Conclusion: Slow Modernism

In a review dating back to the 1930s, Elizabeth Bowen explains why Conrad's work is in "abeyance." Her commentary is brought in evidence of what Owen Knowles diagnoses as a "state of disaffection" for the author. Bowen's review hinges on the problem of Conrad's preoccupation with the individual. She writes: "Most vital of all, perhaps, he seems to be over-concerned with the individual: with conscience, with inner drama, with isolated endeavor. Romantic individualism is at a discount now" (Knowles 69). It is not without a certain irony that when Conrad finally emerges as a significant voice in modernist poetics, he is celebrated for the very theme Bowen relegates to a Romantic consciousness. As Knowles explains, "Seen as part-originator of a more dangerously radical modern tradition, Conrad thus forcefully emerged as 'our' contemporary, his preoccupation with extreme moral isolation, the 'trapped sensibility' and lonely recognition making him akin to Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, André Gide and the French existentialists" (72).

The individual in isolation thus reads as key to a critical reception that both makes and unmakes Conrad as a "modern." This study reconsiders this celebrated feature of his writing; it suggests that the author's exploration of subjectivity anticipates the late modernist realization that identity is fluid and interdependent. The theme of isolation may be central to Conrad's poetic vision, but it is revisited as a nostalgic or haunting conceit that dates back to enlightenment thinking, a conceit that strains under nineteenth and twentieth-century theories that show subjectivity to be a product of multiple internal and external factors ranging from ideology, language and convention to biological, affective and sensory input. Much current critical thinking is devoted to the attempt to relocate the human "within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or

unanticipated effects is considerably broadened" (Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms* 10). A conception of the human as symbiotic, mutable and passive may be regarded as a philosophical response to the radical shifts in scientific theory observed over the last century. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe some of the scientific innovations that call for a reconceptualization of materialism:

> While particle physics has radically changed our sense of the composition of matter, other currents within physics, notably chaos and complexity theory, are also transforming our sense of the patterns or characteristics of matter's movements. They, too, are undermining the idea of stable and predictable material substance, hastening a realization that our natural environment is far more complex, unstable fragile, and interactive than earlier models allowed. […]. While for chaos theory apparently random effects have an extremely complex, nonlinear provenance, for complexity theory the emphasis is on unpredictable events that can catapult systems into novel configurations. For both, the physical world is a mercurial stabilization of dynamic processes. (10)

Similarly in tune with these shifting conceptualizations of matter, current critical interventions in modernist poetics demand we no longer chart its limits by utilizing the traditional paradigms that once defined it. With a view to expansion rather than exclusion, critical reappraisals of the period and its works offer new frameworks by which we might test ossified classifications.

Conrad needs rereading. Themes that have been conventionally aligned with modernist aesthetics – epistemological doubt, impressionistic technique, the subjective turn, defamiliarization and speed – cohere all too readily with an ontological stance that is derived from Enlightenment thinking:

> Many of our ideas about materiality in fact remain indebted to Descartes, who defined matter in the seventeenth century as corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert. This provided the basis for modern ideas of nature as quantifiable and measurable and hence for Euclidian geometry and Newtonian physics. According to this model, material objects are identifiably discrete; they move only upon an encounter with an external force or agent, and they do so according to a linear logic of cause and effect. (Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms* 7)

What results is a set of morally-coded binaries that occupy two mutually exclusive categories: human and non-human, agency and passivity, direction and drift, meaning and meaningless. In keeping with the radical scientific and philosophical shifts described above, Conrad's writing upends these binaries and depicts a world where causality and linearity are rendered suspect. His fiction unmoors time from its chronological measure, frees the subject of the reassuring, if confining limits of the Cartesian *cogito,* and abandons telos in the charting of narrative form. Where conceptual logic cancels out difference in an attempt to create a coherent, recognizable picture, Conrad's work repeatedly returns us to the life force of difference.

This study follows from the premise that a transition from an emphasis on similarity to an emphasis on difference doubles as a just response to Conrad's fiction and an organic offshoot of the evolution of our thinking. The last fifty years have seen a change in the way we process information. Such a shift follows the one described in the opening chapter between two art forms – one that is associated with the rigidity of categories of thought and another that is associated with the flux of becoming. The same can be said of a transformation (in some places radical, in others subtle) of our method of reading, interpreting and evaluating literature.

The theme of the chapter on *Chance* is a case in point. Much of the critical work written in the mid-twentieth century expounds on the theme of chance in light of its relation to unity. Thus, Bruce Harkness may view the title of the novel as ironic, but despite the inevitable ambiguity such irony generates he goes on to suggest that "the title, properly understood, provides the key to the unity of the novel" (209). Harkness takes this further, suggesting such unity is evident not only in the novel, but in Conrad's works in their entirety: "The theme of 'ironic chance' thus pointed out

has the three distinct advantages of explaining the use of the narrators, and of applying to the main incidents of the book, and of *being more in keeping* with Conrad's previous works" (my emphasis, 222). We recognize such critical aims as the signposts of new critical thinking – but such a school of thought arises from a focus on closure and sameness that extends beyond this particular school's reach.

Conrad's use of time has also been seen as a measure of unity rather than ambiguity. In 1966, Robert N. Hudspeth argues that Conrad's use of seven different time levels in *Chance* serves "to convert the ambiguities of the past into the understanding of the present" (286). He explains that it is "only by carefully collecting and sifting the past events of [Flora's] life" that "Marlow and the reader gain the necessary moral understanding which is so important to Conrad. Life is mysterious and ambiguous in its immediate experiences, but with the passing of time these mysteries and ambiguities may possibly be dissipated, given enough chance meetings and acquisitions" (285). Such unity relies on precisely those signposts introduced at the start that distinguish between an aesthetics of the known and an aesthetics of the new. Hudspeth here clarifies the significance of time in serving the novel's overarching unity and meaning:

> The completion of our understanding comes from the presence of the narrator who effectively removes Marlow from our *direct* contact with his narration. Because the narrator provides a temporal removal from Marlow, the reader more perfectly gains a knowledge of Marlow as a sensitive, humane person. If we keep in mind the original assertion that the immediate experiences of life cannot be understood fully, we can see the necessity of being able to see Marlow with some clarity. If he were the direct narrator, we would have a much less thorough understanding of his qualifications as an observer who is capable of understanding. (289)

The techniques Hudspeth associates with understanding and cohesion are suggestive of a method of hermeneutic processing that relies on analogy and conceptual logic. We see Marlow better because he is held at a remove from us. Such a remove endows

the reader with the objectivity of the remote gaze. Harkness reads *Chance* as a moral lesson: "Chance (accident) does not govern life. If the believers in chance had seen deeply enough into the apparently uncaused events, they would have perceived that life is *not* a matter of chance. Conrad is saying, hence, that even in this tale, with its great amount of pure chance and accident, there is a determinative causality at work" (211). Determinism, causality and the spatialization of time (the rearranging of incidents according to a linear unfolding of events) are integral to meaning and coherence. But they are also integral to the way critics analyze and interpret Conrad's work.

Against these mid-century critical observations, contemporary work on Conrad repeatedly shows how understanding is no longer a provision of the identification of the same. In order to find meaning, we look for nuance, difference and the new. I have already cited Peters's suggestion that *Chance* marks a new direction in Conrad's aesthetic vision. Where Hudspeth emphasizes the coherence of Conrad's art, Peters underlines difference in order to propose that the novel might be a meaningful site of critical inquiry. Perhaps a more sweeping illustration of this hermeneutic shift is evident in Richard Ruppel's introductory remarks in *A Political Genealogy of Joseph Conrad* (2015). He writes: "That is why I call this book a political *genealogy*, a word that suggests contingency rather than order and permanence, abrupt change rather than steady development." In doing so, Ruppel hopes "to reveal some of the rich eccentricities and inconsistencies in Conrad's work" (8). I would argue that Conrad always anticipated late modernist poetics. Today, we can appreciate why and how.

I have attempted to show that the way we distinguish openness and closure, the "modern" and the antiquated may follow certain misattributions owing to critical

commonplaces. Modernist stylization in fiction has long been associated with the handling of information – gaps, delays, frustration and deception. We respond to such long-standing conventions by locating modernist innovation in Conrad's delayed decoding, convoluted chronology and the gaps and mysteries around which his plots so often revolve. Razumov's conscription as spy, the *Patna's* safe return to port – these are but two examples of the ways in which Conrad's texts evolve around a singular mystery.

Such techniques promise coherence through the promise of a *fabula:* a linear, sequentially logical and teleological narrative. This underlying, abstract concept speaks to a tradition that owes itself to millennia of narrative writing. The spatializing of time that allows for an author to play with the ordering or concealing of events always relies on a truth of historical progression that may be withheld – but is always finally revealed to provide meaning. This is how narrative means, and this, as we have seen, is an important aspect of Conrad's artistic vision. He may be "slow to develop," but all the parts eventually fall into place so that we may return to the familiarity of a known linear trajectory whose end was always determined.

In tracing a warring impulse in his art, I have attempted to show that another aspect of Conrad's art has so far eluded critical focus. Viewed outside a traditionally damning binary grid, the slow can be understood as a "way to intensify what it might mean to be contemporaneous to one's present" (Koepnick, 12). The attempt, in fiction, to realize this insight, marks a radical departure. The modernist poetics attributed to the writer in the past works through backtracking; it is a method of reading forward that is always haunted by a reading back. In reading Conrad otherwise, I proposed to channel the modernist spirit in its most ardent attempt to break free of the past; to bring to fiction, as Ruben Borg writes, "the most temptingly

ahistorical of concepts, a concept we might fall back on when attempting to characterize forces that unfold beyond ideological critique, beyond moral or aesthetic appropriation: life" (73).

Modernist Erasure and Eternal Return

> You understand that nothing is more disturbing than the upsetting of a preconceived idea. Each of us arranges the world according to his own notion of the fitness of things. (*Chance* 289)

> We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas. That is why we want to hang on to fixed opinions so much. We ask only that our ideas are linked together according to a minimum of constant rules. All that the association of ideas has ever meant is providing us with these protective rules—resemblance, contiguity, causality—which enable us to put some order into ideas, preventing our "fantasy" (delirium, madness) from crossing the universe in an instant, producing winged horses and dragons breathing fire. (Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy* 201)

The tension traced throughout this study, between a writing grounded in analogy, sameness and conceptual logic and one that courts an open-ended, multi-sensory and affective movement of becoming signals a shift in how we understand the human and its relation to the world. Such a shift is heralded by the radical thinkers of the nineteenth century – Nietzsche, Darwin, Freud, Heidegger; it finds material urgency in the scientific, technological and digital developments of the past decades. Posited facts cannot be taken at face value; they are the product of accident and contingency at best, forceful manipulation at worst. To engage more fully, more responsibly and more productively with the world we need to avoid the automatic processes that substitute significant nuance with reductive or erroneous attributions of ready-made truths. The political climate offers constant reminders that the binary oppositions on which truths moral, social and judicial are grounded have become outdated and suspect. They serve

as blinders to the complexities of reality. Despite the consolations of logical thinking and conceptual categories, the present age suggests that openness and tolerance to change may better serve us going forward.

Conrad's works warn his readers against the violence of automatic, biased or dismissive interpretations. Where this study adds to this accepted understanding of Conrad's artistic vision is in addressing a tension that arises between a slowing down into pure duration – a mode of sensory receptivity and affective response that eschews judgment and rational processing – and the human desire to know. Such a tension poses a particular problem for a fiction writer, as a story develops by generating gaps that must be filled; narrative moves forward in an oscillation between crisis and resolution, concealment and revelation. It hinges on the abiding desire for certainty. Conrad's works revolve around ambiguities and unanswered questions; they constantly test our assumptions. Still, critical focus on knowledge given and withheld leads to the neglect of a much-needed study of the way we think and the questions we ask, questions that determine the answers we fashion. To consider how we think is to engage with the pressing question of who we are.

The book presents two different answers to this question – two modes of being that, though represented in opposition – often coincide and intermix in Conrad's works. Their interrelation is observed in the tracing of a tension between two artistic impulses and the ontologies that underlie them. The first is associated with the liberal-humanist subject, an entity that employs analogy and similarity to make sense of reality and maintain its autonomy and cohesion. The second is an entity in a state of becoming; it follows a material, physical, affective and sensory multiplicity and hinges on difference. In his appreciation of Proust (addressed in the introduction), Conrad associates the first with a mimetic aim and the second with a generative artistic impulse.[1] What is at stake in

the choice between the two is whether the artist engages in a return or a departure, whether he looks to the past or lives in the present.

In the previous chapter I argued that *Nostromo* uses the motif of suspension to diffuse the violence whereby historical trajectories dissolve, hide or marginalize the present moment. In "Literary History and Literary Modernist," Paul de Man argues that such is the very aim of the modernist movement: "modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (388-389). The necessity to break with the past, however, quickly falls into an inevitable paradox. Unpacking Nietzsche's "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" de Man explains: "If history is not to become sheer regression or paralysis, it depends on modernity for its duration and renewal; but modernity cannot assert itself without being at once swallowed up and reintegrated into a regressive historical process" (391). The new can only be approached by breaking with the past, by turning against the impulse to historicize. The force of this revolution, however, cannot be made to signify if it is not placed within the context of an evolving history of ideas.

A quick survey of the philosophers, writers and characters sampled throughout this book is suggestive of the universality of this paradox. Bergson promotes intuition against intellection, duration against the spatialization of time. However, as Elizabeth Grosz explains, "The Bergsonian present does not succumb to a philosophy of presence: his present is never self-identical, never able to be definitely separated from the past that contextualizes it and the immediate future that it functions to anticipate" (281 fn 26). In so far as the past is a condition of the present, a virtual repository from which the present repeatedly draws, Bergson does not advocate forgetting or breaking with the past.

A similar lesson is offered by Emilia Gould in *Nostromo.* Toward the end of the novel, she realizes that "for life to be large and full, it must contain the care of the past and of the future in every passing moment of the present. Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after" (*N* 520-21). The primacy of memory and understanding comes to inflect this moral comment; the present cannot be stripped of its obligations to the past and its promise for the future. The insight, however, is not without irony. The thought comes to her in one of the rare depictions of a pause in the action; the abiding insistence on linearity and telos is abandoned and Emilia is encountered in an isolated moment in time. She is "alone in the garden of the Casa, with her husband at the mine and the house closed to the street like an empty dwelling" (520). Her face "became set and rigid for a second, as if to receive, without flinching, a great wave of loneliness that swept over her head" (521). Though her insight calls for an appreciation of the past and future and their manner of complementing the present moment, the affective power of the passage lies in the experience of the present. The scene is reminiscent of Decoud's experience on the island. Emilia and Decoud are both alone, and both are caught in a moment in time – the unadulterated present that is so rarely glimpsed in the course of the novel. Where Decoud disintegrates, Emilia survives the affective overload by anchoring herself in a contemplation of the past and her duty to others. Much like Conrad's "Author's Note" to *Chance,* the choice traced here is between spatialized time (a chronological measure of past, present and future) and duration, between a moral responsibility to others and an exploration of the affective force of the moment.

To conclude this brief survey of the antitheses of life and history, the present of affect and sensory input and the past imagined as a virtual repository of images, we turn to Beckett and Conrad and their respective comments on the tensions between the two.

Beckett's comment on the working of habit and repetition in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* testifies to the way in which familiar patterns of behavior deny us the experience of the new. It is only when an object or event is decontextualized, de-automatized, as it were, that we might become aware of change and be cognizant of the new:

> When the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment. Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence. (*Proust* 11)

Marlow makes the opposite observation in *Chance,* where he notes the way in which comprehension, understanding and an engagement with the world rely on the power of reason – on a comparative analysis that will always relate new experience back to the already familiar. Commenting on Mr. Powell's astonishment at Mr. de Barral's eccentric behavior (known to him here as Smith), Marlow notes:

> "Yes, I knew their joint stories which Mr. Powell did not know. The chapter in it he was opening to me, the sea-chapter, with such new personages as the sentimental and apoplectic chief-mate and the morose steward, *however astounding to [Mr. Powell] in its detached condition was much more so to me as a member of a series*, following the chapter outside the Eastern Hotel in which I myself had played my part (*C* 309).

Marlow underlines the significance of knowledge, familiarity and reason as paths to deep comprehension. Powell may be astounded by the revelation, but Marlow is more so because he recognizes what he sees. Surprise is itself reconfigured here so that it is conceptually grounded in the known rather than the new.

These competing impulses, ventriloquized as they are by different voices and falling into different, if metonymically related concepts, are not finally resolved in Conrad's work. In keeping with the Nietzschean texts that inform de Man's essay and

inspires Conrad's and Deleuze's work, the dynamic interplay between the two does not conclude with a Hegelian synthesis but might be understood, instead, with the eternal return and its centrifugal drive into the future.

In "The Eternal Return and the Phantom of Difference," Catherine Malabou turns to the writing of Deleuze and Derrida in an attempt to grasp the instantiation of the new against the backdrop of the eternal return. Framed by the thought of the two philosophers, the eternal return is seen as Nietzsche's attempt to provide an alternative to the Hegelian dialectic and its mechanism of negation. Difference, much as we understand Derrida's *différance,* "is not opposition"; it does not seek resolution. Nietzsche, she suggests, "replaces the dialectical process of the resolution of opposites, which reduces difference and subordinates it to the work of the negative, with a principle of *spectralizing* selection" (22). Framed thus, the eternal return provides a cogent principle for an intervention in critical interpretations of Conrad's works, in so far as it embodies a process similar to the one I have attempted to delineate here. The slow must no longer be exclusively understood according to its traditional denotation as the negative binary to speed, an obstacle to action. Inaugurating a new avenue for artistic exploration, Conrad's slow modernism spells openness, flux and change; its decelerations unfold in the fiction as life itself.

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