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Epistemology in 'Karain: A Memory', 'A Smile of Fortune' and
*The Shadow-Line***

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Critical interpretations of Conrad's representation of imperialism and colonialism reveal differing emphases, ones that if they sometimes verge on the contradictory, are perhaps not intrinsically uncomplimentary. Andrea White, for example, identifies Conrad's 'desire to expose imperialism's fraudulent pretensions of benevolence' and, while recognising his ambivalence and conservatism, praises Conrad's crucial contributions to an eventually liberating 'reevaluation of imperialism'.¹ A strong case can indeed be made for these elements in Conrad's fiction generally, and in his Malay stories in particular. However, in contrast, Kenneth Graham notes the novelist's 'searing scepticism' manifested in a 'multiplicity of viewpoints that will conceal the artist yet express his view [...] of the world's lack of fixed meaning'.² Indeed, the possibility of any firm ethical stance seems to be questioned in one of Conrad's letters to R.B. Cunninghame Graham: 'And suppose Truth is just around the corner like the elusive and useless loafer it is? I can't tell. No one can tell. It is impossible to know anything'.³ Of course, any attempt to tie down the point of view of an author whose work is so multi-faceted, subtle and protean by any one reference to his stated opinions elsewhere is fraught with danger. Yet, such a statement does raise the

¹ Andrea White. 'Conrad and Imperialism'. *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. pp. 181, 198.

² Kenneth Graham. 'Conrad and Modernism'. *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. J.H. Stape. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 207.

³ *Joseph Conrad's Letters to R.B. Cunninghame Graham*. Ed. C.T. Watts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969. p. 45.

question of how far epistemological uncertainty may inhibit meaning and hinder clear interpretation of his depiction of late nineteenth century ‘new imperialism’. John Peters is in no doubt that ‘his emphasis on the individuality of the epistemological process brings into question all attempts to universalize human experience’ posing ‘two unpleasant logical possibilities for Conrad: epistemological solipsism and ethical anarchy’.⁴ Although Peters then understandably absolves Conrad’s narrative techniques from contributing to either extreme, troubling questions remain. These revolve around the effect of those techniques on readers’ perceptions and how far ethical issues are explored in a way that opens up interpretative possibilities. Daniel Just tries to disentangle issues of ethical ambiguity or nihilism by arguing that the language and narrative structures of his novellas embody a ‘mechanism of the disintegration of meaning’ and that the undermining of denotative language is ‘the only ethically acceptable response to the historical experience of colonialism’.⁵ Whether Conrad’s necessarily uncertain epistemology, then, leads to obscurity or meaningful illumination is at stake.

This paper will therefore consider the representation of colonialism and imperialism in Conrad’s shorter Malay and Indian Ocean fiction, in relation to the intriguing questions that John Peters and Daniel Just raise. In particular, it will explore how far Conrad finds it possible to conceptualise the ‘Other’ in a colonial context. Therefore, the issues of how far narrative techniques do indeed manifest disintegration of meaning or alternatively clarify ethical questions of being and acting will need to be elucidated. In addition, the balance between epistemological uncertainties and ontological imperatives in Conrad’s work is another key consideration. For example, it will be argued that the extent to which that balance inhibits or illuminates our understanding is fundamental to our appreciation and to any move toward a critical reading. As part of that impulse, this article will seek to show that

⁴ John G. Peters. *Conrad and Impressionism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p. 5.

⁵ Daniel Just. ‘Between Narrative Paradigms: Joseph Conrad and the Shift from Realism to Modernism from a Genre Perspective’. *English Studies* 89.3 (2008): pp. 277, 282.

the narrative techniques of multiple narrators, limited point of view, ‘achronology’ and *in medias res*, which John Peters treats as uniformly destabilising, have very different effects in the balance of the epistemological and the ontological at different stages of Conrad’s writing career.⁶ Ultimately, the question is how far ambivalence, ambiguity and uncertainty form an illuminating response to European identity and questionable moral purpose in an Eastern setting, and how far they also deepen the mystery and murkiness of the movement from commercial colonialism to state disseminated imperial ideology. To some extent, this question relates to ways in which Conrad can be considered as a twentieth-century modernist as well as a writer whose creative impulses also look back to the nineteenth century.

The subtleties and problems involved in the depiction of the nineteenth-century colonial encounter are exemplified in the early story, ‘Karain: A Memory’, published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in November 1897. Linda Dryden characterises it as a work of popular romance in which ‘there is no hint of subtle irony or suggestions of sordid reality beneath the exotic surface’ and which ‘seems to have little to do with Western moral values’.⁷ Yet, this rather overlooks the way the act of narration itself moves centre stage at this early stage of Conrad’s career — and in fully achieved complexity. For example, the unreliable narrator’s distancing memories are very ambivalent about how irreducibly Other Malay reality may be and about how universally applicable Western moral values are. Therefore, he alternates between seeing Karain as a fellow human being — ‘an adventurer of the sea, an outcast, a ruler – and my very good friend’ — and abstract exoticisation:

All that had the crude and blended colouring, the appropriateness almost excessive, the suspicious immobility of a painted scene; and it enclosed so perfectly the accomplished acting of his amazing pretences that the rest of the world seemed shut out forever from the gorgeous spectacle. [...] He appeared utterly cut off from everything but the sunshine, and that even seemed to be made for him alone.⁸

⁶ Peters, p. 22.

⁷ Linda Dryden. *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000. p. 114.

⁸ Joseph Conrad. *Tales of Unrest*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1947. pp. 7-8.

Although the stress on ‘gorgeous spectacle’ descends at times into hyperbole as Karain is seen as the source of the sun, elsewhere the Othering descends into racism, as in the judgment ‘little more pressing was needed to make him swerve over into the form of madness peculiar to his race’.⁹ Often, the two tendencies are combined incongruously, so we hear that ‘his plans displayed a sagacity that was only limited by his profound ignorance of the rest of the world’.¹⁰ Andrew Roberts draws out the full significance of this ambivalent and aestheticised male bonding, which is attempting to transcend the racial divide and convey both admiration and disdain. He points out that ‘the dual nature of the symbolic representation of Karain (as pure untrammelled masculinity and void masquerade) is no more than a projection [...] of the dilemmas and uncertainties of the imperial subject’.¹¹

To this can be added the implications of the symbolic use of the Jubilee sixpence as the charm to cure Karain’s haunting by his dead friend’s spirit. This can be read as undermining, perhaps even parodying, the imperial desire to exercise control through civilising influence. The narrator’s view of Karain’s power over his people has already been undercut by excessive theatrical metaphor — for example, the comment that ‘he was treated with a solemn respect accorded in the irreverent West only to monarchs of the stage’ perhaps betrays some irony about the ‘solemn’ nature of his own ‘respect’.¹² Similarly, his reflection on the power of the British monarch also plays with the confusion between illusion and reality and between respect and contempt. Firstly, gunrunners, ironically mistaken for government representatives, proffer the coin. Moreover, this coin, despite being adorned with the ‘image of the Great Queen and the most powerful thing the white men know’, has unfortunate connotations.¹³ Since the gilded 1887 Jubilee sixpence resembled a half-sovereign, and its fraudulent use led to its withdrawal from circulation, we have a bogus coin

⁹ Conrad, *Tales of Unrest*, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹ Andrew Michael Roberts. *Conrad and Masculinity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. p. 55.

¹² Conrad, *Tales of Unrest*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

being used in a bogus ritual. In addition, as David Adams further observes, ‘in emphasizing Victoria’s symbolic status, her subjects often seemed to be registering their perception of the incongruity between the person and the prestige’.¹⁴ A creatively undermining ambiguity and irony therefore surrounds the imperial symbolism. A grieving Queen’s image, wrapped in trinkets associated with Hollis’s failed romantic attachment, cures a man whose desire for his friend’s sister has brought about his downfall.

Furthermore, the fact that the Malay chief himself is given a narrative voice illuminates to a certain extent the nature of the irony toward the English narrator’s imperialist outlook. For Crystal O’Neal the ontological importance of this is clear. For her, ‘Karain’s ability to speak’ allows us to see him as ‘more than just another marginalized, colonized Other’.¹⁵ Indeed, Karain does exhibit the very different values of Malay codes of honour in his story of revenge against the Dutch trader and he does fill in some of the historical and political gaps left by the European narrator. In this way, his point of view subverts and illuminates the Western lack of perspective and ironises its very lack of foundation: ‘Oh! The strength of unbelievers!’¹⁶ Yet at the point where the narrative technique of multiple narrators seems to be most illuminating and compelling, complications arise. David Adams suggests that Karain’s story mirrors the European myth of Odysseus’s descent into Hades to converse with the dead, as indicated by his wanderings being described as ‘that obscure Odyssey of revenge’.¹⁷ Moreover, alternative parallels with Polish ballad have been suggested and one could add that the story of erotic obsession shares similarities with ‘A Smile of Fortune’.¹⁸ Whatever the case, we seem to have Western

¹⁴ David Adams. ““Remorse and Power”: Conrad’s Karain and the Queen’. *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (2001): p. 736.

¹⁵ Crystal A. O’Neal. ‘The Subaltern Speaks: Ambiguity of Empire in Conrad’s “Karain: A Memory”’. *Postcolonial Text* 3.1 (2007): p. 12.

¹⁶ Conrad, *Tales of Unrest*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Adams, p. 728; *Ibid.*, p.40.

¹⁸ Christopher GoGwilt. *The Invention of The West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995. p. 59.

problems, or at least problems expressed in Western terms, embodied by a supposed Eastern character, as imperial romance becomes imperial gothic. Robert Hampson concludes that Karain ‘has merely moved from one Orientalist discourse to another’, while Christopher GoGwilt sees it as symptomatic of fiction that uses the East to interrogate the construction of Western values.¹⁹ For him, this leads to an epistemological and interpretative crisis. So, Karain’s fable ‘does not offer a dilemma that in its immediacy or power unsettles the complacent consumption of exotic adventure. It constitutes rather, a historical as well as an existential riddle that no point of view can adequately explain’.²⁰

The story’s characters share these difficulties of interpretation as they try to establish what is illusory and what is not. Jackson, whom the narrator meets in *The Strand* some years afterwards, wonders ‘whether the charm worked’ and ‘whether it really happened to him’.²¹ Even the London scene has less solidity than his memories of Karain: ‘It is there; it pants, it runs, it rolls; it is strong and alive; it would smash you if didn’t look out; but I’ll be hanged if it is yet as real to me as...as the other thing...say, Karain’s story’.²² Moreover, the narrator’s attempted hold over time — ‘the two ship’s chronometers ticking off steadily the seconds of Greenwich Time seemed to me a protection and a relief’ — is now dissolved by the fluid inter-penetration of past and present that is memory.²³ The achronological technique means that epistemological uncertainty predominates. We are therefore not certain what to make of Karain himself, despite the resonating powerful critique of the empty, superstitious imperial ideology he has unmasked. The solidity of the narrator’s fictional world breaks apart when Karain finally returns to his people: ‘I wondered what they thought,

¹⁹ Robert Hampson. *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad’s Malay Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000. p. 124.

²⁰ GoGwilt, *Invention*, p. 57.

²¹ Conrad, *Tales of Unrest*, p. 54.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

what he thought; ...what the reader thinks'.²⁴ The shattering of the hermeneutical circle is signified not just by the irruption of the readers' perceptions, but also by the change of tense from 'thought' to 'thinks'. As Robert Hampson remarks, this 'problematizes the boundary between reader and text in the same way as the narrative has problematized the boundaries between cultures'.²⁵ Meaning, however, does not so much disintegrate as multiply. The light shed by the technique of two mutually undercutting narrative voices has partly been diffused by the difficulty of achieving true engagement with another culture. Yet, the intractable and insurmountable problems surrounding the articulation of the voice of the Other in non-ideological terms, in themselves embody a thought-provoking challenge to our interpretative strategies. No single, straightforward reading can do justice to the layers of troubling associations and contradictions that are involved.

At this point, it would seem worthwhile to consider how far Conrad thought it possible to achieve the articulation of the voice of the Other and to examine why the indigenous point of view largely recedes in his later Indian Ocean fiction. One must first consider the importance of setting. The lack of geographical specificity in Conrad's fictional Indian Ocean, stretching from the Gulf of Siam to the north, to Mauritius in the west, but centring round the Malay Archipelago, is notable. Singapore, for instance, is always referred to as 'an Eastern port'. Although Marialuisa Bignami declares his uses of these locations 'give vent to his disgust and suffering at the sight of cruel and crude colonial exploitation', the anonymity of such settings is not unproblematic.²⁶ The lack of place-names may give the fiction emblematic power, but the lack of specificity does leave it open to Achebe's critique of arrogance, of using ethnic backdrops as props for the disintegration of the European

²⁴ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁵ Hampson, p. 127.

²⁶ Marialuisa Bignami. 'Joseph Conrad, the Malay Archipelago, and the Decadent Hero'. *The Review of English Studies* 38.150 (1987): p. 202.

mind.²⁷ However, Conrad, despite his personal knowledge of the region through working as mate on the *Vidar* in 1887-8 and later as captain on the *Otago*, and despite his extensive reading, did not claim intimate knowledge of colonised societies. Indeed, when recalling a meeting with the colonial administrator Hugh Clifford, who had been moved to criticise Conrad's failure to capture the 'real' Malay in *Almayer's Folly* (1895), he records with some irony:

He ended by telling me with the uncompromising yet kindly firmness of a man accustomed to speak unpalatable truths even to Oriental potentates [...] that as a matter of fact I didn't know anything about Malays. I was perfectly aware of this. I have never pretended to any such knowledge.²⁸

More importantly, however, Conrad would not have been completely unaware through his reading of 'writing Malaysia' literature, with all its underlying uncertainty, that Clifford's concept of the 'real' Malay was, as Robert Hampson argues, a fiction produced by colonial discourse.²⁹ Consequently, he often examines the self-destructive nature of colonial values by focusing on the colonial periphery, on 'the conjuncture of volatile and antagonist perspectives' and their complex dislocations of the historical and geographical record, as GoGwilt convincingly maintains.³⁰ Such a complex focus requires the colonial Other to be increasingly dealt with more indirectly. Certainly, *The End of the Tether* (1902) is very different from 'Karain'. Here, although the Malay Serang occasionally speaks, and the third person narrator is allowed limited access to his consciousness, the effect is to stress the mutual incomprehension of Malay and European:

His placid mind had remained as incapable of penetrating the simplest motives of those he served as they themselves were incapable of detecting

²⁷ Chinua Achebe. 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*'. *Postcolonial Discourses: An Anthology*. Ed. Gregory Castle. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. p. 215.

²⁸ Joseph Conrad. *A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1946. p. iv.

²⁹ Hampson, pp. 27-28.

³⁰ Christopher GoGwilt. 'Joseph Conrad as Guide to Colonial History'. *A Historical Guide to Joseph Conrad*. Ed. John G. Peters. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 156.

through the crust of the earth the secret nature of its heart which may be fire or may be stone.³¹

It is possible to discern changing attitudes towards the conceptualisation of the colonial encounter in operation here, with greater focus on the fallibility of European perceptions of the East. Indeed, looking at the Malay fiction as a whole, Christopher GoGwilt espies a ‘turn away from the mixed racial family romances of the early Malay fiction’ such as *Almayer’s Folly* to the ‘white racial romances of the later Malay fiction’, such as *Victory*.³² Therefore, Conrad’s thought-provoking characterisation, and the ambiguous portrayal of mixed-race Mauritian society in ‘A Smile of Fortune’ (1911), is worthy of further investigation as some kind of transition between the different stages of Conrad’s writing. Here, the attitude toward, and voicing of, the colonial encounter is very different to the early writing.

Certainly, the way ‘A Smile of Fortune’ explores colonial racial prejudice and commercial values in an Eastern but non-Malay setting is crucial to how this transition can be understood. Here, understanding of local society and culture is filtered through the limited self-awareness of a single, very fallible European narrator, alone. Prejudice is evident both in the local society, which ostracises Jacobus and his mixed-race illegitimate daughter, and in the first person narrator’s own descriptions of Alice. Although she is ‘not a mulatto’, she has the thick, black ‘dishevelled magnificent hair of a gypsy tramp’ and ‘those long, Egyptian eyes’.³³ Alice is therefore stranded somewhere between European respectability and the uncertain status of untameable, if erotic, multi-racial Other. As daughter of a European trader and a mother of dubious respectability and racial origin, kept in hiding away from polite society, she takes on the descriptive language and status of an almost sub-human native. It is to this ‘startled wild animal’, alternately languid and aggressive, trapped in an

³¹ Joseph Conrad. *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether: Three Stories*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1946. p. 228.

³² Christopher GoGwilt. ‘Conrad’s Creole Family Romance and “A Smile of Fortune”’. *Conradiana* 43.2 (2011): p. 77.

³³ Joseph Conrad. *Twixt Land and Sea: Three Tales*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1947. pp. 38, 59, 71.

ironically symbolic colonial Garden of Eden, that the captain is alternately attracted and repulsed.³⁴ His contradictory reactions mirror his attitude toward colonial commerce.

Initially, he naively harks back to the days of adventure:

Why must the sea be used for trade – and for war as well? Why kill and traffic on it, pursuing selfish aims of no great importance after all? It would have been so much nicer just to sail about with here and there a port and a bit of land to stretch one's legs on.³⁵

Yet he is forced to violate 'his commercial innocence' since he lives 'in a world more or less homicidal and desperately mercantile'.³⁶ In unwillingly acting for his Western shipping company, his failed idealism partly reflects the contemporary transition towards the finance capitalism of imperialism and also leads him to becoming a victim of his own corrupt instincts towards violation and power over others. The mistreatment of Alice significantly leads to nightmare: 'That night I dreamt of a pile of gold in the form of a grave in which a girl was buried, and woke up callous with greed'.³⁷ Indeed, the connection between commerce and 'greed' and between Alice and imperial trade is fundamental to the story. When the captain is caught *in flagrante delicto* — and disturbingly, he describes 'the first kiss I planted on her closed lips was vicious enough to have been a bite' — he feels forced to buy Jacobus's potatoes.³⁸ The astonishing, indeed breathtaking, genre switch here, from romance parody and anti-Cinderella fairy story to one of financial speculation, which in the past critics have judged as an artistic failure, is in fact a technical tour de force.³⁹ In some sense, Alice has been a tradable object all along, with the text hinting at the possibility that the prospect of getting rid of the family scandal is what brings the estranged Jacobus brothers back together again, thereby making the deal on the missing bags possible.

³⁴ Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea*, p. 44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁹ For the former point of view, see: Lawrence Graver. *Conrad's Short Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969. p. 159.

Certainly, the use of Alice as commercial bait becomes clear when the narrator's refusal to trade is thwarted by Jacobus's flourishing of the girl's fallen slipper, symbol of the narrator's sexual transgressions, which Jacobus has presumably witnessed:

Jacobus raised his eyes from the shoes to look at me.
'Sit down, Captain,' he said at last, in his subdued tone.
As if the sight of that shoe had renewed the spell, I gave up suddenly the idea of leaving the house there and then. It had become impossible. I sat down, keeping my eyes on the fascinating object [...]. He checked my movement to rise by an austere, commanding gesture of the hand holding that fatal shoe. I remained seated and glared at him. 'You know I don't trade.'
'You ought to, Captain. You ought to.'⁴⁰

The repeated references to 'shoes' and the girl's 'shoe', which has become 'a fascinating object', carry associations of embarrassment, fetishisation and some kind of objectification of the shoe's wearer. Indeed, the juxtaposition of 'shoe' with 'trade' is crucial here. This underlines what David Mulry observes, that the 'orient is eroticized and feminized by the male observer' such that colonial trade is seen through the lens of illicit sexuality.⁴¹ Indeed, for another example of this, one could point to the telling description of Jacobus by the captain of the *Hilda* as 'the sort of chap to procure you anything you like for a price' where associations of prostitution nestle beneath the commercial term used.⁴²

Yet, despite this dazzling critique of the colonial encounter, where the temptation for violation is almost irresistible, and where a woman in a symbolic natural state symbolises the temptation of commercial exploitation, the story's narrative techniques complicate our response. We cannot overlook how firm significance and secure knowledge are somewhat undermined by the use of a single, confused and confusing narrator. For example, while the narrator remains suspicious of Jacobus, Captain H-, who describes Jacobus's kindness following the death of his child, is recorded as giving a quite different view of him: 'That's a

⁴⁰ Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea*, pp. 72-73.

⁴¹ David Mulry. "'Lost in the Haze": Joseph Conrad, the Ruined Maid and the Male Gaze'. *South Central Review* 31.1 (2014): pp. 77-78.

⁴² Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea*, p. 19.

good fellow – a really good fellow’.⁴³ In part, the uncertainty over which brother to trust on commercial matters exhibits Conrad’s familiar, rich and mysterious psychological pattern of doubles and doubling, that we find so memorably, for example, in ‘The Secret Sharer’.

However, this does mean that everything is left for us to interpret, as the narrator is unable to throw much light on the precise motivations of any of the characters involved. For example, at the moment when Jacobus could have forcibly married off his daughter, he starts to talk about potatoes, the intentional bathos and frightening comedy undercutting the respectability of trading, but at the cost of our understanding of what his aim has been all along. Have the brothers been plotting to offload Jacobus’s illegitimate daughter onto him, thereby eliminating the social stigma that Alice’s very presence creates, or has this been a figment of the Captain’s imagination? We are also left to imagine why the narrator’s emotions toward Alice suddenly turn from desire to indifference since the narrator does not know and cannot explain it. Nor can he explain her ‘hasty, awkward haphazard kiss which missed my lips’ as they part.⁴⁴ The technique of first person narration brings immediacy but also the full sense of the narrator’s confusion at the mixed messages surrounding him. Of course, it can easily be argued that Conrad is not interested in realism or psychological clarity here and that the destabilisation of our epistemological footing is creatively ambiguous, reflecting the destabilising nature of a symbolically captured colonial encounter. However, if we are to follow Daniel Just in seeing any arguable disintegration of meaning to be an ethical reaction, we still have to come to terms with the way the first person narrator traps us in a world with few answers. It is certainly one in which our enforced observation of the transgressive nature of Alice’s portrayal, makes this particular reader deeply uncomfortable.

Therefore, we need to examine closely the symbolism at work here. It may be nuanced but it remains challenging and deeply disturbing. Although David Mulry helpfully

⁴³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 79.

remarks that the hints of miscegenation surrounding Alice express ‘the underlying fear for the European narrator of degeneracy, atavistic precocity, madness and instability’, this still overlooks the terrifying reality of the narrator’s misogyny.⁴⁵ Whether this is also the story’s misogyny is a matter of dispute. Susan Jones considers the narrator’s depiction of a passive victim wholly ironic since Conrad:

emphasizes the illusory nature of this framing device when the narrator discovers that Alice’s actual demeanour, ‘snarling and superb’, is closer to a very different iconography – that of the African woman in *Heart of Darkness*.⁴⁶

Perhaps this judgment conceals a certain level of wish fulfilment, however, since the forcefulness of the African tribeswoman left behind in *Heart of Darkness* is arguably highly ambivalent and our last sight of Alice is scarcely more unambiguous:

I experienced the last touch of emotion in that house, at the thought of the girl I had left sitting there in the obscurity with her heavy hair and empty eyes as black as the night itself, staring into the walled garden, silent, warm, odorous with the perfume of imprisoned flowers, which, like herself, were lost to sight in a world buried in darkness.⁴⁷

Surely we are enveloped here in the narrator’s world where female (and male) emotions are conflated with images of darkness and imprisonment and supposed feminine values are viewed negatively in figurative language of absence, blackness and the night. If there might just be a — highly questionable — level of regret at what is being abandoned, there are no positive images of women on offer, either here or elsewhere. Captain H- deems marriage and sea-faring incompatible and advises ‘Don’t you ever marry unless you can chuck the sea first’. In addition, Jacobus’s infatuation with Alice’s mother is described as ‘perfectly scandalous’, his pursuit of her to the Cape and other parts of the world placing him in a

⁴⁵ Mulry, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Susan Jones. *Conrad and Women*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999. p. 183.

⁴⁷ Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea*, p. 79.

‘most degrading position’.⁴⁸ The narrator is similarly dismissive and despising of the daughters of the local old French families:

The girls are almost always pretty, ignorant of the world, kind and agreeable and generally bilingual; they prattle innocently both in French and English. The emptiness of their existence passes belief.⁴⁹

On one level, this may represent a not inaccurate picture of an isolated society, but on another, it also suggests prejudice in the equation of beauty with stupidity. If sexist attitudes are being used ironically to undermine sexism, and racism is being equated with misogyny, there are, however, no external voices beyond that of the narrator to establish any ontological alternatives supported by the text itself. Appealing to other texts’ seemingly more liberal views as Susan Jones does, pointing to *Chance* for example, is problematic since we, as readers, have to come to terms with each story as it stands, honest to our reading experience. Unlike in ‘Karain’, Conrad may understandably feel unable to attempt to give a voice to the figure who stands here as a type for the colonial Other, but since this thwarted potential voice is a female one, this leaves the narrator’s misogyny to undermine itself alone. Although it could be argued that, by itself, the emphasis on the isolated island nature of the setting implies other ontological possibilities, none can be acknowledged by the narrator and therefore their absence requires the reader’s intervention. It could be maintained that the apparent absence of authorial point of view is strength rather than weakness, the effect of being trapped within the narrator’s mind and, being thereby isolated, making us responsible for supplying alternative meanings and alternative ethical options. However, the danger of ambiguity, as well as the corresponding advantage of narrative power, in the uncertainty created by the technique of a single, fallible narrator, must be acknowledged. His misogyny or colonial bigotry could be read at face value and the epistemological uncertainty could be experienced as destabilising rather than bracing. Perhaps the intermingling of both

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 17, 36.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

potentialities helps to explain the story's ability to perplex and, for some, even infuriate, at the same time as its power continues to challenge and refuses to be dismissed.

If meaning and the one sided voicing of the colonial encounter is both controlled and constricted by the first person narrative technique of 'A Smile of Fortune', the opposite seems to be happening in the late work, *The Shadow-Line* (1917). Here a single narrator seems to be trustworthy, and capable of interpreting for us what has happened to him, many critics taking at face value his initial remarks on the passage from youth to maturity. F.R. Leavis, for example, sees the narrator as 'representative of 'man's' life in the world [...] in the way only a very exceptional man can be' when grappling with existential questions, while Ian Watt talks of 'the whole complex of conflicting emotions which characterize the onset of that penumbral transition from late youth to committed adulthood'.⁵⁰ The novella has therefore often been read as one where the colonial encounter is of minor importance. Yet, this is arguably not the case, as will shortly be argued. In addition, if the balance seems to have completely swung from the epistemological to the ontological, then we need to look at the way the narrative techniques complicate and deepen what John Peters characterises as the story's affirmation of work and community, the 'relationship between self and other through mutual reliance' which prevents any slide into solipsism or ethical anarchy.⁵¹ In the process, our understanding of these techniques deepen and complicate our appreciation of the encounter with alternative values and cultures, even though the voice of the Other appears, at first, to be totally absent. Certainly, the values of the coloniser are put under the microscope. While Terry Collits perhaps over-exaggerates by suggesting the existence of a concealed darker subtext, 'a repressed alternative narrative', which studies the individual in isolation, there is an unresolved tension in the text between human vulnerability and

⁵⁰ F.R. Leavis. *Anna Karenna and Other Essays*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1967. p. 102; Ian Watt. *Essays on Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 156.

⁵¹ Peters, p. 143.

confident sea-faring values.⁵² The new captain initially praises imperial creeds when he first sits in the cabin, staring at his own face in the looking glass and feeling:

some sympathy for this latest representative of what for all intents and purposes was a dynasty; continuous not in blood, indeed, but in its experience, in its training, in its conception of duty, and in the blessed simplicity of its traditional point of view on life.⁵³

This emphasis on ‘blood’, ‘duty’ and ‘training’ smacks of imperialism but its seeming self-assurance and confidence in the ‘simplicity’ of western ways that are ironically seen, not as modern constructs, but as ‘traditional’ is but temporary. They are soon undercut by Mr

Burns’ revelation of the madness of his predecessor that had endangered ship and crew.

Indeed, Mar. Burns’ supernatural narrative begins to infect the narrator’s text. When the ship is becalmed, the captain remarks:

There was no sense in it. It fitted with neither the season of the year nor with the secular experience of sea-men as recorded in books, nor with the aspect of the sky. Only purposeful malevolence could account for it.⁵⁴

Now ‘secular experience’ has become puzzling and reveals only active antagonism to sea-faring values. The personification of his fear of the unfaltering hostility of the universe around him has already been foreshadowed by the earlier remark ‘not that the evil spirit held us always motionless’.⁵⁵ It is therefore significant that later Mr Burns himself should issue ‘out of the companion on all fours’, and take on inhuman dimensions:

It was something big and alive. Not a dog – more like a sheep, rather. But there were no animals in the ship. How could an animal... It was an added and fantastic horror which I could not resist. The hair of my head stirred even as I picked myself up, awfully scared; not as a man is scared while his judgment, his reason still try to resist, but completely, boundlessly, and, as it were, innocently scared – like a little child.⁵⁶

⁵² Terry Collits, *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2005. p. 31.

⁵³ Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-Line: A Confession, Within the Tides: Tales*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1950. p. 53.

⁵⁴ Conrad, *The Shadow-Line*, p. 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

The adult world of reason and endurance threatens to collapse here as evil assumes a corporeal, bestial form and childish powerlessness and confusion threaten to overwhelm him. His attempt to hold on to the seaman's stoic ethic is matched by an undermining sense of 'fantastic horror' that creates irresolute panic. He is scared like a 'little child' unable to act or use reason. Since the captain's point of view is also counter-pointed with the attitudes of the pragmatic but inefficient doctor and Captain Giles, the effect of the novella's complex interplay of voices is to question the self-sufficiency of sea-faring values, and by implication, the culture and society they serve. Nothing seems as certain as it should and others can only be regarded with ambivalence. For example, Captain Giles is seen alternately as 'the most dull, unimaginative man I had ever met' and as sage who wisely remarks, 'I believe everybody in the world is a little mad'.⁵⁷ At the end of the nightmare voyage, it is Captain Giles who attempts to set the moral of the tale by calmly asserting: 'You will learn soon how not to be faint-hearted. A man has got to learn everything – and that's what so many of those youngsters don't understand'.⁵⁸ Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, the return to the vulnerabilities of youth, it is unclear how far the narrator accepts this judgment. He admits that he is 'no longer a youngster' but there is no assertion of manhood having been reached, just the assertion of an obstinate determination to go back to sea directly. How purposeful this might be, however, is not clear:

It was as if a ponderous curtain had rolled up disclosing an unexpected Captain Giles. But it was only for a moment, just the time to let him add, 'Precious little rest in life for anybody. Better not think of it'.⁵⁹

The ambiguously 'transformed' Captain Giles responds here with a downbeat comment to the effect that doing is better than thinking. Any positive idea of the sea as an escape from the commercial pressures of the land is undermined by the unthinkable — that the very

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 15, 42.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

concepts of masculinity and sanity that underpin the sea-faring, trading, and implicitly colonial, ethos may be unsustainable.

This is best exemplified by the narrator's two contemporary journal entries, which add another narrative tone, and almost another narrative voice, to undermine the intermittent epistemological confidence of the main text. Once again, a counterpointing technique operates to deepen and problematise the 'meaning' of the story as interpreted by Captain Giles. As Jakob Lothe points out, while the main text is written in hindsight, from a distance that presupposes survival from the events described, in the diary entries the distance between narration and narrator disappears and we experience *in medias res* confusion.⁶⁰ Hence, meaning and interpretation depend on the achronology, the context and the time in which events are being recorded. Nisha Manocha helpfully remarks that the diary entries are not simply quoted or casually incorporated but 'clearly demarcated on the page to suggest they exist independent of the narrator's larger confession'.⁶¹ However, although both Lothe and Manocha then more questionably deem the tone of the extracts to mirror that of the surrounding text, it can rather be argued that the heightened register of the extracts are initially very different. In marked fashion, they act to change and deepen the tone of the retrospective main narrative. The first extract, for example, is apocalyptic, pessimistic and universalising as the writer confronts his finitude and insignificance:

There they are: stars, sun, sea, light, darkness, space, great waters; the formidable Work of the Seven Days into which mankind seems to have blundered unbidden. Or else decoyed. Even as I have been decoyed into this awful, this death-haunted command...⁶²

The immediacy of this passage, and the emotional depth of an experience that requires imagery of the reversal of the very forces of creation to express it, is very different to the calmer, perhaps more complacent, retrospective reasoning of the narrator. On looking back,

⁶⁰ Jakob Lothe. *Conrad's Narrative Method*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. pp. 119, 129.

⁶¹ Nisha Manocha. 'Reading Documents: Embedded Texts in "The Professor's House" and *The Shadow-Line*'. *Studies in the Novel* 44.2 (2012): p. 191.

⁶² Conrad, *The Shadow-Line*, p. 97.

he attempts to rationalise, and even explain away, the purpose of the diary, arguing that it ‘was purely a personal need for intimate relief and not a call for egotism’.⁶³ However, egotism, or at least an intense personal response to a fundamental challenge to his very being and identity, is indeed what it is. The second diary entry acts to reinforce the impact of the first in recording a moment of even more terrifying moral and psychological breakdown:

And I am shrinking from it. From the mere vision. My first command. Now I understand that strange sense of insecurity in my past. I always suspected that I might be no good. And here is proof positive, I am shirking it, I am no Good.⁶⁴

The disintegration of personality, purpose and sense of worth is stark. Significantly, the tenor of these wretched thoughts cannot be corralled in the past. They immediately feed into the description of the darkness that surrounds them:

The impenetrable blackness beset the ship so close that it seemed that by thrusting one’s hand over the side one could touch some unearthly substance. There was in it an effect of inconceivable terror and of inexpressible mystery. [...] It was impossible to shake off that sense of finality. The quietness that came over me was like a foretaste of annihilation. It gave me a sort of comfort, as though my soul had become suddenly reconciled to an eternity of blind stillness.⁶⁵

This desolate psychological mood with its apocalyptic overtones seems to be confronting his soul’s very ‘annihilation’. Its sense of ‘finality’ therefore complicates any simplistic interpretation of the subsequent, seemingly positive, assertion that ‘the seaman’s instinct alone survived whole in my moral dissolution’.⁶⁶ Such a conclusion is reinforced by the subsequent, disorientating re-appearance on deck of Mr Burns, which has already been alluded to, and which suggests that sea-faring values have a very fine dividing line from insanity. The diary extracts therefore reveal a sensibility, judgment and vulnerability, in effect, another voice, that has gone on to infect and increase the ambivalence of the wider narrative.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

Moreover, just as the complexity of the narrator's self-doubt is stimulated and deepened by the insertion of an earlier perspective of events, so confidence in colonial norms is problematised by the way the description of the Oriental capital, from which the journey starts, influences the wider text. The capital is both chaotic and vulnerable, 'dilapidated, crumbling under the vertical sunlight', as well as associated with natural processes, with its 'vegetable-matter style of architecture, sprung out of the brown soil'.⁶⁷ It is instructive to compare this with the narrator's defencelessness in the diary fragments, his awareness of his own dissolution and his acknowledgment of the fierce indifference of nature into which man has 'blundered'. In a very profound sense, the narrator is taking on the very aspects of the colonial Other in that the diary's voice is both marginalised and internalised. Significantly, however, that voice is now given expression. In this way, the nameless narrator's lack of identity and self-sufficiency undercut the dreams of imperialist strength with which he started out when he first sees his ship:

I saw her disengaged from the material conditions of her being. The shore to which she was moored was as if it did not exist. What were to me all the countries of the globe? [...] The very gang of yellow coolies busy about the main hatch was less substantial than the stuff dreams are made of. For who on earth would dream of Chinamen?⁶⁸

If the narrator learns anything from his experience, it is that dreams of superiority cannot endure. The 'gang of yellow coolies' may seem insubstantial but so subsequently does the 'stuff' that his 'dreams' are made of. We therefore end not with dreams but with a more downbeat and ambivalent endorsement of the world of work and endurance in which we cannot even be sure that the shadow-line has been crossed. Significantly, Captain Giles's final, 'That's the way. You'll do', meets with little in the way of a positive response:

'What did you expect? That I would want to take a week ashore for a rest?' I said, irritated by his tone. 'There's no rest for me till she's out in the Indian Ocean and not much of it even then.'⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 48, 47.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 132.

Hence, if work cannot supply answers, then it can at least dull the pain of the questions. At the very end, instead of affirmation, we are left with ambivalence as a final narrative voice is heard. Despite possessing a ‘faithful breast’, Ransome has to acknowledge his weakness as he confesses ‘I – I am in a blue funk about my heart’.⁷⁰ Strength and frailty are then inextricably linked in a powerfully numinous, and beautifully poised, final image. His ‘faithful breast’ is allied with ‘mortal fear’ while awaiting ‘our common enemy’, Death, thereby suggesting that any aspiration for an honourable way of being comes with questionable knowledge and comfort.⁷¹

Ultimately therefore, *The Shadow-Line*’s single narrator conceals a multi-voiced narrative that balances both epistemological and ontological uncertainties. This balance is so delicate and so nuanced that it opens up interpretative possibilities. Narrative techniques create meaning but suggestively and not prescriptively. The challenge to imperial values enriches rather than entirely subverts the search for human values, while the obliqueness with which the voice of the Other is internalised asks questions rather than gives answers. However, it would be too simplistic to judge *The Shadow-Line* as ‘solving’ technical problems raised by ‘Karain’ and ‘A Smile of Fortune’, where the voice of the colonised is alternately inadequately mediated and deliberately thwarted. Intractable issues surrounding representation of the colonial encounter, which all three grapple with in different ways, require that meaning both be revealed and obscured. If meaning rarely entirely disintegrates in these tales of loyalty and betrayal, then it is complicated and enriched by narrative techniques that sometimes leave us uncomfortable. Their entanglement in murky waters confronts and undermines the simplicities of colonial discourse in a way that does not foreclose their resonance. As Christopher GoGwilt concludes of *Heart of Darkness*,

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 133.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 133.

Conrad's ambivalent guide to colonial history reveals tensions such that although 'successive readings may have drawn attention to those differences [...] they have surely not resolved them'.⁷² We feel the intellectual, emotional and ethical frisson of a failure that is inevitable, in the face of the intractable problems caused by the colonial encounter. We also sense the grappling for a sustainable moral vision, the search for an integrated but responsible state of being, the pain of whose non-achievement long remains with us. The uncertainties, despite, and perhaps even because of the murkiness of the insight, are what continue to make Conrad worth reading well beyond the historical confines and concerns of his time.

⁷² GoGwilt, *Joseph Conrad as Guide to Colonial History*, p. 152.

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