

Acts of Initiation in *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*

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THE Anglo-American tradition of formal textual analysis has often ignored the way an author's consciousness and psychic complexity become embodied within the text. In this essay, I shall relate Conrad's state of mind in the 1894-6 period to his first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and discuss how Conrad becomes a presence in his text. As Conrad knew, "A novelist lives in his work" (*A Personal Record*, p. 15).¹ In these early novels he tests and refines themes and techniques that he will use in his subsequent fiction. A novel's significance usually depends on its vision of human situations and its artistic coherence. But in the case of major authors it may also depend on how it reveals the author and casts light on the author's entire canon. This essay will consider significance in both these senses.

Sambir, the setting for *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, is the first of Conrad's distorted and intensified settings. Like the Congo and Patusan, Sambir is used as a metaphor for actions that occur there. It is also a projection of Conrad's state of mind: in his 1894-6 letters exhaustion and ennui alternate with spasmodic energy.² Conrad's narrator is in the process of creating a myth out of Sambir, but the process is never quite completed. Like Hardy's Egdon Heath, it is an inchoate form that can be controlled neither by man's endeavours nor by his imagination. The demonic energy that seethes within the forests is a catalyst for the perverse sexuality of the white people and their subsequent moral deterioration.

With its "mud soft and black, hiding fever, rottenness, and evil under its level and glazed surface," Sambir refutes the Romantic myth that beyond civilization lie idyllic cultures in a state of innocence (*OI*, p. 326). Sambir's river, the Pantai, is a prototype for the Congo; the atavistic influence it casts upon white men, drawing out long repressed and atrophied libidinous energies, anticipates the Congo's effect on Kurtz. Sambir's primordial jungle comments on the illusion shared by Dain and Nina, as well as Willems and Aissa, that passionate love can transform the world. Sambir's tropical setting seems to be dominated by the processes of death and destruction, and the jungle's uncontrollable fecundity expresses itself in devolution rather than evolution. The dominance of the Pantai and the forest implies that Conrad's cosmos is as indifferent to man's aspirations as the cosmos of his contemporary Hardy, whose *Jude the Obscure* was published in 1895.

Had Conrad not gone on to write *Heart of Darkness*, we might be more attentive to the extent to which Sambir embodied Conrad's nightmare of various kinds of moral degeneracy and how it is for him a Dantesque vision of a kind of damnation. In Sambir, the (relatively) strong prey on the weak, the young upon the old, the rich upon the poor. Illness, aging and death dominate life in Sambir. In *Outcast*, a tired worn-out generation gives way to another; Lakamba displaces Patalolo because the latter is aging; Abdulla replaces Lingard; Mahmat Banjer displaces the "very aged and feeble" Hinopari; and the old woman servant who remains with Willems and Aissa has been all but discarded to die (*OI*, p. 309). In *Almayer's Folly* Babalatchi is very conscious that he and Lakamba lack the energy they once had. Lakamba, Abdulla and Almayer are older and moving toward their own inevitable death. The span of twenty years, a generation, has brought no discernible progress to Sambir. As chapter eleven of *Almayer's Folly* opens and Dain awaits Nina with whom he will elope, Dain is depicted as a diminutive and anonymous figure who is

dwarfed by the size and energy of the forest. While Dain and Nina rendezvous, "the intense work of tropical nature went on:" "plants shooting upward, entwined, interlaced in inextricable confusion, climbing madly and brutally over each other in the terrible silence of a desperate struggle towards the life-giving sunshine above — as if struck with sudden horror at the seething mass of corruption below, at the death and decay from which they sprang" (*AF*, p. 71).

Upon the anarchial and primordial Sambir, man seeks to impose his order. Lacking wife and parents, and bereft in England of any family ties, Conrad proposes family and personal relationships as a putative alternative to the greed and hypocrisy that dominate Sambir life. Throughout Conrad's early work, the search for someone to legitimize one's activities by an empathetic response to one's motive and feelings is dramatized. We see this in Jim's need to be understood by Marlow and Marlow's to be understood by his audiences, and we see it as well in Conrad's desperate early letters to Garnett. As the letters indicate, Conrad's personal quest for identity involves rendering an account to such putative fathers as Garnett and Cunninghame Graham. It is as if within the artistic and intellectual realm Conrad felt himself an adolescent in relation to peers and contemporaries whom he *required* as approving authority figures. The 1895 letters to Garnett are as self-revealing as they are painful to read. Typically, he writes: "I suffer now from an acute attack of faithlessness in the sense that I do not seem to believe in anything, but I trust that by the time we meet I shall be more like a human being and consequently ready to believe any absurdity . . ."³ The protagonists of his first novels — ineffectual, self-deluding, indolent men who are the victims of their own imagination — objectify the self-consciousness about his ability and worth that he projects in his early letters. Since the orphaned Conrad regarded his uncle as a father figure, Conrad would have taken very seriously his uncle's rebuke

that he lacked "endurance and steadfastness of decision" and the implication that he had inherited from his father's side a tendency to "[plunge into] plans of various kinds, the most diverse, mostly of a fantastic nature."⁴ In the Sambir novels each person seems to require someone else to share his confidence. This takes the form of a search for the missing family. As an orphan, who felt guilty for betraying his personal and natural paternal heritage by living in England, Conrad was concerned from the outset with the relationship between parent and adult child. Almayer and Willems lack a father and seek to compensate for their lack of someone in whom to confide. The Malays' search for the restored family parallels that of the white protagonists: Omar is a father figure to Babalatchi, and the latter plays that role for Lakamba.

Conrad ironically uses the biblical concept of symbolic paternity in which God the father or a patriarch confers his blessing almost as if by magic. Both Almayer and Willems, for whom blessing is equated with wealth, depend on Lingard for such a symbolic paternity. Almayer and Willems define even the most fundamental human relationships in economic terms. Almayer calls Lingard "father" because he wants to establish a filial relationship with the man who offers the promise of wealth in exchange for marrying his adopted daughter. Willems has married Hudig's illegitimate half-caste daughter in exchange for economic amenities. Lingard does not deny Willems' accusation that he has sold his soul: "Well, whatever I have sold, and for whatever price, I never meant you — you of all people — to spoil my bargain" (*OI*, p. 91). Pathetically, Willems and Almayer believe in Lingard's omnipotence, for Lingard is the man both would like to be. At one point the disreputable Willems parodies Lingard's colonial impulse, an impulse that Conrad understood as perverse paternalism: "In exchange for [fulfilling their economic needs], he had their silent fear, their loquacious love, their noisy veneration . . . His munificence had de-

moralized them" (*OI*, pp. 4-5). Even more than the natives who confer on him the name, "King of the Sea," Almayer believes in Lingard. Willems acknowledged Lingard's role as a father figure: "In the whole world there is only one man that had ever cared for me. Only one white man. You!" (*OI*, 274). Lingard himself has a need for surrogate children. He adopts Willems and Mrs. Almayer, requests that Almayer call him father, and dotes on Nina. Ironically, he mistakenly believed that Willems was his surrogate son because he has qualities that resemble his own ("How he had liked the man: his assurance, his push, his desire to get on, his conceited good humor, and his selfish eloquence," *OI*, p. 223). Conversely, because he thinks of Willems as a man whom he has "brought up," Lingard feels Willems' conduct as a personal shame (*OI*, pp. 262, 277).

In *An Outcast* the narrator tentatively proposes and discards Lingard not only as a hero but as the center of the novel's attention. Lingard's courage, straightforwardness, and willingness to accept the consequences of his behavior provide standards by which we measure Almayer and Willems. At first, Lingard is a sympathetic figure, because he seems to represent a separate and distinct alternative to Willems. Lingard egotistically speaks of "that river of mine" and thinks that his "word is law" (*OI*, p. 43), but he really has little control over Sambir events. Having discovered the river "for his own benefit only," he begins to equate Sambir's destiny with his own: "He dreamed of Arcadian happiness for that little corner of the world which he loved to think all his own. His deep-seated and immovable conviction that only he — he, Lingard — knew what was good for them was characteristic of him, and after all, not so very far wrong. He would make them happy whether or no, he said, and he meant it" (*OI*, p. 200). Gradually and almost reluctantly Conrad acknowledges that Lingard's egomania is a serious flaw. The first of the apparent *ubermenschen* that fascinated Conrad, Lingard

equates himself with Law and Justice. The aging Lingard represents a kind of independent, self-sufficient man who had benefitted from the geographical and moral open spaces. He is the embodiment of the childhood fantasy that desires may ontologically determine one's morality, a fantasy which takes more pernicious forms in Kurtz and Jim. Lingard does have the sense of self, confidence, authority, and ability to act unselfconsciously that his creator lacked in his new writing career. Lingard may respond amorally and egocentrically, but he knows who he is and has the kind of stature that enables him to transform a situation by his very presence. What sustains Lingard is his self-confidence and the intensity of his imagination. At times he behaves as if his very words were capable of transforming his wish into reality. In a sense he is both the artist Conrad wishes to be and the idealized man of action who regretfully must be left behind.

Lingard anticipates Kurtz in the Congo, Jim on Patusan, and Gould in Costaguana as men who are finally unable to conquer themselves by means of conquering their environment. As Kurtz will in the Congo and Jim on Patusan, Lingard plays God in Sambir; indeed, the natives believe that he had magic powers "to be in two places at once" or to "make himself invisible" (*OI*, 317). Lingard regards Sambir as a kind of Utopia because of his delusion that his will is dominant and his word law; however Sambir is less a primitive Xanadu than a mare's nest of petty intrigue. After he loses his boat and control over the river, he subsequently disappears. His identity as the "King of the Sea" is demythologized; Lingard proves no more able than another man to transform his fictions into action. The ineffectuality and disappearance of the potential hero indicate Conrad's reluctance to depend on this vestige of his previous life as an ordering principle within his fiction.⁵ Yet the temptation to allow Lingard's autonomy to become the ultimate moral value,

as it almost does in the final confrontation with Willems, must have been great.

Unmarried until his late thirties, Conrad idealized heterosexual love; he wistfully and poignantly remarked "There is love Still one must have some object to hang his affections upon — and I haven't" (*LL*. I. 175; June 7, 1895). From the outset of his career, the early Conrad explores heterosexual love as a possible alternative to isolation and self-doubt. Yet this idealization of heterosexual love is undermined by his obsessive treatment of Victorian sexual taboos: miscegenation, incest, and adultery. That sexuality so frequently focuses on these taboos reflects his unconscious discomfort with the subject of sex. Sambir becomes Almayer's and Willems' personal nemesis once they violate sexual taboos. Aissa is equated with Sambir because her sexuality is frightening not only to Willems, but to the propriety and decorum of Conrad's standards. Conrad is both titillated and shocked by interracial heterosexuality, a response that plays an important part in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. Conrad depicts Willems' love for Aissa as a turning towards decay and moral darkness. Significantly, Willems perceives her as "the very spirit of that land of mysterious forests" (*OI*, p. 70). Once Willems has sexual intercourse with Aissa, he has "a depraved sense of pleasure at the after-taste of slime in the water" (*OI*, p. 73). Like Sambir her facade is appealing but she contains the threat of the forbidden and destructive: "He had been baffled, repelled, almost frightened by the intensity of that tropical life which wants the sunshine but works in gloom; which seems to be all grace of colour and form, all brilliance, all smiles, but is only the blossoming of the dead; whose mystery holds the promise of joy and beauty, yet contains nothing but poison and decay" (*OI*, p. 70). The catalytic effect of his passion for Aissa upon his repressed libidinous needs leads to Willems' atavistic behavior. Describing how passionate, forbidden sexual love causes Willems to put behind him the last vestige of the civilized man he believed

he was, Conrad struggles to control his ironic distance and his language. He punishes his character Willems by having him imagine his own nullification. Willems saw himself "going away from him and diminishing in a long perspective of fantastic trees He felt a desire to see him vanish" (*OI*, p. 134).

These first novels introduce the essential Conrad theme that man necessarily lives in a world of his own illusions. Each of the major characters creates narratives of the future in which he or she believes. The novels trace Almayer's and Willems' response to the destruction of the putative future that each man imagines to keep himself going. In making an imagined world the basis of their existence while they are oblivious to empirical reality, Almayer and Willems anticipate Jim and Kurtz. The opening of each novel stresses the fictions in which both men live: Almayer's "dream of splendid future" and Willems' illusions that his step off the "straight and narrow path" will be a "short episode" (*AF*, p. 3) (*OI*, p. 3). The language focuses on self-delusion. Almayer is "absorbed" in his dream; Willems "imagined" and "fancied" that his life will continue as it has (*AF*, p. 3; *OI*, p. 3). Almayer fantasizes a future which will compensate for his present degradation; prior to his dismissal Willems complacently assumes the invulnerability of the position on which he predicates his present self-satisfaction. The flashback technique — temporarily moving to the past but always returning to the present — is an appropriate formal metaphor for Almayer whose alternating fantasies and reminiscences cannot permanently exclude the present any more than the narrative can. Once he is disgraced, Willems responds to his repressed libidinous needs by creating a fantasy in which sexual love becomes synonymous with life. Ignoring evidence of her real attitude to him, her mother's growing influence, and her psychosexual needs, Almayer creates a fiction of Nina that is not congruent with the facts. Just as Lingard unsuccessfully tries to play Pygmalion with

Mrs. Almayer, so does Almayer with his daughter. Living in a fictive world purged of moral sanctions not only makes Almayer ineffective in dealing with present exigencies, but it permits him to form subconsciously a forbidden relationship with his daughter: "Almayer was absorbed in the preparations, walking amongst his workmen and slaves in a kind of waking trance, where practical details as to the fitting out of the boats were mixed up with vivid dreams of untold wealth, where the present misery of burning sun, of the muddy and malodorous river bank disappeared in a gorgeous vision of a splendid future existence for himself and Nina" (*AF*, p. 62).

As will occur later in *Lord Jim, An Outcast of the Islands* begins with a prologue (in this case, the first three chapters) in which the central character's moral identity is defined. The rest of the novel is a working out of the consequences of what happens to a man once he has given in to his inherent weaknesses; Willems unwillingly surrenders to savagery and moral darkness after he is revealed as an embezzler. His "indiscretion" is deliberately described in terms which blur the distinction between civilization and savagery: the "track" of his "peculiar honesty" was so "faint and ill-defined" "that it took him some time to find out how far he had strayed amongst the brambles of the dangerous wilderness he had been skirting for so many years" (*OI*, p. 21). Even before Willems departs for the wilderness of Sambir, he is morally correlated with that grotesque place. Like the original "path from which he had strayed," the path to Aissa is almost allegorical: "at the end of the first turning," Willems had "a vision of blackness darker than the deepest shade of the forest" (*OI*, p. 68). The man who had equated *the* world with *his* world, soon discovers, as Jim and Razumov will, "that the world was bigger, the night more vast and more black" (*OI*, p. 30). Yet he is transformed in his own eyes into another man. As Willems understands after his disgrace, he has become "Another man — and another life with the

faith in himself gone" (*OI*, p. 23). Like a snake (an image which the narrator associates several times with him, *OI*, pp. 328, 358) shedding its cover, Willems casts off the remnants of his superego. The change in circumstances obliterates his facade of self-respect and makes him prey to libidinous impulses which he had barely sublimated in his compulsively aggressive pursuit of money. Willems is afraid of his transformation. With Victorian fastidiousness, he insists on affirming his marriage tie to a woman he despises and whom he regards as a "limp weight" and an "encumbrance." As the ironic narrator makes clear, Willems is the man who has no principles and who takes economic success as a synecdoche for moral and emotional well-being. Like Jim, he takes solace in being white. As Part One ends, Willems despises his reversion to savagery; but he cannot help himself. Later, he irrationally and paranoically attributes demonic powers to Aissa. "I did not belong to myself. She did. I did not know there was something in me she could get hold of She found out something in me. She found it out, and I was lost. I knew it. She tormented me" (*OI*, p. 269).

Omar's attempted murder of Willems is an externalization of Conrad's own subconscious self-condemnation for permitting his character to have a sexual affair with a Malay woman. The man who violates sacrosanct moral laws brings upon himself his own nemesis. Perhaps that is the real clue to why Omar's murderous passion finally casts Willems completely adrift from his psychic moorings; Willems had an "unreasoning fear of this glimpse into the unknown things, into those motives, impulses, desires he had ignored, but that had lived in the breasts of despised men It was not death that frightened him: it was the horror of bewildered life where he could understand nothing and nobody round him; where he could guide, control, comprehend nothing and no one — not even himself" (*OI*, 149). Willems becomes a totem to warn man and to remind man of what happens when he gives in to his

repressed impulses. Covered in blood from Lingard's attack, Willems "seemed as though he had been set up there for a warning, an incomprehensible figure marked all over with some awful and symbolic signs of deadly import" (*OI*, pp. 263-4).

Violating the incest taboo evokes a similar nemesis. It is not impossible that Conrad's heterosexual interest in his cousin, Mme. Poradowska, accounts for the narrator's relatively compassionate view of Almayer's love for his daughter. When Almayer's marriage proves disastrous, he unconsciously begins to transform his daughter into a wife. He rationalizes that his quest for gold is entirely a quest to transform his daughter's status. His obsessions with gold and racial status are in part sublimations by which he circumvents the incest taboo. Ironically, Almayer, who has sold himself to Lingard as a husband for his adopted daughter in exchange for the promise of gold, wants to use the gold to purchase back his status and that of his daughter, and thus reverse the descent in status that interracial sexuality implies to him. Gold becomes the means by which he can pay homage to his daughter in a socially acceptable way. His passion for Nina evolved from his apotheosizing her when she was a young child; Almayer "appeared strangely impressive and ecstatic; like a devout and mystic worshipper, adoring, transported and mute; burning incense before a shrine, a diaphanous shrine of a child-idol with closed eyes; before a pure and vaporous shrine of a small god — fragile, powerless, unconscious and sleeping" (*OI*, p. 320). Almayer's ecstatic child-worship, recalling the idolatry of primitive cultures, underlines the equation of sexuality and atavism. This equation is at odds with the narrator's efforts to establish heterosexual love as a paradigm and with his contention that there is no substantial distinction between primitive and civilized man.

In two of the more significant readings of *Almayer's Folly* written in the last decade or so, John H. Hicks and

Royal Roussel have stressed the affirmative nature of the heterosexual relationship between Nina and Dain.⁶ Hicks argues that what begins as a "spontaneous and irrational passion" evolves into a mature relationship; while Dain reconciles his desire for Nina with his "responsibilities as seaman, prince, and future ruler," Nina combines her own individuality with a socially valid identity.⁷ Roussel speaks even more enthusiastically of how through "mutual surrender two people can achieve such a miraculous continuity and enter an existence in which any distinction between self and other disappears."⁸ Yet the narrative structure indicates that Nina is as much a dreamer as Almayer. Nina's wish to escape with a passionate lover to a land unpolluted by white men and sordid searches for wealth is an ironic inversion of her father's. While Almayer dreams of wealth and triumph in the white world with himself as her companion, she dreams of leaving him behind. The fulfillment of her dream is inevitably the destruction of his. How often in Conrad does one person seem to thrive at the expense of others, as if by a weird principle of human energy one person's happiness necessarily implies another's destruction. But both dreams are the function of a psychic need to escape a claustrophobic existence. Psychologically, Nina is prepared for virtually any alternative to her intolerable existence of the past three years. Disillusioned by the civilized world at Singapore, she responds to her mother's fictions rather than her father's and believes she has found "The ideal Malay chief of her mother's tradition." Well aware that her response to Dain is a function of disappointment, sexual frustration, and ennui, the narrator renders her awakening with gentle irony and intentionally melodramatic language: "She understood now the reason and the aim of life; and in the triumphant unveiling of that mystery she threw away disdainfully her past with its sad thoughts, its bitter feelings and its faint affections, now withered and dead in contact with her fierce passion" (*AF*, p. 152). Dain's impulsiveness, the immoderation of

his emotions, his enthusiasm, and his recklessness appeal to her because they contrast to her father and the hypocrisy of the white world in Singapore, where she had been slighted for her color. That the characters arrive for Dain's and Nina's elopement in reverse order of their original presentation — Dain first, then Nina, finally, in pursuit, Almayer — shows how Dain has rendered Almayer obsolete and cast him out of the primary position he once occupied not only in Nina's consciousness but in the novel's form.

In an early version of *The Secret Sharer* motif, Dain and Nina mythicize one another. Even before he knows her, he is not only captivated by her looks, but certain that they are of a common mind. No sooner does Nina behold Dain than she feels "born only then to a knowledge of a new existence" (*AF*, 64). Yet when they meet to elope, "She was thinking already of moulding a god from the clay at her feet. A god for others to worship" (*AF* 172). She is unintentionally miming her father's attitude towards her. She has a touch of her father's egoism and more than a touch of his hyperbolic imagination; she tells her father "I shall make him great. His name shall be remembered long after both our bodies are laid in the dust" (*AF*, 180). The reader understands that she may repeat Almayer's effort to shape another human being according to one's own whims, an effort which perhaps more than any other is "Almayer's folly."

But do Dain's and Nina's mutual fictions imply that they will really live a transformed life? Isn't Dain's love for her an expression of his immoderate and spontaneous nature rather than a guarantee of future bliss? Like Almayer and Willems, Dain barter for his wife. Is he, like them, choosing a wife who is culturally incompatible? For psychological reasons, Nina chooses a racial antitype as a means of passage away from a world she finds stifling and disgusting. Where is there an indication of a mature love? After all, Mrs. Almayer suggests that, despite Dain's pres-

ent enthusiasm, "there will be other women" (*AF*, 153); she implies that Nina should merely accept this, unless he is in love with one specific woman in which case she recommends that Nina murder her rival. True, Nina will be the wife of a mighty prince, but isn't Mrs. Almayer's recollection of "the usual life of a Malay girl — the usual succession of heavy work and fierce love, of intrigues, gold ornaments, of domestic drudgery, and of that great but occult influence which is one of the few rights of half-savage womankind" — proleptic of Nina's life? (*AF*, p. 22). In any case she will be part of a world in which war, intrigue, and violence are perpetual. Lakamba and Babalatchi have few scruples about murdering both Almayer and Dain. Mrs. Almayer's vision of Malay life is a violent one; in her Polonius role before the elopement, she encourages her daughter to insist that "men should fight before they rest" (*AF*, 152), and she imagines that he will be perpetually fighting white men. Her view of Malay heterosexual love is one in which the woman serves her man by day and dominates him sexually at night. Clearly, the reader is shown aspects of Nina's future life that do not conform to her fictions.

Nina's own fastidiousness and timidity about leaving her father show that she does not share her mother's temperamental enthusiasm for this world. Ironically, her acculturation makes her unfit for the Malay world as well as the white world. While she romanticizes the future into a paradise, the narrative implies that Dain's life may be hardly more than a series of military adventures. Indeed, Conrad would have us understand that her speech to her father about the impossibility of two people understanding one another is appropriate to *any* human relationship: "No two human beings understand each other. They can understand but their own voices. You wanted me to dream your dreams, to see your own visions But while you spoke I listened to the voice of my own self" (*AF*, p. 179). Like Almayer and Willems, Nina inhabits a world of her own

sensory perceptions from which she desperately tries to escape by seeking an empathetic other. Nina's speech undermines the very belief in mutual love to which she commits herself by implying that each person narcissistically responds to his or her own voice. When Dain is baffled by her tears, the narrator stresses the necessary disparity between Dain and Nina, and by implication, any two people: "He was uneasily conscious of something in her he could not understand No desire, no longing, no effort of will or length of life could destroy this vague feeling of their difference" (*AF*, 187). Clearly, Nina has not found the empathetic other that she seeks.

Conrad understood that man can only pursue, and never capture, one's dream. Temporarily, Nina and Dain may "[enter] a land where no one can follow us" but the exigencies of survival, the passage of time, and the ephemeral nature of sexual love are continual threats to their present bliss (*AF*, 179). Love, then, is as temporary an illusion for Nina as it is for Aissa, Willems and Dain, all of whom face an extremely problematic future. The emphasis upon man's diminutive stature in relation to nature, the stress on man's temporality, the indifference of nature to man's aspirations, and perhaps even the meanness of the human spirit as illustrated by white man and natives show the impossibility of love's creating a new existence.

Before he created Marlow, Conrad had difficulty controlling the personal turmoil that we see in his letters of the 1894-96 period; he feels isolated in a meaningless universe; he is cynical about man's motives and purposes on this earth; he senses that he is an artistic failure; he doubts his ability to communicate, even while expressing the concomitant need to be understood. If it does not always seem that the commentary is appropriate to the dramatic action which evokes it, it is because Conrad is using his speaker to explore his own bafflement in a universe he regards as amoral, indifferent, and at times hostile. In the first two novels, when Conrad's surrogate,

his narrator, places an episode in an intellectual and moral context, he is often testing and probing to discover what an episode means. Conrad subsequently learned to capitalize on his reluctance to be dogmatic; he dramatizes Marlow's process of moral discovery, and shows how Marlow continually formulates, discards and redefines his beliefs through experience. But because in 1894-5 Conrad had difficulty in embracing a consistent set of values, his narrator's commentary does not always move towards a consistent philosophic position, but rather may posit contradictory perspectives. Quite frequently, the omniscient voice of the first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, explores characters and action from the perspective of a man committed to family ties, the work ethic, sexual constraint, individual responsibility, and racial understanding. Yet these basic humanistic values are often at odds with the artistic tentativeness and moral confusion that derive from Conrad's uncertainty and anxiety. The unresolved tension between, on the one hand, Conrad's own personal concerns and, on the other, his attempt to objectify moral issues is revealed in conflicts between the values expressed by the narrator and the implications of his plot and setting. At times, one of the narrator's comments may very well be in some conflict with another. Or one of his comments may be more an outburst of intellectual energy than a reasoned-through discussion of the novel's action. For example, the narrator uses the occasion of verbal fencing between Babalatchi and Willems to make the following meditative comment that barely pertains to the action but reflects Conrad's own ennui and pessimism.

Babalatchi's fatalism gave him only an insignificant relief in his suspense because no fatalism can kill the thought of the future, the desire of success, the pain of waiting for the disclosure of the immutable decrees of Heaven. Fatalism is born of the fear of failure, for we all believe that we carry success in our own hands, and we suspect that our hands are weak. (*OI*, p. 126)

When Aissa feels her isolation, Conrad characteristically defines it in terms of *his own* loneliness which he generalizes into mankind's common plight:

Her hands slipped off Lingard's shoulders and her arms fell by her side, listless, discouraged, as if to her — to her, the savage, violent, and ignorant creature — had been revealed clearly in that moment the tremendous fact of *our* isolation, of that loneliness impenetrable and transparent, elusive and everlasting; of the indestructible loneliness that surrounds, envelopes, clothes *every human soul* from the cradle to the grave, and, perhaps, beyond. (*OI*, p. 250; emphases mine)

When he launched his writing career, Conrad was not only a complex personality almost paralyzed by self-doubt, but an expatriate with an ambiguous attitude toward the English intellectual and moral milieu of the 1890's.⁹ In his early novels, the conservative standards of the English merchant marine are qualified by the values and attitudes of bourgeois culture as well as the ennui and cynicism of the *fin de siècle*. The tradition of English manners, with its emphasis on polite behavior and fastidious moral distinctions, plays a prominent role in the early novels where Conrad's usually skeptical and gloomy narrator often adopts the stance of an enlightened Victorian.

Conrad did not accept the late Victorian notion shared by the Fabians Shaw, Cunninghame Graham, and Butler that mankind was evolving into a higher creature or that western civilization was of superior quality to the more primitive kinds of human life. Conrad implies that the distinction between civilized white man and savage natives, a distinction which is taken as the essential premise of life by his Western European characters living in undeveloped areas, is fundamentally apocryphal. In the preface to *Almayer's Folly* Conrad stresses the common plight of all men:

I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live; in houses or in tents, in the streets under a fog, or in the forests . . . For, their land — like ours — lies under the inscrutable eyes of the Most High. Their hearts — like ours — must endure the load of the gifts

from Heaven: the curse of facts and the blessing of illusions, the bitterness of our wisdom and the deceptive consolation of our folly. (*AF*, p. viii)

In the early Malay novels it is Conrad's narrator, not Conrad's expatriates, as Lloyd Fernando argues, who is "tantalized by the ideal of a true bond of humanity among all."¹⁰ His early works bitterly satirize imperialistic pretensions. In *Almayer's Folly*, *An Outcast of the Islands*, the stories comprising *Tales of Unrest*, and *Heart of Darkness*, white men and natives share similar passions and needs; both demonstrate the same potential for nobility and baseness. Almayer and Willems seek to exploit their racial position for economic gain. As Westerners who eschew hard work and seek a life of ease, they anticipate Kayerts and Carlier in "An Outpost of Progress," the company men in *Heart of Darkness*, and the officers of the *Patna*. Conrad implies that what restrains Almayer and Willems from murder is not superior morality, but enervated instincts and atrophied will. In Conrad's Malay novels, as Fernando reminds us, Conrad's Europeans share the condition of exile with the major Malay characters — Babalatchi, Abdulla, Lakamba, Aissa.¹¹ Perhaps Conrad blurs the line between cultures because in the 1890's he wanted to believe in the similarity between Poles and Englishmen. By emphasizing the similarity between cultures, he eased both his psychic strain of being an expatriate writer for English audiences and his frustration in learning to speak the English language.

Conrad demystifies accepted late-nineteenth-century distinctions between primitive and civilized by replicating in the Malay and Arab society the kind of social hierarchies that we mistakenly believe to be an implicit part of Western civilization. He describes the Malay world in terms which his turn-of-the-century reader would have readily placed in the context of Edwardian England. Willems is a "confidential clerk," Lakamba is a "noble exile" and an "ambitious nobleman," and Babalatchi is a "sagacious statesman." As a mysterious powerful figure whose reputation sustains him

more than any action, Abdulla parallels Lingard. Conrad wants to imply that Sambir is analogous to Western civilization, without going so far as to say so and thus risk offending his adopted country: "It was one of the tolerated scandals of Sambir, disapproved and accepted, a manifestation of that base acquiescence in success, of that inexpressed and cowardly toleration of strength, that exists, infamous and irremediable, at the bottom of all hearts, in all societies; whenever men congregate; in bigger and more virtuous places than Sambir, and in Sambir also, where, as in other places, one man could steal a boat with impunity while another would have no right to look at a paddle" (*OI*, p. 309). At times he suggests that Malay political life is the metaphorical vehicle for which English politics is the tenor. Can there be any doubt that English political pretensions are included in the following remark? "The mind of the savage statesman, chastened by bereavement, felt for a moment the weight of his loneliness with keen perception worthy even of a sensibility exasperated by all the refinements of tender sentiment that a glorious civilization brings in its train, among other blessings and virtues, into this excellent world" (*OI*, p. 214-5).

Despite the narrator's efforts to propose values and ideals, the first two novels posit a vision of mankind that emphasizes mankind's powerlessness, his ineffectuality, his pettiness, his selfishness, and the ephemeral nature of the life he leads. Like Carlier and Kayerts in "An Outpost of Progress" and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Almayer and Willems are men whose passions have been repressed and distorted by civilization without a concomitant social development. With scathing irony, the narrator shows that the relationship between Almayer and Willems is marked by atavistic hatred: "Those two specimens of the superior race glared at each other savagely . . ." (*OI*, p. 63). Yet, while Nina may conclude that, finally, the savages are preferable, the intrigues of Lakamba and Babalatchi do not lead the reader to that conclusion. Conrad attributes apparent differ-

ences in the political behavior of whites and natives to the native's relative weakness compared to the white man's military power. For similar stimuli often evoke similar responses. Conrad recognizes the need of men to communicate with one another as the basic impulse that draws them together. Both the native and white cultures rely on talk as a means of planning, reminiscing, exchanging thoughts, Conrad's explanation of the uses and abuses of language anticipates a central theme of the three turn-of-the-century Marlow tales. For the natives, talk "is their only accomplishment, their only superiority, their only amusement" (*OI*, p. 96). Lakamba depends on Babalatchi's talk to energize him; their exchanges contain abortive plots and insidious stratagems, but more than that their talk gives them the opportunity for friendship that neither seems to find elsewhere. Part of Almayer's problem is that he has no one in whom to confide; even before he retreats into autistic silence at the end of *Almayer's Folly*, the range of his verbal behavior has atrophied and he uses speech only to give orders and to fence with his enemies. From the outset, when his wife's shrill cry disrupts his fiction, language seems an enemy that threatens to intrude into the fictions that he weaves for himself. Almayer feels Taminah's urgings that he awake as "the murmur of words that fell on his ears in a jumble of torturing sentences, the meaning of which escaped the utmost efforts of his brain" (*AF*, p. 159-60).

Finally, Conrad's narrative structures and proleptic texture mime a closed universe where man seems to be locked into a concatenation of events that he cannot control. In both novels, the Victorian humanism of the narrator is undermined by the dramatized action of the plot, and it is the pessimistic, morbid plot that reflects Conrad's own state of mind. Even while the narrator tries to establish a humanistic perspective, the plots of both novels dramatize the inevitable demise of a man who has debilitating moral flaws and the failure of human relationships among the rest of the major characters. For example, Lingard's and

Almayer's mutual failure to kill a fly unites in futility and frustration the seeming *ubermensch*, Lingard, with the *untermensch* Willems: "Lingard and Almayer [stood] face to face in the fresh silence of the young day, looking very puzzled and idle, arms hanging uselessly by their sides — like men disheartened by some portentous failure" (*OI*, p. 169). In *Almayer's Folly* each of the early chapters closes with significant codas which point to Almayer's demise: His wife's "savage intrusion" concludes chapter two; his "nameless fear," deriving from his suspicion that his daughter might want "to be kidnapped" ends chapter three; the presence of Babalatchi juxtaposed to Almayer's unspoken and ineffectual threats closes chapter four; the river's violence climaxes chapter five; and the ironic juxtaposition of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* with Babalatchi's and Lakamba's plans to poison Almayer concludes chapter six. While the parabolic endings to chapters reinforce the dark vision of the plot, they may seem forced and anxious attempts by Conrad to transform nominalistic events into significant form. The collapse of the house of cards that Lingard built to amuse Nina may be not only a metaphor for Lingard's failure to impose a structure upon the world, but a moment of self-irony on the part of the author who doubts whether he can get control of his imagined world. For as he wrote Edward Noble, while he was still completing *An Outcast*, "[Writing] is made up of doubt, or hesitation, of moments silent and anxious when one listens to the thoughts, — one's own thoughts, — speaking indistinctly, deep down somewhere, at the bottom of the heart" (*LL*. I. 175; July 17, 1895).

Whereas in *The Nigger of the Narcissus* Conrad will dramatize the fellowship of an organic community and the virtues of self-reliance, resourcefulness, and fidelity to the ship and crew, the only affirmative values in the first two novels are in the telling. Conrad defines the narrator of the two early novels as a man who is morally and psychologically different from the protagonists, both of whom he

not only patronizes but despises. And yet Conrad reluctantly realizes that Willems and Almayer, like Jim, must be regarded as "one of us" and that all men share a kinship with the worst of men. Writing to Garnett of Aissa and Willems, he remarked: "To me they are typical of mankind, where every individual wishes to assert his power, woman by sentiment, man by achievement of some sort — mostly base. I myself . . . have been ambitious to make it clear and have failed in that, as Willems fails in his effort to throw off the trammels of earth and of heaven" (LL. I. 181; Sept. 24, 1895). Royal Roussel speaks of the narrator's "sympathetic" awareness of Almayer's world and his "emotional involvement and commitment" with all the characters of that novel.¹² But, on the contrary, what is remarkable is the compulsive *insistence* of Conrad's surrogate, the narrator, upon separating himself from his ineffectual protagonists. Almayer and Willems are fictional projections of the self-doubt, weariness, and anxiety that Conrad desperately wishes to leave behind. The early novels are acts of initiation for the artistic self Conrad was trying to create and the casting off of the seaman identity with which he had achieved success and self-satisfaction.

NOTES

- ¹Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Kent edition, 26 vols. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1926). I use the abbreviations *AF* to indicate *Almayer's Folly* and *OI* to indicate *An Outcast of the Islands*. Although written first, *Almayer's Folly* takes place 20 years after *An Outcast of the Islands*. Conrad completed *Almayer's Folly* in 1894 and *An Outcast of the Islands* in 1895; the dates in parentheses are publication dates.
- ²See G. Jean Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1927). Also John A. Gee and Paul J. Sturm, *Letters of Joseph Conrad to Marguerite Poradowska 1890-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); see for example, pp. 63, 82, 86, 88. Since the dates of the letters are important to my argument, I have placed them in parentheses within the text.
- ³Edward Garnett, ed., *Letters from Joseph Conrad* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 39.

- ⁴See Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), p. 122.
- ⁵For the original of Lingard, whom Conrad knew as a legend rather than personally, see Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), especially pp. 89-118.
- ⁶John H. Hicks, "Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*: Structure, Theme, and Critics, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*," 19 (June, 1964), pp. 17-31. See Royal Roussel, *The Metaphysics of Darkness* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 28-50.
- ⁷Hicks, p. 24.
- ⁸Roussel, pp. 40-41.
- ⁹For substantive discussion of the intellectual and literary milieu, see John A. Lester, Jr., *Journey Through Despair 1880-1941: Transformations in British Literary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
- ¹⁰See Lloyd Fernando, "Conrad's Eastern Expatriates: A New Version of His Outcasts," *PMLA*, 91 (1976), p. 89.
- ¹¹*Ibid*, pp. 78-90.
- ¹²Roussel, pp. 49-50.