines:

> Disdainful of certainties, disengaged from the eternal or any of its surrogates, fixated upon the minute particulars of subjective experience, the modernist writer regards settled assumptions as a mask of death and literature as an agent of metaphysical revolt. (19)

With his emphasis on the way language affects characters' self-perceptions and views of the world, he is readying himself to join the revolutionaries in his next novel as the anarchist of language. Meanwhile, this novel's heroine and representative of the highest human values finally intuits the true continuum. Mrs. Gould

> resembled a good fairy, weary of a long career of well-doing, touched by the suspicions of the uselessness of her labors, the powerless of her magic . . . . It had come into her mind that for her life to be large and full it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. (520-21)

To the few who are unclouded by society's interpretation of continuity, who, instead, perceive the universal order and the need for continual, if inconclusive self creation, life can embrace meaning.

If Nostromo traces the experience of the lone actor abandoned by his costars and the extras who have characterized him, now unsuccessfully seeking a way to express his sense of reality and self, The Secret Agent repopulates the stage with

a motley crew, each of whom begins confident in the absolute nature of his individual version of reality. Reliance on language, patterns of expectation, and belief in consistency must give way to acceptance of pluralism and process. In The Secret Agent Conrad intensifies his attack on the myth of consistency, associating it with the religious fervor that so often attends the notion of science. Mr. Vladimir mentions it to Verloc, who adopts the word as his private bogeyman, "the sacrosanct fetish of to-day is science" (38, sic). And Ossipon has "in him the scientific spirit, which moved him to testify" (242). The belief in science and dependence on language are clearly misplaced, however. Characters become dissatisfied with reliance on these systems, but have no candidate for replacement. As Ossipon complains, "How am I to express myself? One must use the current words" (69).

The mismatch between expectation and reality is revealed in the novel in the pervasive image of the tightrope. Many characters stay on a tightrope of compartmentalized understanding and foreseeable circumstances until something shakes it and makes them look down. The tightrope image is Chief Inspector Heat's. He feels "indignation" and "moral insecurity" as the Assistant Commissioner interrogates him about the bomb and "like a tight-rope artist might feel if suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin

to shake the rope." Heat feels the need to cling to "something more tangible than his own personality, and establish his pride somewhere, either in his social position, or in the quality of the work he is obliged to do, or simply in the superiority of the idleness he may be fortunate enough to enjoy" (104). He questions, in other words, the stability of personality if it is not tethered to external, objective assurance. In another of the many interviews in the novel, this one between Verloc and Mr. Vladimir, Verloc feels the need to remain "motionless, as if feeling himself surrounded by pitfalls" (29). Later, in his bedroom, Verloc still cannot shake the "sensation of an incipient fall" (58) as he begins to worry about carrying out Vladimir's demand for a dynamite outrage. The request for his invention of and participation in a plan he dislikes affronts his sense of control over his life. Winnie, too, has to force herself occasionally to keep "the singleness of purpose" she feels about protecting Stevie in the front of her mind to avoid "fall[ing] into the idleness of barren speculation" (152, emphasis added). And when she has to look down, compelled by the unexpected drops of blood to recognize what she has done, what she sees is the gallows--and the prospect of another final drop (209, 220).

In the barren city world, characters feel secure on their tightropes when they are identified with something "tangible," such as a member of family or a bureaucracy. (Ironically, as

members of both the police and the anarchist camps point out, most of the anarchists act as though they are members of their own bureaucracy.) This stratification is also the way individuals use words to perceive themselves and others. Yundt calls himself a terrorist, but the narrator assures us he is really "a moribund murderer . . . a senile sensualist" (47), and that he had "never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice" (51). The Professor, dubbed "the perfect anarchist," pronounces himself free from social constraints and "everything artificial" (7) because of the force of his personality. But still, to combat his "sinister loneliness" he must compare himself to the multitude he fears and assert his superiority over Chief Inspector Heat by saying, in a very un-anarchical way, "I am doing my work better than you're doing yours" (88). Verloc, too, calls himself an anarchist, but he would seem to be a walking anomaly, as Mr. Vladimir points out: "Anarchists don't marry. It's well-known. They can't. It would be apostasy" (42).

Conrad uses such exclusive epithets ironically throughout the novel to show the absurdity of all classifications. Michaelis, "the ticket-of-leave apostle," is only comfortable talking to himself. Verloc, "the far-famed secret agent Δ of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim's alarmist dispatches, was not the man to break into . . . the mysteriousness of living

beings," which his wife exemplifies. He claims to be able to uncover the mystery of political affairs, but he is useless at unraveling human ones. Even the novel's title does not suffice to describe Adolph Verloc, at least this version of him, which requires additional modes of action. The entire first chapter, for instance, describes the indolent Verloc, sloppily domesticated, an agent of nothing and only slightly secretive. Conrad uses the titles of Chief Inspector Heat, the Assistant Commissioner, and Sir Ethelred, the great "Personage," in similar ways, mocking the presumed singularity of role. Repeatedly christened Stevie's "sister, guardian and protector," Winnie is the immediate cause of her brother's death because she encourages him to accompany Verloc. Oddly enough, Verloc self-consciously attaches epithets to Winnie and Stevie:

> Mr. Verloc raised his eyes . . . and in the expiring clatter of the doorbell beheld Winnie, his wife, enter and cross the shop on her way upstairs, followed by Stevie, his brother-in-law. The sight of his wife was agreeable to Mr. Verloc. It was his idiosyncracy. (148)

It is as if Verloc has to remind himself of the bonds that are not included in the parameters of the label "secret agent." He has to work at becoming comfortable with the typical emotional effects of those familial ties which do not fit into his narrow definition of himself.

Language shares many characteristics of bureaucracy, appealing to characters because of its built-in hierarchies

and relationships in set sequence. When these are properly "cultivated by a capable man, [they have] a distinct value for the individual and for society," according to Chief Inspector Heat (176). He is upset at the Assistant Commissioner's understepping his bounds and meddling in the actual activity of police work; he thinks the meddling is going to "disorganize the whole system of supervision [and] upset many things" (176). The Assistant Commissioner, on the other hand, hates desk work "because of its confined nature and apparent lack of reality" (117). The Chief Inspector wants to work only by "the rules of the game" (108), even if he might miss a real criminal and arrest an innocent man; whereas the Assistant Commissioner is "a born detective" and resents more than anything "the necessity of taking so much on trust" (102). Their respective titles imply that each man would have the other's characteristics. Similarly it is amusing that both the Professor and Chief Inspector Heat recognize the sibling qualities common to both the terrorist and the policeman. They both come from the same basket, the Professor says, and Heat points out that they both recognize the same conventions, including linguistic ones (68 and 85). Names and titles do not function as the guideposts characters expect.

Conrad suggests that the compartmental modes of thinking in bureaucracy or language are not satisfactory because boundaries are so easily crossed. If the policeman and

terrorist share as many characteristics as they oppose, then these terms lose their distinguishing capabilities. Characters instead should be anarchical in their use of language. Ironically, it is the Assistant Commissioner's "natural . . . born characteristic" to have "a mistrust of established reputations" (105). Is this because they are socially created, rather than innate? The working social bonds of protection or servitude are illusory and easily broken when their raison d'être dissolves. Even Mr. Verloc noticed that Winnie was "not at all like herself"(99) the night of the revelation about Stevie. Her notion of self and all her decisions--even her marriage--had been based on the single purpose of providing for her brother. Without him, she is suddenly if momentarily free and in control of herself "because the bargain was at an end" (215). Realizing that no innate, indissoluble affection exists calls into question all absolute reality. Boundaries certainly are not permanent even in family relationships, where they have a glow of scientific sanction. Yet the narrator has relied on the myth of a core self which informs personality and action: political creeds are nothing more than disguised personal impulses, says the narrator (77), and furthermore, "we can never cease to be ourselves" (105). The narrator is verbalizing here the myth of consistency, which forces even him to adjust consciously for aberrations. When Mrs. Verloc asks her mother "how in the

world [she] manage[d]" to find a place in a charity home, the narrator is quick to explain that "as not affecting the inwardness of things, which it was Mrs. Verloc's principle to ignore, this curiosity was excusable" (132). And later, even more explicitly, the narrator explains Verloc's inability to understand the extent of Winnie's sentiment for Stevie: "in this he was excusable, since it was impossible for him to understand it without ceasing to be himself" (193). The narrator is as uncomfortable as the characters when the boundaries of personality are threatened. If pleasurable, the loss of established identity is seen as almost immoral because it implies rejection of or loosening of bonds and ties in an attempt at independence. Whereas in Nostromo and earlier novels, characters were intent on creating themselves, but had finally to acknowledge the impact of their social roles, here not only do the anarchists botch their independence of social structure, but Winnie, the nouveau-anarchist following Verloc's murder, is unable to live without a relationship. She is unfettered by social restraints for only a few hours; very soon her fears and habitual needs attach her to Ossipon so that she is "no longer a free woman" (238).

One place where the split between expectations and reality manifests itself is in speaking and conversation. Verloc thinks of himself as a great speaker: he not only had a powerful, controlled voice, but "he knew what to say, too"

(33). Conrad seems to be having fun here, at Verloc's expense, with the difference between public and private, figurative and literal meanings. Despite his belief that he is an exceptional orator, he cannot speak to his brother-in-law, Stevie: "He did [not] know what would happen if he did say anything" (56). And he is first eulogized by Ossipon as being "more useful than important. Man of no ideas. Years ago he used to speak at meetings--in France, I believe. Not very well, though" (72). In contrast, Stevie, who is "no master of phrases and perhaps for that very reason his thoughts lacked clearness and precision" (146), at least feels profoundly; indeed, his response to the whipped horse is morally superior to everyone else's. And although "like the rest of mankind, perplexed by the mystery of the universe, he had his moments of consoling trust in the organized powers of the earth" (147), for the most part, he is admirably free from communal language and its limiting understandings. When he attempts to chart the universe, he draws

> innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric; a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable. (49)

The novel's only true anarchist of language, Stevie communicates most profoundly with his death.

If the so-called best speakers, such as Verloc, cannot speak, this may help explain why in this novel conversations,

in general, do not work. Verloc's conversation with Winnie in their bed is a good example: "his anxieties prevented him from attaching any sense to what his wife was saying." He responds when her voice ceases, and what he says "might have [been] meant . . . as an opening to a complete confidence," but she is so used to non-sequiturs and to their inability to communicate, that she goes on. It is a great effort for him to be social and fully responsive, even to a question such as "shall I put out the light now?" to which he only responds in a "hollow tone" (59-61). It is as difficult for him to use words as it is for him to communicate in other ways. Even his tone is "hollow." When characters limit their self-concepts to single categories, they limit their range of response in other roles.

Conversations also fail when speakers do not accept the same ground rules and conventions. In another interview between Chief Inspector Heat and the Professor, Heat's "perfectly proper words within the tradition and suitable to his character of a police officer addressing one of his special flock" get an "outrageous . . . reception [which] departed from tradition and propriety" (86). Later, Verloc explains to the shocked Winnie how and why the bombing occurred. His "was a benevolent intention, but Mr. Verloc had the misfortune not to be in accord with his audience" and Mrs. Verloc "let most of the words go by; for what were words to

her now?" (206). As we have seen in Nostromo and other novels, only when characters share basic assumptions can they communicate. Her powers of communication do not improve when she is a "free" woman, trying to engage Ossipon for her protection: "she imagined her incoherence to be clearness itself. . . and she gave a special meaning to every sentence spoken by Comrade Ossipon whose knowledge did not in the least resemble her own"(230-1). Because of differing sets of ground rules, conversations are more likely to miss than to work in this novel. Language cannot overcome these obstacles.

Another way Conrad hints that the compartments and artificial descriptions do not suffice is when he puts epithets in quotations marks. The phrases that have been linked almost automatically with Winnie are now heard ironically: even as she listens to Verloc's explanation of Stevie's end, "without 'troubling her head about it,' she was aware that it 'did not stand looking into very much'" (199). The narrator renders this potentially tragic scene as tragicomic with the ironic use of the epithets. Winnie's habitual reponses no longer apply when her tightrope is shaken; a reader's reaction must be shaken as well. Reality cannot be tethered to a single word or idea, a single person or place. Its plurality is underscored with each new description of the bombing incident: it is "a domestic drama" (184), "the production of a moral effect" (195), an attempt to safeguard

Verloc's job (195), as well as a response to a "jeering" brute, Mr. Vladimir (197).

Plurality is also championed in Winnie's automatic behavior, when, still in the guise of a loyal wife responding to her husband's wooing invitation, she stabs him. Is this the anomalous behavior of the devoted wife, or an aspect of personality that language cannot capture in a single word? She feels free of her bonds now that Stevie is dead, and sees Verloc not as her husband or even as Adolf, but as "that man": "She did not wish that man to change his position on the sofa. . . . She succeeded. The man did not stir" (215). Her actions and understanding are fragmented. The "dark drops" falling from Mr. Verloc's waistcoat are finally recognized as "Blood!", just as the sticks flying about Kurtz's nose on the river in Heart of Darkness are finally recognized as arrows. Her understanding of the stabbing is also similar to Jim's perception of his leap from the Patna: "I had jumped--it seems" (LJ 111). Conrad infuses her with Stevie's soul and "the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms" (216), perhaps as a way of expanding the reader's perception of the earlier Winnie who could not have acted this way. But he also seems to mock the assurance of scientific explanation. Although Ossipon remarks on the "scientific" connection between Winnie, "the sister of

a degenerate" and her brother, Conrad undercuts the seriousness of these observations by remarking several times that "he gazed scientifically" and by recalling his entire series of epithets as a mock genealogy: "Alexander Ossipon, anarchist, nicknamed the Doctor, author of a medical (and improper) pamphlet, late lecturer on the social aspects of hygiene to working men's clubs" who now "submitted to the rule of science" (242).

One reason scientific compartmentalized divisions do not suffice is that they do not account for the unforeseeable circumstances. Whether fate is an accident or a force, it has the effect of overwhelming our normal perceptions and understandings. Experience is typically understood according to ritual formulas which accord with the past. As in Nostromo, the future is expected to be a continuum of the past. In fact, that is the cause of Michaelis' optimism, a structuralist vision of a law governing all of history and all the future. In daily life such expectation is pervasive, if limiting. Unaware of her husband's discovery moments earlier of her brother's death, Mrs. Verloc perceives her husband's excited ranting and unusual coloring according to recognizable patterns: "Mrs. Verloc, for the purposes of practical existence, put down these appearances to the cold" (168).

It is easier to stay on the tightrope of unified and expected understanding than to venture off and possibly

flounder in the abyss of the unforeseen. The Verloc's marriage is based on a "tacit accord" which was "perfect but . . . not precise." And "this reserve, expressing in a way, their profound confidence in each other, introduced at the same time a certain element of vagueness in their intimacy" (203). Of course when the vagueness is made precise, when the assumptions are made manifest, the bond dissolves. And it does not dissolve equally. The idea that Winnie viewed her marriage as a bargain, exchanging wifely duties for protection of her brother, "would have been infinitely shocking to Mr. Verloc's idea of love" (213).

Characters want to stay on the surface, not looking very deeply into things. Sir Ethelred is the perfect model, not wanting the details, just the expected circumstances which fit into his pre-formed understandings. The novel's synthesizing image emerges in the efforts of the perfect anarchist, the Professor, to invent a detonator which "would adjust itself to all conditions of action and even to unexpected changes of condition"(5), because no human can foresee all circumstances. Yet, although the Professor recognizes that it is the belief others have in his will to set off the detonator which makes him deadly, not the detonator and bomb themselves, perhaps he does not have the confidence he claims to have. Mr. Verloc is certainly too indolent to have done extensive planning about the bombing, but he had tried to overcome his "philosophical

unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort"(24) in order to save his secure position as "agent provocateur." Indeed, after the bombing he is "converted . . . to the doctrine of fatalism" (191). He believes "he had foreseen everything" but Stevie stumbling and "had never expected to have to face" Winnie's grief on account of death. He feels that "all action [is] over and his fate taken out of his hands (192). Conrad bombards us with the impossibility of foresight or of effective human action: "He had come home prepared" for Winnie's grief, but not her impassive hysteria. In fact

> in all the eventualities he had foreseen, Mr. Verloc had calculated with correct insight on Stevie's instinctive loyalty and blind discretion. The eventuality he had not foreseen appalled him as a humane man and a fond husband. From every other point of view it was rather advantageous. (195)

Here is the problem with the single compartmentalized view for the individual: a single event has varying significance to different selves. Verloc himself realizes that this event has several results. And for characters used to an expectable reality, such uncontrollable fate is terrifying, as Winnie discovers. Although her initial reaction to her freedom is "giddy but calm" (216), an oxymoronic feeling that certainly defies normal categories, she is soon tremendously frightened by her image of the gallows and the phrase she associates with it: "The drop given was fourteen feet" (220). This drop from her tightrope will be the result of her new freedom. It is also Ossipon's problem when he realizes that Winnie has

committed murder: his understanding of her, of any woman, would never have included the possibility of such action. Now "he did not believe the woman, or rather, he was incapable by now of judging what could be true, possible or even probable in this astounding universe. He was terrified out of all capacity for belief or disbelief in regard to this extraordinary affair" (235-36).

The sense of a unified reality dissolves with such an aberration, and events which once seemed providential seem terrifyingly arbitrary, if somehow related to our automatic, instinctual thoughts. Verloc feels vaguely that "there are conspiracies of fatal destiny, that a notion grows in a mind sometimes till it acquires an outward existence, an independent power of its own, and even a suggestive voice," yet action, whether physical or scientifically verbal, still does not give one control of one's fate. In fact, neither control nor freedom lasts very long in "this world of vain and illusory appearance" (133).

CHAPTER 5

THE SEMIOTICS OF POLYVALENCE

> Everything, sounds, attitudes, movements and immobility seemed to be part of an experiment. (UWE 222)
>
> I remained silent, checked between the obvious fact and the subtle impression. (UWE 156)
>
> Words, as is well known, are the great foes of reality. (UWE 11)
>
> I will never total it all.
>
> Tillie Olsen

Under Western Eyes joins the number of Conrad works that experiment with possible readings or interpretations. Characters and narrator all express epistemological doubts: they need to understand but they suspect that they cannot quite get it right. The problem may be that pieces of critical information are missing; or that they are ignorant at a given point about what they learn later; or that their culture, class, gender, age, or political affiliation create unbridgeable gaps. But whatever the cause, one thing characters and narrator come to share is the growing skepticism about the readings to which the community subjects them. Once

a person is "understood," perhaps labeled with an epithet, he or she experiences a discomfort with this narrowing of the self. Fitting a person into a paradigm, a metaphorical experience ("this person is like this"), reveals the essentializing tendency of language. Rather than metaphor being a movement of expansion--adding to our understanding of X by relating it to another concept--it is seen as a limiting move. When characters collide with a paradigm that doesn't fit, either for themselves or for a situation they thought they understood, they grow skeptical of all labels, definitions, epithets, and explanations. They reject the simplifying trend of words as static categories, recognizing that understanding accumulates as a process of reading and only over time.

Conrad has come a long way, then, since his Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus". There is no longer a single truth some characters are privileged to experience, or that the writer can descend into himself to expose for his readers. No longer will a euphemism such as "the horror! the horror!" satisfy as a judgment of the totality of experience. The belief in a single truth and in the ability of language to express it dissolves. The best characters can hope for is the dialogic experience of life, the negotiating among competing selves. As selves go through time, they come up against paradigms that don't fit. The self, in fact, seems finally created in relation to the misreadings of language (in its

paradigmatic function) and of community.

While narrator and characters are learning new ways to read situations, readers of the novel experience similar unsatisfactory readings and paradigms. Readers trained on the realistic novel expect the narrator to give them the whole scoop. And after all, the Conradian narrator encourages our trust in his ability to read accurately the situations he describes. He is very self-conscious in his attempt "to get it right," but Conrad forces readers to see that there is not only no "it" to be gotten, but no single "right" way of reading experience. For the reader who has admired Marlow's sincere effort to understand Kurtz or Jim, the narrator of Under Western Eyes seems like an ironic version of that paradigm of a narrator. Readers must read around what he ignores: when he does give us information, he misreads it; when he draws a conclusion, readers see that he has missed some critical pieces. The question of timing looms, as well. The narrator claims to be tracing the story of Razumov in the fullness of hindsight: he presumably has access to all the information, so he can piece together the chronology. Yet it is clear that his own understandings change over time, and that his efforts to reconstruct what he knew when, and what he now understands about those incomplete readings are also seen as faulty. Thus when he is satisfied that he has pieced together the history over time, readers must acknowledge that

time does not stop, and so neither can his version of reality.

The connection Conrad has sought with his readers, his "appeal" to his readers through a sincere conveyance of sensual images, can no longer be made through an agreement on the "truth" of "a passing phase of life" (P xiv). The only truth to be reached is that no single truth exists; the only whole is an unfinished, ever-dialogic process. Conrad hints at this in the Preface when he refers to the "changing wisdom of successive generations [that] discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories" (P xii). This kind of wisdom is diachronic, an "acquisition" subject to changes across time. Conrad's misty way of describing the synchronic version he prefers contrasts "acquisition" with "gift," an apprehension of the ungraspable whole colored by an appreciation of its many possible readings. When he talks about the "magic suggestiveness of music--which is the art of arts" (P xii), he seems to be referring to the difference between reading or even playing individual notes, and the ephemeral experience of listening to what those notes create: music. The narrator in Under Western Eyes is occasionally aware of others' attempts to perceive beyond the words or other signs of a given moment. Observing an interview between Nathalie Haldin and Razumov, he notes Razumov's efforts to understand Nathalie--not simply to understand what she is saying:

> I perceived that with his downcast eyes he had the air of a man who is listening to a strain of music

> rather than to articulated speech. And in the same way, after she had ceased, he seemed to listen yet, motionless, as if under the spell of suggestive sound. (287, emphasis added)

This passage describes the attitude Conrad wants his readers to adopt--listening to the strains and the suggestive accumulation of signs, rather than to the individual notes. He encourages readers to become skeptical of their own readings if those readings focus only on the word, on language. Although the above description of Razumov's attitude may seem to be expressed directly or paradigmatically, in its offering of metaphorical explanations, it is finally dialogic or syntagmatic because it simultaneously offers different versions of the scene. Rather than monovalent semiotics, where equivalences can be established, Conrad insists that signs be read polyvalently, with all their complex associations.

Conrad undertakes in Under Western Eyes an experiment: to expose the myth of consistency by expanding the range of signifiers and the range of their interpretations. Playing off the conventions of the realistic novel, including the belief that reality is consistent, predictable, and expressable in language, Conrad suggests that selves and communities as such do not exist, except in utterance. Reality is not stabilized in language. In this novel, narrator and character after character become aware, to one extent or another, of the contexts and contingencies that affect perception of reality.

Almost all characters express the need to understand and be understood, but what they ultimately understand is that meaning lies in its expression; that words and names are simply conveniences, not true definers of persons or actions; that the range of signs that define meaning is virtually endless; and that ambiguity and polyvalent semiotics are all that exist.

A number of critics, from James Guetti's The Limits of Metaphor in 1967 to Patrick Whitely's Knowledge and Experimental Realism in 1987, have noted in Conrad a concern "with the inadequacy of language" (Guetti 2). Since inadequacy only becomes an issue when expectations are not met, another way to put this is to say that the novels address characters' expectations that language can match reality. One of the most well-known examples in Conrad, of course, is Marlow, who in Heart of Darkness honors the admission that language cannot work. His admiration of Kurtz derives from his belief that "the horror! the horror!" is an admirable summation that says only that "the reality of experience lies beyond language and the processes of the human imagination" (Guetti 61). The old teacher of languages who narrates Under Western Eyes has his own suspicions about the ability of language to render experience understandably. Although many critics have mocked this narrator as simply dense,[17] he distinguishes himself from earlier narrators--except, certainly, the Marlow of Lord

Jim--by the fact that he questions language and so frequently and overtly doubts both it and his ability to use it. If "the meaning depends on the narrator's capacity to make his language as transparent as possible" (Whitely 35), then the search for meaning must include components other than language. In fact, Conrad's figures rebel against granting language the sole authority over meaning, as they come to recognize the impact of tones, loudness and rhetorical considerations surrounding language, along with the unending list of non-linguistic signs that contribute to any attempt to understand.

To use Luce Irigaray's term, Conrad is examining the "grammar" of each situation. The questions to ask include, What are the rules of meaning here? What else conveys meaning besides language? Irigaray asserts that beyond ordinary scrutiny of what is said, any search for meaning must also include what is not "articulate[d] at the level of utterance: its silences" (Irigaray 75). As with most of Conrad's fiction, Under Western Eyes abounds with awareness of sounds and silences. Once the field is extended to examining ways that non-linguistic signs work, the reader must hike past the realist path and seek meaning in all kinds of cues, including the juxtaposition, sequence and even lack of order in signs. Julia Kristeva defines this as "semanalysis," an approach that "conceives of meaning not as a sign system but as a signifying

process" (Kristeva 28). Language is not a closed system, although it is perceived as a structure that is either accurate or not ("I'm trying to think of the right word"). The process of establishing meaning, on the other hand, includes "various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language" such as loudness, connotation, "syntactic irregularities such as ellipses, non-recoverable deletions," and other omissions (Kristeva 28). There is no doubt that Conrad explores just such determinants of meaning, each of which shade the supposedly absolute referent.

Under Western Eyes examines tensions among the elements I have been exploring throughout this study: language, self, and community. But this time, in order to identify any of these, characters and narrator much more consciously try to understand the signs around them, hoping to come to some irrefutable knowledge or understanding, some final truth. The same trap awaits these characters, however, as I have found in the other works I have examined. No final knowledge exists to be reached, a conclusion the novel highlights by its emphasis on aural and other signs: words, names, sounds, silences, combined with other hermeneutic cues such as stares, squeezes of the hand, positions of the body, reputation, and so on, all provide characters, narrator and readers with particles of meaning. Initially so certain of his public role as star student, Razumov finds that role dissolved in his rooms by

Haldin's private confession. In the risky world of revolutionary Russia, Razumov can only imagine his entire future compromised by Haldin's action. It does not occur to him until later that Haldin's decision to target him as a sympathetic accomplice is based on faulty interpretation of Razumov's actions: Haldin has read his silences as "generosity," his reserve as strength (20-21). Razumov undergoes a transition from assurance about reality to distress about ambiguity. The novel traces his efforts to translate his polyvalent interpretations into one action--a decision about how to act, no matter the consequences.[18]

The experiment Conrad undertakes in Under Western Eyes evolves like a complex archeological dig by several teams of researchers. These teams are comprised of various combinations of investigators, including the narrator, Nathalie Haldin, numerous Russian revolutionaries residing in Geneva, and Razumov himself. The variety of alliances, rendezvous, and interviews guarantees the polyvalent interpretations. The first identified researcher is the narrator, a teacher of English residing in Geneva, who prides himself on his ability to recognize the Western lens through which he perceives actions of the Russian exiles and revolutionaries he encounters. He protests continuously that the tale of his experiences and observations has been corrected by his reading the diary of Razumov and using some of Razumov's own phrases.

When we first begin hearing of young Razumov's coerced involvement in the revolutionary actions of Victor Haldin, we are encouraged to read them almost as transcription of Razumov's detailed journal. Anything "shocking" (28) is to be attributed to the narrator's mistranslation or his inability to transfer the Russian experience understandably to Western readers. He is excessively conscientious about uncovering for his readers universal truths, a task he accepts as the obligation of a narrator.

> Approaching this part of Mr Razumov's story, my mind, the decent mind of an old teacher of languages, feels more and more the difficulty of the task.
>
> The task is not in truth the writing in the narrative form a precis of a strange human document, but the rendering--I perceive it now clearly --of the moral conditions ruling over a large portion of this earth's surface; conditions not easily to be understood, much less discovered in the limits of a story, till some key-word is found; a word that could stand at the back of all the words covering the pages, a word which, if not truth itself, may perchance hold truth enough to help the moral discovery which should be the object of every tale. (62, emphasis added)

Readers learn a great deal about the narrator in this passage. His first statement is simultaneously disclaimer and offering of credentials. He sees his role as critical in understanding the complicated range of experiences he describes. Conrad suggests that the manner of telling is as important as what is told; that, in fact, every story is a "rendering." The narrator confirms this emphasis on versions every time he tells readers he has omitted a conversation because it was not

important, or breaks off in the middle of a description, because "it's no use going into details" (139). These interpretations of significance clearly affect our access to information that might allow readers to suggest alternative versions of the "truth." The narrator's rhetorical strategy is to mine this story in hopes of finding a master signifier, a key to unlocking the absolute truth usually just out of human reach. His search for the "key-word" that may open the door of moral truth for his readers is complicated by "conditions" that are "not easily to be understood." The narrator, then, still has some belief that a coherence may exist, some hope that the fragments of information and observation may form a unified "truth." Yet there is to be no unity.

While the narrator claims to be suspicious of his own renderings, Conrad simultaneously makes readers suspicious of the narrator's methods and objectives. Whenever the narrator makes a disclaimer that he is simply a transmitter of the scenes he has observed, the diary he has read, the conversations he has heard, readers are asked to doubt. Almost like the bard of a Homeric epic who claims that the muse is singing through him, the narrator claims that he uses no art: what he sees, hears and reads is what he writes, that he is a nearly transparent lens. Although readers see his lens as definitively opaque, he is no ordinary obtuse, unreliable narrator: he models an incomplete paradigm of the sensitive interpreter.

He fears that his cultural biases, age differences, and other barriers may cloud his perceptions, prevent him from interpreting all the evidence with complete accuracy. Since readers cannot believe the first version--his errors in his supposed transparency are all too apparent--the latter view seems more plausible: no interpretation is irrefutable. Monovalent semiotics can no longer be accepted. Although the narrator's confession seems designed to ease the doubts of his audience, instead it intensifies them. The narrator complains repeatedly about the difficulty of interpreting the words and actions of members of different cultures, insisting that the semiotics of Russian and Western experience differ radically. Westerners do not see or hear as meaningful the same things that a Russian would, he claims. When the "heroic fugitive" and "a certain Madame de S--, a lady of advanced views" ride throughout Geneva facing each other in an open carriage, the narrator tries to understand the significance of this act.

> Their airings suggested a conscious public manifestation. Or it may have been unconscious. Russian simplicity often marches innocently on the edge of cynicism for some lofty purpose. But it is a vain enterprise for sophisticated Europe to try and understand these doings. Considering the air of gravity extending even to the physiognomy of the coachman and the action of the showy horses, this quaint display might have possessed a mystic significance, but to the corrupt frivolity of a western mind, like my own, it seemed hardly decent. (110, emphasis added)

Signs that seem of no significance to the two travellers--and certainly not to the coachman and horses!--are searched by the

narrator for their significance. It may be that Westerners cannot understand Russian acts, but readers become suspicious when the narrator claims that no interpreters--save himself--can adjust their lenses. The narrator also claims to have discovered a "mystic" lens through which Russians filter experience, but because he repeats this so frequently, readers suspect it as an excuse, an indication of the narrator's own weakness as an interpreter.

The narrator tries to create a consistent, credible explanation that will help him read any similar experiences in the future. But this is his chief error, trying to make everything he does not understand fit his paradigm of "Russian."

> The propensity of lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression, is very Russian. . . . I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naive and hopeless cynicism. (93)

Of course no one "reading" will cover all situations. Rather than believing the narrator that the primary problem is the differences in cultures, and despite the narrator's repeated protestations that he is trying to get it right, readers doubt his interpretation when he uses such terms as "simplicity," "mystic," "naive," and "cynicism" in pejorative ways. This suspicion about the essentializing paradigm that affects his every interpretation seems reconfirmed when the narrator

decides that not only the sound of the words, but their very appearance is foreign, designed to mystify. Looking at one of Haldin's letters, the narrator claims to be mystified: the "very handwriting seemed cabalistic, incomprehensible to the experience of Western Europe" (117).

In other words, Westerners cannot understand Russian ways of looking at problems, perhaps, as Gene Moore claims, because the chronotopes (the relationship of space and time) differ so radically. Russians pay close attention to time and space: Razumov, for example, feels pressed by time and tightly trapped by small spaces--his tiny rented room, the prison-like rooms in which he is interviewed, where silence that suggests something "measureless" is not interrupted even by the "clock on the mantlepiece" (43). In contrast, in Geneva most descriptions of time are more imprecise and most of the action occurs in open streets, parks, gardens. The narrator emphasizes the differences in attitude toward space and place even as he seeks the story's coherence and tries to

> make what I have to say presently of Mr. Razumov's presence in Geneva a little more credible--for this is a Russian story for Western ears, which, as I have observed already, are not attuned to certain tones of cynicism and cruelty, of moral negation, and even of moral distress already silenced at our end of Europe. (140)

Of course, as Eloise Knapp Hay points out, not having spent much time in England in twenty years, the narrator is ignoring the revolutionary disruptions occurring there ("Missing" 133).

This difference in attitude toward time and space may suggest a reason for Razumov's heightened sensitivity to sounds and silences. Since "sound is an event in time" (Ong 76), and Razumov finds time and timing particularly critical, then he naturally will be hyperaware of snatches of meaning as they disappear with sound in a moment of time.

The narrator's insensitivity to the concerns and abilities of Westerners and to the attitudes of the Russians is highlighted here. The narrator reminds his readers so often of their cultural blinders, and he misunderstands so many things, that the question arises whether the fault is primarily his own. Yet he is more than simply an unreliable narrator: his awareness of the various impediments to understanding force him into semanalysis, mining each situation for additional clues and factoring in both timing and "fullness of knowledge." Understanding, which is perceived as a state to be sought, is valued highly, no matter the way it is reached. For example, when Nathalie leaves the narrator and Razumov in the public garden to return to her ailing mother, the narrator at first gloats that he has a greater basis for understanding her departure than Razumov, but he also tries to understand Razumov's response. Only in contrast to Razumov can the narrator say he understands; only in the dialogic process can he approach real understanding. Nathalie has just thanked Razumov for understanding her, but as she leaves she hints

that narrator is the one who truly understands why she must go immediately. The narrator subtly revels in his position:

> "No," I said gravely, if with a smile, "you cannot be expected to understand."
>
> His clean-shaved lip quivered ever so little before he said, as if wickedly amused--
>
> "But haven't you heard just now? I was thanked by that young lady for understanding so well."
>
> I looked at him rather hard. Was there a hidden and inexplicable sneer in this retort? No. It was not that. It might have been resentment. Yes. But what had he to resent? He looked as though he had not slept very well of late. . . . Now, when I know how true it was, I can honestly affirm that this <u>was</u> the effect produced on me. It was painful in a curiously indefinite way--for of course, the definition comes to me now while I sit writing in the fullness of my knowledge. But this is what the effect was at that time of absolute ignorance. (156)

The narrator tries to match facial expression, possible motives, physical influences, and tone of voice with an interpretation of Razumov's attitude, which he finally acknowledges he cannot reach except in retrospect. And even that knowledge is tenuous. At the time he was not at all certain to what conclusions or impressions his semanalysis led him. Because it is clear at this point that the narrator does not possess "fullness of knowledge," readers also doubt whether at that point he was in a state of "absolute ignorance." These two notions are false dichotomies.

During the remainder of his interview with Razumov, the narrator either admits his lack of understanding or congratulates himself on his perception, when the reader knows he has

missed too much. Curious about Razumov's hesitation to visit Mrs. Haldin and Nathalie to address their son's and brother's last days, the narrator protests: "I can't make out your attitude in this. Either the man is a hero to you, or . . ." (162; ellipses Conrad's). The narrator admits here his habit of seeking paradigms as explanation, and readers see this model as faulty. The relationship between Haldin and Razumov was never an either-or situation. Not long afterwards, Razumov has divulged enough about his reason for staying in Geneva that the narrator can say smugly, "I was satisfied with my faculty for putting two and two together when I drew the inference that the mission had something to do with the person of the great Peter Ivanovich" (166). He is more self satisfied than he has a right to be, since his interpretation is wrong-headed: Razumov has no mission and his presence in Geneva only tangentially relates to Peter I. Again, the logical process he praises must also be rejected as a means to understanding.

In his typical manner of focussing on the wrong clues, or missing the connections that may create meaning, the narrator tells simply as background the story of Peter Ivanovitch, the "heroic fugitive," and his escape from imprisonment by the autocratic authorities who have attached heavy chains to his legs. The tale details his failed attempts to release himself from his chains; his resulting despair that turns him into a

solitary wild "beast-man"; his rescue by a woman; and his subsequent published autobiography that brought him international acclaim. The narrator is capable of binary, metaphorical analysis: he does point out symbolic elements within Peter Ivanovitch's story. But he seems unaware of the multiple parallels in the story to Razumov's experiences, unable to read the syntagmatic associations. The story seems to be told in such detail, then, not for the benefit of his readers but for that of Conrad's, and not as a metaphor for Razumov's experience and identity, neither of which can be explained directly in words, but as an exercise in dialogic analysis.

The contiguous layers are many. Like the fugitive, Razumov is alone: only recently has he suspected that he may have a family identity as the illegitimate child of Prince K. Eager to establish such a connection, to finally belong to a paradigm, Razumov is happy to see himself in the chains of "the divine right of autocracy" (106), unlike Peter I's iron fetters which connect him forcibly to this political system he abhors. Razumov is writing an essay to win a contest that will assure his stable place in the world of his aristocratic father, when he is interrupted by Haldin, the revolutionary who announces he has just assassinated a government official. This oral announcement displaces the assurance that the written essay would have created, replacing his sense of who

he is with the suspicion of ambiguity.[19] Convinced in the atmosphere of political suspicion and upheaval that the physical proximity to Haldin, even for the briefest of time, and the mere utterance of his confession have permanently stained his reputation as an upright student, Razumov feels his identity has been compromised. And of course, it has. Any label will limit the dynamics of the self. Ong's observation that spoken words exist only momentarily in time helps explain Razumov's dreamlike anxiety as he tries to discover what is real. Even though "sound is an event in time," people treat words as spacial signs to attempt to have some control over them (Ong 76).

Now Razumov feels shackled by two claims, both of which are sham. His old chains (to autocracy) are compounded by his supposed allegiance to the revolutionaries, so that his fetters now truly weigh him down. He is as desperate as was Peter Ivanovich to escape these constraints. The first result of his trying to shrug off those fetters is his part in the death of Victor Haldin, whose loss shocks revolutionaries all over Europe. Awareness of Razumov's arrival and stay in Geneva, the subject of the majority of the novel, is similarly widespread because of his supposed close and friendly attachment to Haldin. As in the case of Peter Ivanovitch, "the sensational clink of [whose] fetters is heard all through the chapters describing his escape--a subject of wonder to two

continents" (106), Under Western Eyes is a story of Razumov casting off the bonds that he believed forged his identity. He must learn to substitute the dialogic process.

In addition, like the fugitive in chains, who "had begun by concealing himself successfully" (106), Razumov, too, is "tempted by despair to give up" trying to escape his chains (107), and turns into a "brute" whom no one in Geneva can understand. He becomes reserved in manner, listening only to the dialogues in his head because

> he had nothing else to put his trust in. For it was as though there had been two human beings indissolubly joined in the enterprise. The civilized man, the enthusiast of advanced humanitarian ideals thirsting for the triumph of spiritual love and political liberty; and the stealthy, primeval savage, pitilessly cunning in the preservation of his freedom from day to day, like a tracked wild beast. (108)

Although each man expects the interior to resolve in a choice between these apparently opposing positions, the final result will be neither a choice nor a synthesis, but a continual dialogue. This description of the fugitive clearly parallels Razumov's sense of himself. The wild beast-man approaches a woman alone on a grassy bank, silently so as not to startle her, but also barely able to speak because he has been out of any human context for so long that "it seemed as though he had lost the faculty of speech" (109). Similarly, Razumov feels that the truth "shining" in Nathalie which has made him love her must also force his confession about his role in her

brother's death. Just as the solitary woman sheds "sacred, redeeming tears" over the brute, restoring him to language and humanity, and soon relieving him of his fetters; so, too, Nathalie pronounces her belief that "revolutionist and reactionary, victim and executioner, betrayer and betrayed, they shall all be pitied . . . and forgotten; for without that there can be no union and no love" (291). This promise of redemption coming from the sister of Haldin seems to be the final catalyst for his confession to her. It must be noted, however, that this revelation is not made in a romantic affirmation of human connection, via language, but is made nonverbally: Razumov simply points to himself. Words here are simply inadequate.

Unlike the "heroic fugitive," Razumov does not now reenter the human world: although his confession has satisfied his need to annul his betrayal of Haldin and of himself,[20] it leaves him even more isolated. Although like Peter I, he turns to writing "the story of his life" (106), it is not as a best-selling autobiography for all of Europe, but as an intimate diary which the narrator believes was intended for no others' eyes. By story's end, however, Razumov has exteriorized his interlocutor: in positing Nathalie as the intended reader, he strengthens his position as subject. The last lines of the diary are these: "I am independent--and therefore perdition is my lot" (298). Yet Razumov is percep-

tive enough to recognize that the only thing lost is stability of self, which was never more than a ruse. The heroism of the confession to the assembled revolutionists is denounced by Laspara's attempt to reduce him to a new name: "police spy." Nonetheless, Razumov is able to reject this narrowing of his identity: he realizes that "even his identity as a police spy is bogus; Laspara has only substituted one false image for another" (Whitely 75). Condemned to a gruesome punishment, the bursting of his eardrums, he is deprived to an even greater extent of a verbal community. I don't see his deafness as only "a silent reminder of his audacity" to try to create a self outside of community, as Whitely claims (75). Instead it is confirmation, however painful, that identity can be approached outside of language.

There is one paradigm that fits all the figures in Under Western Eyes: their intense concern with being understood, with connecting with another's mind, and with understanding others and the diverse signs they emit. This urge does have its own dialogic process, nevertheless. Characters want simultaneously to define themselves and to be part of a community; to sanction their own actions and to transcend solopsistic judgment. Even after Razumov decides to expose Haldin's terrorist act to the authorities, experiencing it as a discovery of "what he had meant to do all along," he is not satisfied with approving his own moral stance. Having

examined the potential accusation of "betrayal" for ways it might define his actions, and finding no linguistic affinity, he claims to be satisfied with his ethics. Nevertheless, "he felt the need of some other mind's sanction."

> With something resembling anguish he said to himself--
> 'I want to be understood.' The universal aspiration with all its profound and melancholy meaning assailed heavily Razumov, who, amongst eighty millions of his kith and kin, had no heart to which he could open himself. (39-40)

The fact that Razumov has no family connections and is part of no community may drive him more than the usual "universal aspiration" to establish his identity and receive this kind of affirmation. In seeking out Prince K--, his suspected father, he is hoping for a stability, a rooted connection to his immediate kin. A short time later, Razumov considers later confessing all his actions and complicity to Councillor Mikulin, who was "perhaps, the only man in the world able to understand his conduct. To be understood appeared extremely fascinating" (247). So family is not the only connection he seeks. It is a connection beyond words.

> Razumov longed desperately for a word of advice, for moral support. Who knows what true loneliness is--not the conventional word, but the naked terror? To the lonely themselves it wears a mask. (40)

In his attempt to define Razumov's need, the narrator focuses on the control language has over emotions. The "naked terror" Razumov feels is soothed as soon as he attaches to it the word

"loneliness." Yet the feeling persists, if masked by the word.

Razumov becomes even more expert at masking his reactions, even as he longs to unmask others' positions. Newly aware of the inaccuracies of others' interpretations, the philosophy student strives still for a stable epistemological stance. But he gradually acknowledges a conspiracy of misinterpretation, depending on what others think they know: either because of information from informants (Sophia) or documents from trusted sources (Nathalie) or reputation (the revolutionaries on Razumov), those with whom he comes in contact have missed the most important fact of all--Razumov's conspiracy in Haldin's death. Interestingly, to neither the revolutionaries nor to Nathalie does Razumov makes his complete identity known--although that single fact that will define his "true" identity for others is only one of a multitude of facts about him, each of which must be understood as part of his complete identity. Despite widespread speculation that Haldin must have been betrayed, and that Razumov's history needs explaining, despite its written credentials in the form of the dead Haldin's testimonial letter, no one is ready to accuse Razumov until he confesses publicly. In their desire to define others, everyone counts on speech and action to provide major clues, but Razumov is living proof that a series of facts may not adequately explain moral decisions.

We are not the sum of the parts, but a constant interplay among them. And in the words of the narrator in Tillie Olsen's story, "I Stand Here Ironing," we are never able to total it all.

The novel underscores both the importance and extreme difficulty of being understood and of understanding, and each member of the archeological dig experiences these difficulties. Razumov, for example, complains: "Must understand this! Not expected to understand that! I may have other things to do" (156). But no, that his is primary task and self-acknowledged goal. Other characters are more and less self conscious about this process. Nathalie Haldin has for a long while questioned the stability of meaning. The narrator has heard that at her finishing school, "she was suspected of holding independent views on matters settled by official teaching" (120-121). While she is suspicious of established doctrine, she is entirely faithful to her idealistic concept of her brother, Victor.

> The concrete fact, the fact of his death remained but it remained obscure in its deeper causes. She felt herself abandoned without explanation. But she did not suspect him. What she wanted was to learn almost at any cost how she could remain faithful to his departed spirit. (122)

Although his death leaves her "abandoned" and more isolated, like Razumov, her faith in her brother only increases, so that his words in a letter about Razumov--that he is one of those "unstained, lofty, and solitary existences"--become almost

"official teaching." She attaches her hopes to Razumov because all that is left of her brother are "a few poor words" (119) of his last days that Razumov, whom she believes to be her brother's close friend, may have overheard. When she first meets Razumov, she is overwhelmed by emotion:

> she had before her the man so highly regarded by her brother, the man who had known his value, spoken to him, understood him, had listened to his confidences, perhaps had encouraged him-- (146)[21]

It seems primarily their verbal exchange that persuades her of their mutual understanding; and she seems to hope that by re-hearing those words from Razumov's lips, she may herself understand her brother. But she cannot penetrate the protective mask Razumov wears, although she tries to apply her previous policy of suspicion and independent reading of words and deeds.

Her efforts to understand are challenged repeatedly. Waiting in the park yet another afternoon for Razumov to meet her, Nathalie replays their interview for the narrator, who questions whether Razumov had understood the invitation.

> 'Understood what I meant?' she wondered. 'He was greatly moved. That I know! In my own agitation I could see it. But I spoke distinctly. He heard me; he seemed, indeed, to hang on my words . . . ' (150; ellipses Conrad's)

The only way she can read her interaction is by the signs she noticed, what she recalls of her own actions and states. Once again, understanding is spotlighted as the critical act, although focussing exclusively on words seems futile. When

Razumov does finally arrives late to their rendezvous, she effusively thanks him for "understanding" her. Because he knows one truth about his relationship with her brother, he is defensive about the emotional bond she wants to establish: "What is there to thank me for? Understand you? . . . How did I understand you? . . . You had better know that I understand nothing" (154; ellipses Conrad's). Like Socrates, he is the wisest for recognizing this last fact: he is wisest because he knows he knows nothing.

Yet the others pursue their efforts at understanding. The narrator continues his own misreadings of the evidence, as in this case:

> It occurred to me that his clean-shaven, almost swarthy face was really of the very mobile sort, and that the absolute stillness of it was the acquired habit of a revolutionist, of a conspirator everlastingly on his guard against self-betrayal in a world of secret spies. (159)

Yes, Razumov is guarding against self-betrayal, but not due to the reasons the narrator ascribes. He is wrong again when he assumes that Haldin's written comments about Razumov dictate the interpretation that they were friends. Razumov can only respond, with an irony of course lost on the narrator, "Obviously. That's perfectly well known. A friend. Quite correct" (161). Putting a name on his relationship with Haldin would indeed be difficult. Razumov has rejected "betrayer," just as he cannot in good conscience accept "friend." His motivation cannot be communicated, his actions

cannot be understood in words: only the sum of all of the misreadings of his history, actions, utterances, and community can begin to accumulate into an identity. This may be Conrad's project--to provide readers with just such an accumulation.

The narrator assigns his difficulty in interpretation to a multitude of gaps--those of culture, age, and gender--and to language itself. Trying his best to express sympathy to Nathalie and her mother in response to new information about Victor's death, he blames at first his "occidental" feelings that make him and "the Western readers for whom this story is written" unable to understand in just the right "complexion" (99-100). But language seems designed also to impede real contact. He complains that he can only think of "some commonplace phrases, those futile phrases that give the measure of our impotence before each other's trials" (100). Razumov struggles constantly to make his spoken words have the ring of honesty, so that he will not be unmasked as a fraud, even while he wrestles with the words written in his diary. These written words seem to carry more credibility as the "real" meaning, perhaps because they appear to have a greater permanence than spoken words (Ong 132). The narrator reports Razumov's difficulties in his last diary entry, praising first in "a man who had read, thought, lived, pen in hand, . . . the sincerity of the attempt to grapple by the same means with

another profounder knowledge" (295). Nevertheless, it was a struggle, as evidenced by

> a page and a half of incoherent writing where his expression is baffled by the novelty and the mysteriousness of that side of our emotional life to which his solitary existence had been a stranger. (295)

For the individual, that is, words have no meaning when they are unconnected to experience. Furthermore, individual experience is difficult to knead into public expression. The narrator blames Razumov's inexperience with interpersonal relationships as the cause of his "incoherent" verbal expression, but Conrad has trained readers to accept such inconsistency in paradigms.

A number of minor characters also confront the problematics of understanding, including the dame de compagnie, who only later names herself as Tekla, and who is quite affronted by the disparity between words and meaning. Acting as a secretary to Peter Ivanovitch, she found it difficult "to have the secret of the composition laid bare before her; to see the great author of the revolutionary gospels grope for words as if he were in the dark as to what he meant to say" (128). This emerges as a source of anxiety for everyone: how can understanding be reached if words do not express ideas that truly exist? How can there be ideas or experience or reality without words to express them? What's more, if knowledge and understanding do involve non-linguistic signs, or non-paradig-

matic uses of language, how are characters to learn the dialogic process? The narrator provides his readers with numerous examples, including an attempt to explain why Razumov calls one of the anarchists a "cursed Jew," when he knows nothing of the man's personal background. That way of thinking may not make sense to a western audience, which presumably expects a direct connection between word and world.

> But this is not a story of the West, and this exclamation must be recorded, accompanied by the comment that it was merely an expression of hate and contempt, best adapted to the nature of the feelings Razumov suffered from at the time. He was boiling with rage . . . (240)

This is an argument, of course, for speech as action, a Wittgensteinian awareness of what people do with words in a particular instance, rather than what absolute truth they believe exists and are trying to approach. It also argues for understanding as a process, not an immediate recognition. V. N. Vološinov posits that understanding an utterance is not tied to recognizing the fixed meaning of certain words, but to becoming aware of the use of the words in the specific context (68). Not only does he insist that "the meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context" to which listeners or readers must attune themselves, but that "any true understanding is dialogic in nature" (Volosinov 79, 102). The interpreter must, in effect, contextualize every utterance, using every sign and element of background that can be gleaned. The speaker, as well, adjusts his words to the context as he

perceives it. The following scene between Razumov and Peter Ivanovitch illustrates this dialogic process of utterance and understanding. I have numbered the paragraphs for reference in later discussion.

Razumov has claimed to be nothing but an ordinary Russian.

1. But Peter Ivanovitch dissented emphatically--
2. 'No! No! You are not ordinary. I have some experience of Russians who are--well--living abroad. You appear to me, and to others too, a marked personality.'
3. 'What does he mean by this?' Razumov asked himself, turning his eyes fully on his companion. The face of Peter Ivanovitch expressed a meditative seriousness.
4. 'You don't suppose, Kirylo Sidorovitch, that I have not heard of you from various points where you made yourself known on your way here? I have had letters.'
5. 'Oh, we are great in talking about each other,' interjected Razumov, who had listened with great attention. 'Gossip, tales, suspicions, and all that sort of thing, we know how to deal in to perfection. Calumny even.'
6. In indulging in this sally, Razumov managed very well to conceal the feeling of anxiety which had come over him. At the same time he was saying to himself that there could be no earthly reason for anxiety. He was relieved by the evident sincerity of the protesting voice.
7. 'Heavens!' cried Peter Ivanovitch. 'What are you talking about? What reasons can <u>you</u> have to . . . ?'
8. The great exile flung up his arms as if words had failed him in sober truth. Razumov was satisfied. Yet he was moved to continue in the same vein. (174)

In paragraphs 1 and 2, Peter Ivanovitch feels thoroughly justified to make his observations about Razumov based on past experience and on the corroboration of others. Guilty and

perpetually anxious about being discovered, Razumov responds nonverbally in paragraph 3. He focuses on Peter I's last phrase, the word "marked" in particular for its possible meaning as a "marked man," awaiting the fetters or the noose. He holds a dialogue with himself, questioning how Peter I meant it, and then looks for additional clues in his facial expression.

Peter Ivanovitch continues defending his "reading" of Razumov in paragraph 4, saying that it has widespread support from written missives. The irony of Razumov having "made [him]self known" on his journey to Geneva may inspire Razumov's rejoinder in paragraph 5. That Razumov has been listening "with great attention" suggests at least two views: he may have been projecting concern in his own facial expression, and he may have been looking for a portion of Peter Ivanovitch's speech at which he can thrust and parry. What he suggests is an alternative reading of the letters about him. Perhaps, he offers, they are the kind of subtle slander Russians are famous for. Paragraph 6 reveals that Razumov perceives his last retort as a return of fire in a battle of words. Like a seasoned soldier, Razumov can bluff his way through enemy lines while at the same time persuading himself that he is on the right side. The last line releases the tension that has been building in Razumov as he hears in Peter Ivanovitch's tone an anxiety that mirrors his own about the

stability of his knowledge.

In paragraph 7, Peter Ivanovitch exclaims in apparent distress the very question Razumov had asked himself in paragraph 3. But instead of having the dialogue with himself, an effort that demonstrates Razumov's strong internal need to know, the "great feminist" opens the dialectical search for truth to his interlocutor. And rather than asking what Razumov means, he wants to know to what his words refer. This is an answer, of course, that Razumov cannot answer, because his retort was a "sally," not a response tied to the isolated, limited meaning of words. The despair of "the great exile" in the last paragraph can no longer even be attempted in words: physical expression completely replaces language, possibly because words have not worked well since the start of this exchange. Razumov recognizes that he has won this battle, but that the conflict is not yet resolved.

Razumov seems unwilling or unable to admit to ambiguity. Trying to understand his own actions, Razumov seeks order and logical explanations for acts that have neither.

> His new tranquility was like a flimsy garment, and seemed to float at the mercy of a casual word. Betrayal! . . .
>
> I have said no word to him that was not strictly true. Not one word,' Razumov argued with himself. (66)

He tries this dialogic pattern seeking a stability, a reconciliation of opposing evidence. However, returning to his room he finds it has been ransacked, his books scattered and

piled. "This disorder affected him profoundly. . . . He had a distinct sensation of his very existence being undermined in some mysterious manner" (70). What upsets him the most is the ambiguity of interpretation. His crime has no automatic result: "Razumov envied the materialism of the thief and the passion of the incorrigible lover. The consequences of their actions were always clear and their lives remained their own" (71). Razumov has come by the end of the novel to a reconciliation with this kind of instability of meaning. Making his life his own has meant abandoning paradigmatic readings of reality, and opting instead for the polyvalence of meaning.

NOTES

[1]See especially Bruce Johnson, Conrad's Models of Mind, Aaron Fogel, Coercion to Speak, and Paul Armstrong, The Challenge of Bewilderment, for important discussions of the ways narrators, characters and readers negotiate problems of language.

[2]I use Belsey here as a strategy of reading. While I think that Conrad's texts draw attention to problems of the subject and the sites of contradiction, I am not arguing that his politics are analogous to Belsey's.

[3]Watts 70. Conrad's anxiety about the tragic consequences of recognizing one's bondage to natural forces would be scoffed at by D.H. Lawrence, who similarly, although optimistically, believes understanding nature to be the path to self-knowledge. According to Lawrence, the same impersonal life force generates all mankind and nature. He writes in "Red Moon Rise,"

> The world with worlds is a womb, where issues all
> The shapeliness that decks us here below
> And the same fire that boils within this ball
> Of earth, and quickens all herself with flowers,
> Is womb-fire in the stiffened clay of us.

[4]Speakers expect related responses, and most often receive them in Conrad's early works. Not until later novels such as The Secret Agent or Nostromo does Conrad investigate extensively the disjointed conversation.

[5]Ezra Pound sees a similar failure in language's capacity to function adequately for all of man's needs. In his essay on Vorticism, he writes, "any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language."

[6]Wordsworth, "Natural Apocalypse" in Ellman and Feidelson 59.

[7]Compare the "uncouth babbling sounds" Kayerts and Carlier hear the Africans make (OP 218).

[8]Jeffrey Meyers suggests that Conrad here is mocking his own broken spoken English.

[9]Note here the typical Conradian theme of the double.

[10]See Johnson 106-25.

[11]Compare Marlow's longing to hear Kurtz, "the voice," even more than to see him.

[12]This anticipates Chief Inspector Heat's image of a tightrope in The Secret Agent to represent the precarious balance between expectations and anomalies.

[13]As Said remarks, "the sea swallows up Martin Decoud with huge indifference to his human littleness; in his final yielding to it, Decoud seems drawn to its unlimited power like a man seeking union with the infinite (109).

[14]It is interesting to compare them to other communicating couples in Conrad. Unlike the close, fertile relationship of the Violas, the Goulds' distant, barren one does not include conversation. Yet conversation is not an exclusive measure of intimacy. In Patusan, Doramin and his wife, silent always, appear to act in concert, although their relationship is not explored extensively. Verloc and Winnie, on the other hand, talk in The Secret Agent, but certainly do not communicate, and can hardly be described as close.

[15]Note here the passing reference to private language, further confirmation of the novel's preoccupation.

[16]In Nostromo, to be sure, the sea and the sky are also impenetrable, but the novel's focus is on the characters, whereas in the earlier works the natural surroundings are almost allegorical.

[17]Hay, for example, calls him a "dull, half-perceptive Englishman" (Political Novels 136).

[18]Razumov resembles Jim in his desire to act according to consistent criteria.

[19]See Whitely 70-76 for a perceptive discussion of Razumov's search for identity.

[20]Razumov writes at the very end of his diary: "In giving Victor Haldin up, it was myself, after all, whom I have betrayed most basely" (298).

[21]This is reminiscent of the Intended's attitude toward Marlow.

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