

“Conrad and the Comic Turn”

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“The music-hall, not poetry, is a criticism of life.” James Joyce (Ellman 80)

Jack Ashore

Of his nineteen years as a sailor, from 1874 to 1894, Joseph Conrad actually worked on ships for ten years and eight months, of which just over eight years were spent at sea, including nine months as a passenger (Najder 161-62). During these nomadic years, London was the place to which he returned again and again to seek his next berth, staying in a series of sailors’ homes, lodgings and boarding houses. How did he spend his time, a single man with no family and few friends, whose main occupation was waiting? He recalled, in the preface to The Secret Agent, “solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days” (7). Ford Madox Ford says that Conrad knew all the bars around Fenchurch Street (which links the financial centre of the City of London to Whitechapel and the East End) from his days of waiting for a ship: returning to the area later in life, according to Ford’s slightly improbable memory, he “became at once the city-man gentleman-adventurer with an eye for a skirt”, who “could tell you where every husky earringed fellow with a blue, white-spotted handkerchief under his arm was going to....” (Ford 1989 116, 117)<sup>1</sup> The reality of these London sojourns was probably less romantic, most of the time. But there was one place where a sailor ashore, without much money, could always go for company and entertainment: the music-hall.

In this essay I will argue that the music-hall – itself undergoing significant changes at this time – played an important part in Conrad’s encounter with British culture and with the English

language, and specifically that popular dramatic entertainment shaped his own development in fiction of the great resource of comic speech. The essay will go on to trace the presence of the music-hall chorus and audience in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' (1897), of the cross-talk of comic sketches in "An Outpost of Progress" (1897) and later stories, and of comic collusion, repartee and double entendre in the dialogue of "Heart of Darkness" (1899).

The history of variety theatre, in the form of a mixed programme of "turns", has been well documented.<sup>2</sup> It came to dominate the commercialized popular culture of the late nineteenth century. In Britain it can be traced back to sing-song entertainments in pubs, like the Jolly Sailor in Poplar, or the Black Horse mentioned at the end of The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and later in Chance, both favourites with sailors ashore. Some of these establishments made the transition to music-halls, which proliferated in the East End and the docklands, but by the end of the 1870s music-hall had started to attract a bourgeois audience as well as a working-class one, and now the West End too was graced with a number of imposing and lavishly appointed music-hall theatres, such as the London Pavilion at Piccadilly Circus, described by Conrad as "that monumentally heavy abode of frivolity" (Last Essays 80), the Palace in Shaftesbury Avenue, the Oxford in Oxford Street and the Alhambra in Leicester Square (originally the Royal Panoptikon of Science and Arts). With the admixture of a more middle-class audience, music-hall added to its boisterous repertoire some elements adapted from the drama of the more respectable theatre. Some indication of the shifting class meanings of this kind of entertainment is suggested by the fact that in 1896 the sixteen-year-old Edward Morgan Forster took his mother and aunt to a music-hall, and wrote an account of the visit in the Tonbridge School magazine, in Latin (Bailey 167). Ford (1989 116) mentions that Conrad used to frequent the Royal Aquarium in

Westminster in the evenings, a venue which had left behind its aquatic beginnings and was famous for circus and music acts (George Robey was to make his debut there in 1891), and as a likely place for romantic or mercenary encounters between men and women. The Aquarium in Westminster, and the Royal Standard, opposite Victoria station, were not far from the lodgings in Pimlico where Conrad in 1889 started to write Almayer's Folly. Ford was a music-hall habitu , and recounts that Conrad enjoyed accompanying him; Ford, it seems, was often to be seen correcting proofs for the English Review in his seat in the stalls of the Shepherd's Bush Empire (Goldring 218). But there were dozens of music-halls in London, and in the larger towns up and down the country.

Young Charlie Marlow in "Youth", bored to death in Falmouth by the endless repairs to the 'Judea', makes a dash up to London and treats himself to an evening of music-hall entertainment and a fine dinner (Youth etc 20). For a sailor with time on his hands, the music-hall recommended itself for a number of reasons. It was cheap. It was spontaneous: you did not have to be in your seat for the overture, but could walk in, or out, at any point in the programme. Audience members mixed convivially, even promiscuously. You could get a drink at the bar. Turns succeeded each other briskly on the stage, so that it was not boring, and they were varied indeed – sentimental and comic songs, farcical and satirical sketches and slapstick, animal acts, jugglers and acrobats, magicians, a dancing chorus, even balletic or operatic interludes. For the young Conrad, whose early knowledge of England derived largely from books and the converse of sailors,<sup>3</sup> it was also a chance to witness and participate in a great gaudy colourful topical inclusive and exciting performance of English life. Character, conflict, communal activity, speech, music, and action: the national life was displayed and commented on in the music-hall,

its songs and sketches returning always to the great social themes, class and gender, family and sex, neighbourhood and nation. In seeking to demonstrate the importance of popular dramatic entertainment for Conrad's fiction, I concur with the argument of Steven Donovan in Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture (194) that Conrad "had direct and substantial knowledge of popular cultural texts and practices, and that these latter exerted a significant influence on his fiction and prose writing."<sup>4</sup>

Ford himself wrote enthusiastically in the pages of the English Review about the music-hall as an art form. He argued, in an editorial in 1909, that with the qualified exception of the work of Barrie and Shaw, English drama was lacking in any form of novelty, and inept alike at awakening thought or expressing passion. "Indeed it is to the music-halls that we must go nowadays for any form of pulse-stirring – for any form of any consummate expression of an art." (Ford 1909 320) The mainstream theatre tried to represent middle-class life in the mode of realism, but, Ford opined, "English social contacts of today are a matter of repressed emotions" (321), conveyed at a level of nuance simply invisible in a theatre except from the front row of the stalls. Barrie and Shaw could only produce vivid theatrical effects by non-realist means. But the artists of the music-hall, not confined to the life of the middle class nor to the restricted theatrical vocabulary of realism, could present a spectacle of life and passion not easily to be found either in the respectable theatre or indeed in its cousin the respectable novel.

There was mischief and polemic, certainly, in Ford's stated preference for music-hall over theatre, but he was not alone in taking the demotic form seriously. Music-halls had made the shift from working-class to mass entertainment and acquired some respectability, but their

entertainers and their public remained thoroughly class-conscious, and this was no doubt equally true of the detractors who deplored them as vulgar, and the enthusiasts like Ford who congratulated them on creating an authentic rapport between performer and audience. The young drama critic G. H. Mair took up Ford's theme in a number of the English Review a couple of years later, arguing that the music-hall "is our one pure-blooded native amusement".

So if you want at this present time to see England at the play, you must go not to a theatre, but to a music-hall. If you want to gauge the progress of dramatic artistry in England, you must go to a music-hall. And it is in a music-hall that the best English acting – perhaps the only live English acting – is to be found. (123, 124)

Mair was more interested in music-hall as a dramatic, than a variety, experience. But as seems to be inevitable with those who enthuse about popular culture, he worried that its best days might already be over. Had the sketch, the cinematograph and the dancers destroyed the traditional music-hall? "Where are now the sisters, the brothers, the cross-talk comedians, the musical families? Where is the mother-in-law, the lodger, the diurnal trials and disillusionments of married life? Where are the snows of yester year?" (127) (The elegiac note seems to anticipate T. S. Eliot's essay of 1923 about the best-loved of all music-hall performers, Marie Lloyd.) The traditional "turns" that Mair lists, and laments, in 1911, represent the staple of music-hall entertainment in the late nineteenth century. Music-hall provided variety entertainment, but in Conrad's circle it was above all valued, as Mair puts it, for its "dramatic artistry", its portrayal of character and speech. Often "in character", singers "broke through the fictions of their impersonations with an ad lib gagging commentary between verses known as 'patter' or the 'spoken'" (Bailey 144).<sup>5</sup> The great artists of music-hall were all singers and actors, their acts,

when alone on stage, a mixture of song and patter. Of one of the greatest, Dan Leno, Max Beerbohm (44) would recall that in his later years he hardly sang at all: “There was just a perfunctory gabble of a stanza and a chorus, and the rest was a welter of the spoken word—and of imaginative genius.”

In fact in the years when Conrad might have been found in the audience, music-hall grew closer in its content to the legitimate theatre. As the entertainment crept upmarket, dramatic fare grew increasingly independent of music, and the proliferation of theatrical sketches which followed, it was sometimes argued, testified to a progressive cultural improvement that helped to raise the tone of the music-hall above the vulgar pub-derived entertainment of its origins (Rutherford 131). There was a continuity, of course, between the inventive or suggestive patter that punctuated the verses of a comic song, and fully developed sketches featuring two or three persons, sometimes lasting for half an hour or more. The increasing prominence of comic sketches among the turns sharpened the decades-old rivalry between the music-halls and the theatres, whose managers, afraid that the music-halls were drawing away their audiences, tried to stop them offering dramatic material (Kift 145). But also this was a period in which bourgeois drama was becoming increasingly realistic in language and performance. While the legitimate theatre through its transparent fourth wall was busy disguising or denying the distance between the audience and the people and action on stage, as Peter Davison has argued, music-hall positively encouraged alienating effects – breaks in continuity, dissociation (the backcloth often had nothing to do with the song or act performed before it), frequent cross-dressing, grotesque appearance and movement, a mixture of mimetic dialogue with diegetic address to the audience across the footlights; flouting of the suspension of disbelief. It was an art of distance.

It was this same capacity that an Elizabethan audience experienced when it attended plays by Shakespeare or Jonson or Heywood. Involvement was possible, but it was the capacity to apprehend the act and actuality simultaneously - not apron stages, nor artifice in acting - that made viable, and so intensely theatrical, the soliloquy, the monologue, and the aside. It was not the theatre, not the players, not even the text in Shakespeare, but the audience's complexity of response that was so vital. It was this which the music hall sustained through a long, exciting period of realistic drama that was nevertheless inimical to theatricality. It is in its capacity to dramatise the absurd (long before the word was coined for drama) that this can perhaps be most easily seen. (52-53)

The theatricality of Conrad's dialogue, we shall see, is capable of eliciting in its readers, and its dramatized auditors, a complex response indeed.

### All together now

The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' is the place in Conrad's early work where the full music-hall experience and ethos is most resonant. Though almost all its action takes place in a ship at sea, this novel shows signs of the way the music-hall may have helped Conrad to see the life of a community, by providing a paradigm of shared activity and of the powerful and shifting emotional experience which is an audience's response. Music-hall can be seen as a form of social imaginary that hovers over the commercial, imperial, and professional ends of the 'Narcissus'. The unnamed narrator has very little life of his own, but is intimately invested in the communal character of the crew: indeed, as Brian Richardson observes (216), "no self-consistent speaking subject is in the text", and the narrative voice speaks of the crew sometimes as "we", sometimes

as “they”, and emerges only at the end of the story as an “I-narrator”.<sup>6</sup> The crew’s life on the ship is a mixture of shared activity – their sailorly work – and spectatorship of the dramatically separated and highlit actions of the officers and, with increasing emphasis, of the dying James Wait. If the crew are both audience and chorus (functions that frequently doubled up in the music-hall), they are also represented more as characters were seen on the music-hall stage than in the pages of the realist novel, as types representing a particular provenance or ethnicity (Kift 45), like Belfast or the Finn Wamibo, or a single strongly drawn trait, like Singleton’s stoicism or Donkin’s bloody-mindedness. To be sure, there are other precedents, besides the music-hall stage, for a bold and simple characterization of types. But there is something consistently theatrical about the life of the ‘Narcissus’. Belfast, for example, nicknamed for his provenance, seems to be seen in the glare of the footlights. “His eyes danced; in the crimson of his face, comical as a mask, the mouth yawned black, with strange grimaces.” (Narcissus 8-9; ch. 1) The malcontent Donkin’s character is not only entirely generic, but recognized as such by everybody else. “They all knew him! He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who curses the sea while others work.” (11; ch. 1) He is as much a type as the cheeky cockney or the randy lodger, but he is a performer too, adept at the manipulation of his audience, one that “knew how to conquer the naïve instincts of that crowd” (12; ch. 1).

James Wait, though, is the star turn, the cynosure of the drama on the ‘Narcissus’, though at first a highly mysterious one. His name, Wait, generates at first some confusing wordplay familiar from the schtick of comedians (“Who’s on first?”), an instance of that “mistaking the



word” characteristic of cross-talk acts and perhaps derived, as Peter Davison (37) has suggested, from the clown acts of the Shakespearean period. Calling out his name, which brings everything to a halt, Wait makes a theatrical entrance, emerging from the peripheral darkness to the bright lights of the quarter deck, where he holds his head up in the glare of the lamp, disclosing “a face pathetic and brutal: the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger’s soul” (Narcissus 17; ch. 1). The “nigger”, and specifically the “nigger” mask, was certainly a familiar sight to music-hall audiences. Nigger minstrels had first appeared on the English stage as early as 1843, and were still a popular feature of variety theatre, though they were usually white performers in black-face. Cross-talk comedians, a standing feature of every music-hall programme, had their origins in the dialogues between the “corner-man” and the “interlocutor” in nigger-minstrel entertainments (Pulling 134, 189).

“Though I detest the stage,” Conrad wrote to Edward Garnett, “I have a theatrical imagination” (Letters, 4:218). In The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ the theatricality is thematised. The forecastle is not a place for privacy: every action is, in a sense, a public one. The crew constitute themselves as audience for Jimmy Wait’s drama, entering with a kind of naivety into his agon, so that they willingly risk their lives to save him in the storm, but also in the end relinquishing him after his death, with that kind of callousness with which we abandon the characters of a drama when the drama is played out and we return to our everyday lives. But beyond the drama or melodrama of the death of Wait, the social life of the ‘Narcissus’ proceeds with a sort of music-hall boisterousness and good humour. Living at close quarters creates a few difficult moments, but most of the time the crew look out for each other, and maintain “a fundamentally egalitarian outlook.” (Richardson 213) They are forever telling each other stories,

teasing each other, enjoying one another's company. Their jollity is disapproved – “Dance and sing. That's all they think of” (Narcissus 90; ch. 4) – by the miserable cook, a man whose religious mania dates from an occasion twenty-seven years before when he became intoxicated in an East End music-hall. But even he, when berating the crew “as wicked as any ship's company in this sinful world”, sounds like a stand-up comedian (perhaps not a very good one) when he embarks on a story in the middle of the storm –

“now, I – any time ... My eldest youngster, Mr. Baker ... a clever boy ... last Sunday on shore before this voyage he wouldn't go to church, sir. Says I, ‘You go and clean yourself, or you'll know the reason why!’ What does he do? ... Pond, Mr. Baker – fell into the pond in his best rig, sir! ... Accident? ... ‘Nothing will save you, fine scholar though you are!’ says I. ... Accident! ... I whopped him, sir, till I couldn't lift my arm....” (65; ch. 3)

The cook is a caricature whose warnings of retribution fail to scare the rest of the crew, and indeed his fierceness is immediately contradicted by his heroic ministrations to them in the storm, and his coining of a catch-phrase – “As long as she swims I will cook!” – which he will enjoy repeating later, an indication that he has come to think of himself as a “character”. The sharing of the ordeal of the storm brings the crew closer together. Even James Wait, whose illness or malingering exempts him from his share in their work, crystallizes them in the fellowship of an audience when they gather before his open cabin in the evening, as if for a performance.

They leaned on each side of the door, peacefully interested and with crossed legs; they stood astride the doorstep discoursing, or sat in silent couples on his sea-chest; while

against the bulwark along the spare topmast, three or four in a row stared meditatively, with their simple faces lit up by the projected glare of Jimmy's lamp. (83; ch. 4)

It is a scene for Walter Sickert, in whose London music-hall paintings the audience and performers are bound together by the medium of theatrical lighting.<sup>7</sup> When the crew of the 'Narcissus' exchange words, it is in the idiom of the comedian's banter. "If we all went sick what would become of the ship?" asks Knowles.

"The stores would run out," he muttered, "and ... never get anywhere ... and what about pay-day?" he added with greater assurance. – "Jack likes a good pay-day," exclaimed a listener on the doorstep. "Aye, because then the girls put one arm round his neck an' t'other in his pocket, and call him ducky. Don't they, Jack?" – "Jack, you're a terror with the gals." – "He takes three of 'em in tow to once, like one of 'em Watkinses two-funnel tugs waddling away with three schooners behind" – "Jack, you're a lame scamp." – "Jack, tell us about that one with a blue eye and a black eye. Do." – "There's plenty of girls with one black eye along The Highway by ..." – "No, that's a speshul one – come, Jack." (85-6; ch. 4)

There are not many images in Conrad of a properly ordered society, but this comic mutuality is one of them. In the end it is this shared experience that prevails in the story, despite the perils of the voyage, Donkin's appeals to solidarity which are in fact the weasel words of selfishness and disloyalty, and the demoralization threatened by the dying Wait. It is poignant that even as death approaches for Wait, the unwitting agent of tragic darkness and alienation, he summons up in memory or hallucination a scene of belonging to the very world whose mutuality he almost destroyed. Struggling for consciousness, he suddenly starts to reminisce about his

London days and a “Canton Street girl” who loved him, he says, and promised “she would chuck – any toff – for a coloured gentleman”.

Donkin could hardly believe his ears. He was scandalized. – “Would she? Yer wouldn’t be hany good to ’er,” he said with unrestrained disgust. Wait was not there to hear him. He was swaggering up the East India Dock Road; saying kindly, “Come along for a treat,” pushing glass swing-doors, posing with superb assurance in the gaslight above a mahogany counter. (117-118; ch. 5)

Wait’s vision of heaven is the utopia of the music-hall lions comiques, that “brashly tumescent generation of comic singers whose swell songs took the halls by storm in the 1860s and 1870s” (Bailey 164). He is the swell with a girl on his arm and money in his pocket, a walking medley of “Champagne Charlie” (first performed in 1866), “Burlington Bertie” (1900), and “Down at the Old Bull and Bush” (1904).

It is certainly a moving moment, though Donkin’s spite will ensure that this dream of serenity does not last, and Wait’s death is accomplished instead in panic and indignity. But it is worth remarking that the toffs of the music-hall stage were always counterfeit. Burlington Bertie was, as likely as not, from Bow. *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo* (1892) gloated that “I’ve now such lots of money, I’m a gent.” The lion comique had the accoutrements and manners of gentility, but was really an imposter (Kift 49). Such performances drew satirical or critical attention to just the social divisions they appeared to transcend (Figure 1). Just as George Leybourne, the original Champagne Charlie, did not really belong to the idle rich, so James Wait in his apotheosis – “posing” with superb assurance in the gaslight, sociable, loved and admired – is unwittingly giving the measure of his alienation. For Wait can never be a member of this

simple English world and its company, and he is about to return to the tragic and mysterious darkness from which he emerged at the beginning of the story.

It is not Jimmy Wait, but the paid-off crew of the 'Narcissus', who in the end will return to inherit that snug and gaudy culture of booze and music and romantic adventure enshrined in places like the Black Horse pub to which the crew are heading when the narrator has his last glimpse of them, on the town with money in their pockets, at the end of the voyage. The story is a comedy only for the chorus, as they perform a clumsy finale, clinging together in a line, swaying, irresolute, and noisy, on their way to celebrate their survival and return. To the narrator their jollity is not a denial of the danger and death they have faced and will face again, but an appropriate and admirable response to it – a gaiety, as Yeats was to write, “transfiguring all that dread”.

And swaying about there on the white stones, surrounded by the hurry and clamour of men, they appeared to be creatures of another kind – lost, alone, forgetful, and doomed; they were like castaways, like reckless and joyous castaways, like mad castaways making merry in the storm and upon an insecure ledge of a treacherous rock. The roar of the town resembled the roar of topping breakers, merciless and strong, with a loud voice and cruel purpose; but overhead the clouds broke; a flood of sunshine streamed down the walls of grimy houses. (135-6; ch. 5)

The narrator channelled the voice of this company earlier in the story, and participated in their communal witness and commentary on the main action, while scrupulously doing nothing singular to draw attention to himself. Here in the last scene, while admiring and even loving the dispersing crew, he establishes a distance from them, for the first time an I-narrator, watching

them. From Belfast's maudlin interpellation, he says, "I disengaged myself gently." (135; ch. 5) He has joined in the chorus, but is not a member of it. They are already turning into memory, and he will never see them again. The comedy is finished, at least until these men or others like them come together again to constitute another company.

Though the presence of music-hall forms and idioms can be traced right through to his late work, Conrad never returned in his fiction to the simple world of the crew in The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'. After completing the highly theatrical "Karain", the next work he embarked on in 1897, "The Return", essays a very different form of comedy, with a very thorough demolition of the ethos of respectable gentility.<sup>8</sup> With its unity of time, place and action, this tale looks rather like an elaboration of a two-handed marriage sketch: a wife leaves her husband, and returns; then the husband leaves the wife. But while the drama of the 'Narcissus' is popular in the sense of drawing in the whole crew as spectators and participants, the domestic drama of "The Return" takes place behind closed doors, in the box-set of private middle-class life, and features a husband fixated on respectability and entirely motivated, or so he believes, by "a purely moral reprobation of every unreserve, of anything in the nature of a scene." (Tales of Unrest 155) It is a false marriage, in an inauthentic community of entirely alienated individuals, the world of City gentlemen who all dress identically, "their indifferent faces ... varied but somehow suggesting kinship, like the faces of a band of brothers who through prudence, dignity, disgust, or foresight would resolutely ignore each other." (111) So triumphantly has the bourgeois husband insulated his world from passion (and demoralized his wife) that he has completely cut himself off from actual human life, from any possibility of intimacy or sympathy. The narrative exposes his inadequacies and solipsism with a Flaubertian ruthlessness. We have

come a long way from the choric good cheer with which The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' ended, to the suburban gentility of "The Return", and a very different narrative voice is required. "In that serene region, then, where noble sentiments are cultivated in sufficient profusion to conceal the pitiless materialism of thoughts and aspirations Alvan Hervey and his wife spent five years of prudent bliss unclouded by any doubt as to the moral propriety of their existence." (113)

Meanwhile in the music-hall itself, that shared demotic bonhomie was perhaps dissipating too, with changes in the comic material presented on stage, to meet the tastes of a more bourgeois audience. An aspect of that change is noted in another of Ford's brilliant anecdotes.

Once we were sitting in the front row of the stalls at the Empire – and Conrad was never tired of wondering at the changes that had come over places of musical entertainment since his time, when they had lodged in cellars, with sanded floors, pots of beer and chairmen. On that night at the Empire there was at least one clergyman with a number of women; ladies is meant.... And, during applause by the audience of some too middle-class joke, one of us leaned over towards the other and said, "Doesn't one feel lonely in this beastly country!" (Ford 1989 258)

### Cross-talk

Though his reputation is of a writer of action, the commonest actions in Conrad's fiction are actions of speech, chiefly the telling of a story, and the interview, an exchange of speech between two (sometimes more) characters. To the exchange of dialogue, more often than not a scene of conflict and misunderstanding, we can give a name from popular dramatic

entertainment, cross-talk, to suggest that in Conradian speech we can often find the tropes of comic dialogue. These interview scenes – which include some of the most memorable moments in Conrad’s fiction – are similar to the comic sketch, an increasingly popular turn as music-hall began to rival the legitimate theatre. The sketch typically featured a comic interchange between two or three persons and had a simple plot deriving its dramatic impulse from contemporary social conflicts of class and gender, but it differed from the realistic drama of the legitimate theatre in its willingness to disrupt the mimetic illusion of the real by breaks in continuity and direct engagement with the audience (see Rutherford). We can find an example of the cross-talking duet and the comic interview or sketch in that knock-about double act, Kayerts and Carlier, the short fat man and the tall thin man who are the principals of “An Outpost of Progress”.

In his memoir of Conrad, written in 1924, Ford has a very interesting passage about their discussions, and practice, of the craft of novelistic dialogue. He recalls that the rendering of the spoken word gave Conrad and himself more trouble than any other aspect of fiction writing, and that the technique they evolved was based on principles of selection and discontinuity. Ford offered a rationale for this method in terms of the aesthetics of impressionism, arguing that “on the whole, the indirect, interrupted method of handling interviews is invaluable for giving a sense of the complexity, the tantalisation, the shimmering, the haze, that life is.” (Ford 1989 204)

Break up speeches, Ford recommends, “put them down in little shreds”, show how seldom one speaker actually listens to what the other is saying, and “you will convey a profoundly significant lesson as to the self-engrossment of humanity.” (203)



In Conrad's novels, speech does tend to come in shreds. But on those occasions when there is continuity to it, it is often following a logic of comedy. Consider this exchange between Kayerts and Carlier, when they realize that the ivory Makola has secured for them while they slept was procured by selling their workforce into slavery.

"We can't touch it, of course," said Kayerts.

"Of course not," assented Carlier.

"Slavery is an awful thing," stammered out Kayerts in an unsteady voice.

"Frightful – the sufferings," grunted Carlier with conviction.

[Meanwhile Makola is setting up the scales to weigh the ivory.]

Carlier said: "What's that filthy scoundrel up to?"

[The tusks are too heavy for one man. Makola looks up helplessly.]

[There is silence for a minute.]

Suddenly Carlier said: "Catch hold of the other end, Makola – you beast!"

Kayerts trembled in every limb. He muttered, "I say! O! I say!"

[But he notes stealthily the weights which Carlier shouts out to him "with unnecessary loudness".]

Carlier said to Kayerts in a careless tone: "I say, chief, I might just as well give him a lift with this lot into the store." (Tales of Unrest 90-1)

This is the double act at work, the discontinuity in this case being not between the speakers but in the thoroughly unequal struggle between their shock at what has happened and their readiness to profit from it. Kayerts and Carlier are Comic Colleagues, an instance of a comic-theatre trope or turn whose genealogy goes back to the 1870s and the knockabout act of “the Two Macs”, Mike Maccabe and Jack MacNally (see Watters and Murtagh 85, and Anthony 167-69). With the success of the Two Macs, cross-talk comedians became a standing feature of every music-hall programme (Pulling 189). There is a connection between the double-act and slapstick comedy, a mode which the Two Macs claimed to have introduced to the British stage though its origins are much earlier, in the commedia dell’ arte. (Hand, 51) Indeed the story of Kayerts and Carlier moves to a slapstick climax, with the two men chasing each other round and round the verandah of their house. But more immediately to the point here is the verbal comedy, the staged cross-talk of misunderstanding or contestation or complicity that is the staple fare of such double acts, and my argument is that it provided Conrad with a template of how people could be represented speaking to each other, in scenes of speech involving two or sometimes three characters. A consequence is that speech in Conrad, when it is directly represented, tends to fall into stylized patterns of exchange and frequently, even in moments of intense or tragic feeling, hovers on the border of comedy.

Comic dialogue relies heavily on “mistaking the word”, to return to Peter Davison’s useful phrase, but there is little verbal play in Conrad on the level of the “wait!/Wait” misunderstanding. The comic patterns in Conradian interviews tend to be structural. The structure may be one of complicity, as with the way Kayerts and Carlier manoeuvre themselves into accepting the ivory, but more often derives from the extreme difficulty many of his characters have in understanding one another. There are several reasons for these comedies of

cross-purpose. Some people are too stupid or egotistical ever to get the hang of another person. Conrad's far-flung stories ensure that there are often difficulties of cultural misunderstanding. And very frequently – and this is pertinent to the idiom of comic-theatre cross-talk – a character is pretending to be someone or something he is not, and therefore intent on concealing or avoiding a truth that the interlocutor wants to discover; or else there is a misfit between their motives and desires, with one speaker desperate to secure some outcome that the dialogue partner cares nothing at all about. Readers of Conrad could no doubt supply impressive lists of pairs of characters in each of these categories. Underlying all this, there is also in the fiction a serious conviction of the essentially unbreakable solitude of subjectivity – that we live, as we dream, alone, as Marlow puts it in “Heart of Darkness” (Youth etc 70) – and a thorough modern skepticism about the power of human language to bridge that solitude. “Everybody shows a respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make,” we learn from “An Outpost of Progress”. “But about feelings people really know nothing.” (Tales of Unrest 91)

One example of such comic structures is discussed by Ford, as it happens, in his account of how he and Conrad composed dialogue. This is the suspension of a clinching dialogue exchange, that promises a resolution or anagnorisis or pay-off, across a long passage of cross-purpose talk, and its sudden release in unexpected form. It is a structure familiar from jokes and the punchlined anecdote of comic patter. You can have long passages in which characters circle round and round each other in speech without real interlocution, says Ford, but then “there must come a point in the dramatic working-up of every scene in which the characters do directly answer each other, for a speech or for two or three speeches.” (Ford 1989 203-4) Ford thought Conrad was “matchless” at this particular trope. One wonderful example is to be found in Victory, when Schomberg finally confronts Ricardo with the intention of giving him and his

party notice to leave Schomberg's hotel. But before he can deliver this ultimatum, for a full twenty-five pages Schomberg is forced to listen to Ricardo's absolutely appalling autobiography of cheating, piracy, murder, and his devotion to the clearly psychopathic Mr Jones. When Schomberg finally manages to get his word in – "Look here, I need your rooms" (*Victory* 176; ch. 7) – Ricardo settles the matter simply by promising to break Schomberg's neck if he gives any trouble.

Structurally similar – a suspension, then an unexpected twist – is the interview between Razumov and Councillor Mikulin at the end of Part One of Under Western Eyes. Having betrayed his friend Haldin to his death, Razumov now wants to disengage from the authorities and get on with his non-political life. Councillor Mikulin remains non-committal, muttering entirely uninformative responses as Razumov rambles on, increasingly desperate and incoherent, about his own character, his academic ambitions, his political orthodoxy, all the while betraying, like a patient on the couch, his guilt at what he has done. He edges towards the door, thinking that now finally Mikulin must either arrest him or let him go.

An unhurried voice said –

"Kirylo Sidorovitch."

Razumov at the door turned his head.

"To retire," he repeated.

"Where to?" asked Councillor Mikulin softly. (*Under Western Eyes* 74; Part 1, ch. 3)

This moment, strongly foregrounded at the very end of the first part of the novel, is certainly a moment of desperate crisis for Razumov, the discovery that there is no escape, he must be a government spy for life. But its form is comic: a build-up of cross-talk, then a dialogic pratfall.

The Secret Agent is a novel in which instances are particularly abundant: it is possible that its setting in the London of Conrad's youth gave the story a music-hall flavour for its author. Notable among examples is the cross-purpose exchange in the embassy between Verloc and Vladimir, which culminates in the latter's virtuoso speech about terrorism and his genial question: "What do you think of having a go at astronomy?" (31; ch. 2). The extraordinary Chapter 11 gives a sustained passage of dialogue which shows how Mr Verloc is rather disappointed that his wife is not more supportive of him after she has learned that he is the cause of her hapless brother's being blown to bits. "Mr Verloc had the misfortune not to be in accord with his audience." (188; ch. 11) A husband could hardly misjudge his wife more catastrophically. Magnanimously, he rounds off their exchange with a sexual invitation – and is taken aback to find she answers this by planting a carving knife between his ribs. This is a very complex piece of narrative, and a moment of Aeschylean tragedy, but also thoroughly comic in both structure and texture. Though the errant Mr Verloc has come home to be met not with a rolling-pin but with a carving knife, we have here not only a comic cross-talk structure of dialogue, but a recognizable music-hall scenario: the idle, self-indulgent, lascivious husband, the retributive housewife. (There is even a mother-in-law in the background, and Verloc himself is the lodger who married the landlady's daughter.)

The comedy of cross-purpose is often a comedy of the sexes, in Conrad as on the comic-theatre stage. It appears to be one his favourite turns. The chronically interrupted narrative of A

Personal Record is interrupted with an anecdote about interruption, when Conrad receives an unannounced visit from a neighbour, a general's daughter, while he is trying to write Nostromo.

“I am afraid I interrupted you.”

“Not at all.”

She accepted the denial in perfect good faith. And it was strictly true. Interrupted – indeed! She had robbed me of at least twenty lives, each infinitely more poignant and real than her own, because informed with passion, possessed of convictions, involved in great affairs created out of my own substance for an anxiously meditated end.

She remained silent for a while, then said with a last glance all round at the litter of the fray:

“And you sit like this here writing your – your ...”

“I – what? Oh, yes! I sit here all day.”

“It must be perfectly delightful.” (*A Personal Record* 93-4; ch. 5)

The dialogue by itself could scarcely be more banal, yet it may serve as a sort of paradigm case for the representation of the interview in Conrad, the anguished (comic) paragraph of diegesis about the teeming imaginary world of the novelist, incommunicable but not invulnerable to this well-meaning visitor, measuring the subjective gulfs that speech cannot hope to bridge. (And who is to say the general's daughter did not have a rich interior life of her own, a history of passions and convictions and even affairs unplumbed by the gentleman novelist?) There is not an essential difference between this and the desperation of Jim, unequal to persuading Marlow to

see things as he sees them (in Lord Jim), or the “absurd and unanswerable” arguments put by Karain, the Malay chieftain, to his visitors from a world away (Tales of Unrest 23). There is a sense in which all talk is cross-talk. Conrad’s characters are no better than anyone else at listening to other people, but their talk is not so much a dialogue of the deaf as the coincident monologue of solipsists.

### Taking the word

Often, though, Conrad’s characters are at work deliberately blocking up the channels of communication. Secrecy is very important in the Conrad world, as Robert Hampson’s Conrad’s Secrets testifies, and among Conrad’s people there is a significant demographic of imposters, spies, traitors, performers, liars, and doubletalkers. For one reason or other, these do not wish to be known or understood, or cannot speak directly. Prominent among them is the narrating Marlow of “Heart of Darkness”, a hopelessly inept anecdotalist – by the standards of “the yarns of seamen” (Youth etc 45) – with his repetitions, divagations, pomposity, evasions and omissions, his over-egged adjectives and his alienating apostrophes to an audience most of whom seem to have fallen asleep during his narration. Resembling in this the narrator of A Personal Record (though for different reasons), Marlow in “Heart of Darkness” is as incapable of straight talking as he is of keeping silent, so that his listeners must peer through the haze of his obfuscations to make out what they can of the story he tells. In his narration and frequently in his dialogue, Marlow, in the words of an old advertisement for The Samaritans, wants to talk about something he doesn’t want to talk about.

And in this matter of indirection and circumlocution and coding, theatricality, and especially the speech of the comic-theatre stage, comes back into the picture. In the music-hall, both audience and performers were experts in indirection. A great deal of the comedy enjoyed by music-hall audiences was saucy, with a bawdy that could not be expressed directly but was pleasurably created by “conspiracies of meaning”, in Peter Bailey’s titular phrase, between performer and audience. Bailey has argued that the insertion of “patter” into a song, performance or impersonation helped to secure “a distinctive relationship with the audience by initiating them into the mysteries of the performer’s craft and giving them a consequent sense of select inclusion”, signalling “a common yet inside knowledge of what was really going on.” (Bailey 144-5) This species of performative irony creates and flatters a state of mind in the audience that Bailey calls “knowingness”.

From the late 1870s, and increasingly as variety theatre moved beyond its working-class roots and began to welcome middle-class families to its audience, moral reformers of religious, educational, or temperance persuasion tried to control impromptu talk and choric singing, and clean up music-hall’s act (see Höher). Laura Ormiston Chant, of the National Vigilance Association, was one who took upon herself this duty, undeterred by being caricatured in *Punch* as Prowlina Pry (Baker 44). One predictable result of these attentions was that performers became more ingenious and audiences more knowing. An observer complained in the Weekly Despatch, 4<sup>th</sup> February 1883, that “There was an unwritten language of vulgarity and obscenity known to music-hall audiences, in which vile things can be said that appear perfectly inoffensive in King’s English.” (qtd. in Bailey 158) Music-hall artists became expert at the double entendre. Marie Lloyd, whose career began in 1885, “could load an apparently innocent song with silent



innuendo” (Baker 31), and became the darling of audiences in Britain and the United States.

(Figure 2)

The complement to “mistaking the word” was a kind of “taking the word” – a complicitous picking up on hints and suggestions that rewarded the decoding skills of the knowing audience, behind the back of official knowledges and the language and manners of respectability and improvement. The music-hall was a place where a nod was as good as a wink.<sup>9</sup> And this atmosphere of the unsaid but understood was no doubt enhanced by the presence in the audience of prostitutes seeking custom, but obliged to dress respectably in order to be admitted to the theatre. “Prostitutes were there and yet not there, at once conspicuous and invisible.” (Bailey 163) These comedies of complicity, whereby the music-hall engaged its subjects in complex sets of meanings and required them to respond simultaneously to two or more planes of reference, added a further dimension to “the tradition of multiconscious apprehension” fostered in their theatricality, according to Peter Davison (13).

I am not going to argue here that Conrad’s fiction is notable for sexual innuendo. I do make the point, however, that his experience of music-hall gave him an extensive example – on his doorstep, as it were – of a kind of speech that elicited from its hearer, or overhearer, a decoding of content that could not be communicated directly, and that might be designed to pass innocuously over the head of a less knowing listener. There is, to be sure, the famous Conradian narrative irony, for which Conrad had plenty of literary models in European fiction. But to see it operating in speech, mobilizing what Bailey calls “a distinctive if slippery form of comic pragmatism” (155), a good place to look is the interview at the end of “Heart of Darkness”.

Marlow has returned to the sepulchral city and goes to pay a courtesy call on Kurtz's Intended, who is in mourning for the fiancé she believes was both heroic and saintly. She receives him in a lofty drawing-room full of massive furniture and funereal drapery, the suitably oppressive setting for an exchange of the kind of clichés which are, unfortunately, the lingua franca of bereavement. The Intended is in some ways an admirable character but she is respectable, bourgeois, sentimental, pious, humourless and highly unworldly, an embodiment of the social forces and discursive manners that music-hall was adept at circumventing. For Cedric Watts (1977 122) the interview presents “an astonishing scenario of black comedy”, while, as he elaborates (1990 xxiii), “the dialogue and the manipulation of the lighting during Marlow's interview with her [the Intended] are so conspicuously theatrical as to render melodramatic what might have been intended as tragic”. But if we attend to the dialogue I think we can see Conrad taking a bigger aesthetic risk than that. Here at the capstone of the tragic narrative he places a scene which is a triumphantly comic sketch, with breath-taking misunderstanding on the part of one interlocutor and a series of agile double entendres on the part of the other.

It is a kind of game, played out in Marlow's oral narration for an audience of men – men of the world – who have just heard the story of Kurtz's depravities, madness and death. The ‘Nellie’, where Marlow's tale is told, is a kind of smoking-room afloat, a suitable venue for the sharing of the kind of stories men tell each other after dark when the women have withdrawn. This is the community of knowingness assembled to decode the prevarications of Marlow's answers to this woman who believes Kurtz was some kind of angel of humanitarianism.<sup>10</sup> The rule of this game is that Marlow must not tell a lie. When he does so, the game will be over.

“You knew him well,” she murmured, after a moment of mourning silence.

“Intimacy grows quickly out there,” I said. “I knew him as well as it is possible for one man to know another.”

“And you admired him,” she said. “It was impossible to know him and not to admire him. Was it?”

“He was a remarkable man,” I said unsteadily. Then before the appealing fixity of her gaze, that seemed to watch for more words on my lips, I went on, “It was impossible not to – ”

“Love him,” she finished eagerly, silencing me into appalled dumbness. (Youth etc 123)

So far, Marlow is helped by the Intended’s eagerness to supply the script for him. “Remarkable” is already a double entendre, but this ingénue interprets it as a compliment. She goes on to praise Kurtz’s eloquence – “But you have heard him! You know!” – unwittingly reminding Marlow, and his listeners, of those words of her fiancé’s of which only she is ignorant. The unspoken obscenity at the heart of this particular dark innuendo is the horror of Kurtz’s life and last words. Can Marlow finesse his way past it?

“His words will remain,” I said.

“And his example,” she whispered to herself. “Men looked up to him, - his goodness shone in every act. His example – ”

“True,” I said; “his example too. Yes, his example. I forgot that.” (124)

The irony in this handy equivocation is inaudible to the Intended. Marlow's words seem to be just what she wanted to hear, and now elicit in her a highly theatrical gesture, stretching out her arms and clasping her pale hands, in a way that is bound to remind Marlow, and his invisible listeners, of the tragic figure on the bank of an African river. But with her knack for turning everything into banality, the Intended is now making a scene. The moment is not only melodramatic, but also grotesquely comic to the point of cruelty, with the Intended's performance of this cliché of bereavement undercut by a joke which only she cannot see, not being privy to the inside knowledge Marlow has acquired in the interior and now shared with his masculine audience offstage.

She said suddenly very low, "He died as he lived."

"His end," said I, with dull anger stirring in me, "was in every way worthy of his life." (125)

An excellent answer: Marlow is still in the game. But he is running out of space to manoeuvre.

While the Intended in her delusion is the more obviously ridiculous figure in this scene, there is comedy too in the squirming of Marlow, the cross-talking principal using his wits to steer him through this awkward predicament. When he says that Kurtz's end was in every way worthy of his life, he is telling no less than the truth, but not the truth the Intended thinks he is telling. At a further level of what Davison (13) called "multiconscious apprehension", a more sophisticated observer than the Intended might remark that, for all his attempts to distance himself from Kurtz while appearing to endorse the Intended's praise for him, Marlow is in fact

here understudying for Kurtz, standing literally in his place, and assisting at the creation of Kurtz's afterlife just as he will later do when he tells the story on board the 'Nellie'.

But the Intended is still speaking.

“Forgive me. I – I – have mourned so long in silence – in silence.... You were with him – to the last? I think of his loneliness. Nobody near to understand him as I would have understood. Perhaps no one to hear ...”

“To the very end,” I said, shakily. “I heard his very last words....” I stopped in a fright.

“Repeat them,” she said in a heart-broken tone. “I want – I want – something – something – to – to live with.” (125)

So finally we are set up for the punchline, “the point in the dramatic working-up of every scene in which the characters do directly answer each other,” described by Ford (1989 204). The options of circumlocution and equivocation have been closed down: this is the endgame. The logic of the comedy structure requires a repartee now that will be both appropriate and unexpected. Rising to the occasion, Marlow comes up with a brilliant riposte, serving the Intended a generous helping of the romantic cliché which is her only language, doing her a kindness of the blackest comedy.

“His last word – to live with,” she murmured. “Don't you understand I loved him – I loved him – I loved him!”

I pulled myself together and spoke slowly.

“The last word he pronounced was – your name.” (125)

For the Intended, this is indeed something to live with, and she takes Marlow’s word for Kurtz’s last word. For those in the know, the observers offstage – Marlow’s boating companions and of course the readers of the narrative – it is Marlow’s last double entendre, and it is for us to “take the word” in a different sense.

We take it, though, at a price. As observers, our privileged knowledge of what happened in Africa, already entered into the narrative record, obliges us to orient ourselves in the pragmatics of this scene with the experienced Marlow and not with the innocent, duped Intended: between the lines of speech, Marlow’s running but unspoken commentary on the scene, the diegesis, ensures that we maintain this orientation and identify ourselves with Marlow’s point of view. If we don’t make this identification, we have entirely failed to get the joke or understand the story, just like the Intended. But in making it, we have forfeited our own innocence. We have enrolled in the party of those who must find innocence ridiculous, who believe that women “should be out of it” (93), and who have assented to the perpetuation of “the cycle of lies that fuels imperialism” (Hawthorn 183). For the Intended really is innocent, in the sense of being personally blameless in this affair: but Marlow, his listeners, and his readers, cannot help but recognize that her ignorant worship of Kurtz is complicitous with Kurtz’s murderous project, so that the substitution of “your name” for “the horror” is both a lie and a shocking cross-talk statement of a truth she alone is too innocent to see. This is our inside knowledge. An already uncomfortable joke becomes more awkward as complicity spreads across the footlights and into the audience, before the curtain comes down. This last turn of the comedy, however, is not theatrical, but brilliantly novelistic.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Black Mate” mentions a tobacconist’s at the corner of Fenchurch Street where many shipmasters would come to recruit crew. Joseph Conrad, Tales of Hearsay, 89-90.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Pulling, Davison, Bailey ed., Bratton ed., Kift, Faulk, Baker. I am indebted to Patricia Pye for information in this and the following paragraphs.

<sup>3</sup> Two-thirds of Conrad’s shipmates on British vessels were natives of the United Kingdom, and nearly half of those were from the south-east of England, including London. See Kennerley, 67.

<sup>4</sup> When it comes to the stage, however, Donovan is much more interested in Conrad’s response to visual spectacle, including the new visual technologies, than to the verbal experience of the theatre. In a later essay he mentions Conrad’s “residual doubts about the status of music hall”, and argues that “musical and variety shows appear in unflattering light in his fiction”. (“Popular Culture”, 207).

<sup>5</sup> “Patter” is a monologue, “cross-talk” a dialogue. For the raw material of a comic’s patter, see Bratton and Featherstone.

<sup>6</sup> The narration of The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ has been much debated. Richardson argues (216) that “the radical, unapologetic juxtaposition of mutually exclusive narrative stances”, transcending the mimetic conventions of realism, is “one of Conrad’s distinctive and most misunderstood achievements”.

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Sickert's paintings of music-hall audiences include "The Old Bedford" (1894-5), and "Noctes Ambrosianae" (1906).

<sup>8</sup> "Karain", "The Idiots", "An Outpost of Progress", "The Return" and "The Lagoon" were published together as Tales of Unrest in 1898. The theatricality of "The Return" is discussed in Hand (57-58).

<sup>9</sup> The most apparently guileless turns might be open to more than one interpretation. John Major, the future prime minister, recalled asking his father (a music-hall artiste) about "Daddy Wouldn't Buy Me a Bow-Wow", a popular hit for Vesta Victoria in 1892. "My father, who heard Vesta sing the song, said that, as performed, it was not the innocent number it seemed, being full of innuendo that audiences would readily have understood." Major 111.

<sup>10</sup> This scene is not for the squeamish. To its already difficult sexual politics, Robert Hampson in Conrad's Secrets adds the further "worrying possibility" that Marlow may have come to the house of the Intended with "an opportunistic sexual interest in his dead colleague's fiancée" (64).

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