

JOSEPH CONRAD'S POLYGLOT WORDPLAY

To a teacher of languages there comes a time
when the world is but a place of many words
and man appears a mere talking animal not
much more wonderful than a parrot.
(*Under Western Eyes*)¹

Joseph Conrad, throughout his literary career, derived some amusement from playing with several languages. And he obviously hoped many of his readers would share his amusement.

One might also claim that languages played with Conrad, or played tricks on him. French and English, and the interplay between them, are the essential elements of the wordplay I wish to investigate. Yet one should also take into account the case of other languages of which Conrad possessed only a more sketchy knowledge, and which he nevertheless employed, more often than not for the purpose of creating the necessary local colour in some foreign contexts, but sometimes in order to make fun of their speakers. One finds in Conrad's fiction words and phrases borrowed from such languages as Malay, Spanish, Italian, and German.

My interest in these questions was stimulated when in 2003 *Lord Jim* (1900) was placed on the syllabus for some national French examinations, and I delivered a paper entitled 'Les amusements linguistiques de Conrad dans *Lord Jim*'. *Lord Jim*, which belongs to the early phase of Conrad's career, is nevertheless one of the most eminently cosmopolitan novels in the entire oeuvre. It has seemed desirable to enlarge the scope of this article by taking in, if only for purposes of comparison, some of the novels and stories that came before and after it in his career, offering opportunities for polyglot wordplay. What will eventually emerge from such confrontations is the privileged position, almost the uniqueness, of *Lord Jim*.

Some of Conrad's other writings involve him in specific linguistic confrontations. *Under Western Eyes* (1911) is rather interesting from that standpoint. While the events take place partly in Russia and most of the characters are Russian, and while the narrator is not a Marlow-like 'master mariner', but a teacher of languages who obviously knows a good deal of Russian, no Russian words are printed in the book. Russian is only suggested by forms of address such as 'Kirylo Sidorovitch'; the Russian characters in the story converse in excellent English, and we get no more than a sort of whiff of Russianity through the narrator's comments on the Russian language and the Russians' 'extraordinary love of words' (p. 4). Mrs Haldin uses French, naturally enough in Geneva; so does Natalia; they are said to be learning English from the narrator, but when their English fails them, they fall back, not on Russian (which the narrator knows), but on French, apparently treated as a more international idiom, in that place and at that time. So that, paradoxically, *Under Western Eyes* contains an almost verbose tribute to the speech of the Russians, but no word of their language.

¹ (London: Dent, 1947), p. 3. Quotations from Conrad's works are from the Dent's Collected Edition (individual volumes are specified as necessary in the footnotes).

Spanish gets somewhat better treatment in Conrad's œuvre as a whole. *Nostromo* (1904) is of course the relevant novel for a study of Conrad's use of that language. Here Conrad italicizes nearly all the Spanish words he uses.² On the whole, he succeeds in creating at least an atmosphere of Spanishness for his story. The proper names, of places and people, are not italicized, but they are recognizable and sound probable: Golfo Placido, Punta Mala, Mesa Grande, Esmeralda, Rincon, to name only a few. Some Spanish words and phrases are readily understandable equivalents of their English counterparts: *Americanos*, *Diario oficial*, and so on; others, though purely Spanish, refer to widely known Spanish realities and contribute to the creation of the necessary local colour: *mozo*, *patio*, *camino real*, *tertulia*; and others again demonstrate that the author either really possessed a creditable knowledge of the language or had conducted a quest for suitably foreign Spanish terms: *cabildo*, *alferez*, *potalon*, and especially the delightful *hombre de muchos dientes*.³ Incidentally, even if he did do his homework conscientiously, Conrad committed occasional mistakes, like having a soldier address his officer as *mi colonel* (instead of *coronel*) or using *policianos* for *policíacos*. But Conrad showed his empathy with the genius of the Spanish language by coining the gorgeous nickname for Nostromo of *Capataz de Cargadores*. Translated into French, that title means no more than the totally unglamorous *contremaître des débardeurs*, or in English, 'foreman of the dockers', or of the 'stevedores'. *Capataz de Cargadores* is an unquestionable *trouvaille*: it sounds splendid, gorgeous, and also ostentatious, suiting the personality and attitudes of the character perfectly, and even expressing them beautifully. Finally, though Conrad probably made things more complex for the reader and somewhat easier for himself by having a central character who uses alternately, and alternatively, Spanish and Italian, and also English, it cannot be denied that his wordplay with Spanish in *Nostromo* is adroit and on the whole successful.

In the linguistic field, the case of *Lord Jim* seems still more complex and interesting. The main narrative is penned—whether or not it is ascribed to Charles Marlow—by an English novelist, but one who had been born in Poland and had become steeped in French culture and speech, so that English was only his third language. In *Lord Jim* many of the characters, like Jim and Marlow, are English, but the cast also includes a memorable Frenchman, the 'lieutenant français', several Germans or germanophones—mainly the *Patna*'s skipper and Mr Stein—and a Malay captain who speaks a bookish and eccentric kind of English, commented on by the narrator.

There is also an Italian, Mariani, who puts in a brief and unglamorous appearance, in the course of which he unfortunately does not manipulate or even handle language much. The only thing he actually says, he says twice: 'Antonio never forget—Antonio never forget!'⁴ He is defined as an 'unspeakable vagabond', because he caters to the vices of one of the *Patna*'s former officers, whom he shelters and protects. He may be unspeakable, but he is also, regrettably, unspeaking. Conrad was to show more active interest in Italian

² Conrad omits the accents in words like *Plácido*, *Rincón*, *potalon*; he misspells *oficial* as *official*.

³ *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (London: Dent, 1947), p. 444.

⁴ *Lord Jim* (London: Dent, 1946), p. 49.

later. In the short story 'Il Conde', for instance, where the setting is Naples, a few words of Italian are used, but it has been shown that not one Italian phrase employed in that story is really correct, beginning with the title, which rests on a confusion between Italian and Spanish (as Conrad himself admits in his 'Author's Note'). In *Nostromo* the Violas and Fianza himself are Italians and first-generation immigrants in a Spanish-speaking land. There are no more than a dozen Italian words altogether in *Nostromo*, and nothing recherché among them; just things like *Avanti*, *Va bene*, *signori Inglesi*, *Buon Viaggio*, *Palazzo*. Nostromo, when he addresses his compatriot, old Giorgio Viola, alternates between Spanish (*viejo*) and Italian (*vecchio*). *Suspense* (1925), like 'Il Conde', is staged in Italy, but it mostly involves an English-speaking milieu. The most interesting Italian character, Attilio, can express himself in fluent English. So does the innkeeper Cantelucci. Monteverso speaks English or French rather than Italian. Apart from easy markers of Italianism, like *signore*, *signorino*, *palazzo*, *piazza*, there are not many Italian words; the most interesting are *Patienza* (which should read *Paziienza*), *bestialità*, and *ortolana*. It is only in Part IV that readers find themselves in Italian Italy, but even then there is not much display of Italian vocabulary and usage. One's overall impression is that Conrad had rubbed shoulders with Italy and the Italian language, but not studied it in depth, and did not wish to advertise his superficial acquaintance with it.

With the exception of the robustly monoglot Frenchman, all the characters in *Lord Jim* are supposed to speak English, though they do not all speak the same brand of that language. Conrad's display of variants of English seems to me to demonstrate his desire to play with language in order to amuse himself and his readers, but also to play on languages as one plays on a musical instrument, as a virtuoso. No one can deny that the English language became an instrument of Conrad's music.

The language, however, that is paradoxically almost absent from the novel is Malay, though it is the idiom spoken in Patusan, where about half of the story is located. Conrad uses hardly any touches of local colour borrowed from his scant store of Malay words. That is all the more surprising as he had inaugurated his literary career with a Malay word. The first line of his first novel, thus the first line ever published by him, reads: 'Kaspar! Makan!' There may be more distinguished ways for a wife to invite her husband to partake of a meal, but can there be a clearer assertion of a writer's purpose to become known as a polyglot? A few Malay words are to be found—unitalicized then—both in *Almayer's Folly* (1895) and in *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896): *Orang Blanda*, *Putih*, *Ada*, *tuan* (a title that sounds much cheaper in those early days than in *Lord Jim*), *besar*; others appear in one of the two novels only; the most singular is probably *Almayer's bourrouh* (Chapter VII), which does not seem to exist in genuine Malay speech and thus possesses the distinction of being a Malay word invented by Conrad. Yet in *Lord Jim*, written at a time when Conrad probably felt more remote from his Malay sources, one finds few reminders of the linguistic foreignness of Patusan; the local word *nakhoda* is used; and Cornelius is called by the natives 'Inchi 'Nelyus'. The English spoken by Tamb' Itam does not sound particularly foreign, and Jewel's seems perfect; I

do not claim to know what that young person's mother tongue can have been. Cornelius, who is not her father but only her stepfather, is Portuguese; her mother was a 'Dutch-Malay girl'. Jewel has spent her whole life in Patusan, where the vernacular speech appears to be Malay. How is one to get one's bearings in such a linguistic hotchpotch? Conrad gets away with that piece of characterization by allowing Jewel to utter no more than a few simple phrases in English—she has to speak English, since she is addressing Jim or Marlow. The two relatively interesting Malay words that remain in evidence are *Dain* (whose status, as in *Almayer's Folly*, remains uncertain, poised, as it were, halfway between first name and title) and the more important *tuan*. *Tuan* is presented as the title bestowed upon Jim by the Patusan people in recognition of the leading part he has come to play in their community. 'Lord' is said to be only an approximate rendering into English of the Malay word *tuan*. Yet Conrad decided to call his novel, not *Tuan Jim*, but *Lord Jim*. Conrad is definitely less interested in the Malay language at the time of *Lord Jim* than he had been when he wrote *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. If there are more Malay words displayed later, not in 'Karain' (1897), but in *The Rescue* (1920), particularly in its first half, that is probably because that part had been written before *Lord Jim*; and the injection of a few Malay words towards the end of *The Rescue* may be regarded as an effort to revive the somewhat languishing atmosphere of that story, after its nineteen years' sleep.⁵ *The Rescue* does sport some of Conrad's familiar Malay vocabulary, italicized now (even *prau*, *kris*, or *sarong*, which the author might have regarded as sufficiently English to be spared that sort of signal), together with a handful of newcomers to Conrad's fiction, like *malim*, *pata*, *panglima*.

Halfway between Malay and English one comes across the case of the captain who takes Marlow to Patusan, and who is of mixed race. It takes a good deal of aplomb, for a foreigner writing in English, to make fun of the way foreigners speak English. Yet, on the one hand, experience shows that the temptation to do so can prove irresistible, and on the other hand, if the right to behave with aplomb can be earned—as Hopkins claimed that the right to be obscure has to be earned—Conrad had undoubtedly earned it. The Malay captain is seen and heard on a couple of pages of a single chapter of *Lord Jim* (XXIII), but they stick in one's memory as among the most linguistically elaborate passages in the novel; the man is a 'half-caste', and behind that detail, repeatedly mentioned by the narrator, we sense an additional cause for his being treated with disdain; additional, I mean, to the captain's performance as a speaker. He is 'a dapper little half-caste of forty or so, in a blue flannel suit, with lively eyes, his round face the colour of lemon-peel' (p. 238). Marlow is struck by the fellow's 'self-satisfied and cheery exterior', in spite of a 'careworn temperament'. He belongs to the subject of the present essay by virtue of the early assertion that 'His flowing English seemed to be derived from a dictionary compiled by a lunatic' (p. 238). His attempts to speak idiomatically invariably fall a little wide of the

⁵ Conrad began to write that novel—called *The Rescuer* at its inception—in 1896, worked on it intermittently for a few years, and had composed about one half of it by the end of the century. His writing of *The Rescue* was resumed only after the end of the First World War; it was completed on 25 May 1919.

mark. He uses 'reverentially' (p. 239) instead of 'respectfully', a confusion on which Marlow issues explicit comments. Particularly delectable is the use of 'offertories' (p. 239) instead of 'offerings'. Marlow notes the self-satisfaction which the Malay captain derived from the linguistic proficiency he believes himself to be exhibiting: 'He [. . .] watched with satisfaction the undeniable effect of his phraseology' (p. 239). There will be another explanatory interruption by Marlow when 'impenitence' (a fine word in itself) is produced instead of 'impunity' (p. 239). Yet a slightly suspicious note is struck when Marlow issues a similar comment a little later on, speaking of 'the insufferably conceited air of his kind after what they imagine a display of cleverness' (p. 240). 'Of his kind'? What 'kind'? Is there not some racial prejudice at the back of such a remark? Then, after a few oddities and inadequacies of syntax, Marlow seems to become more and more intolerant of the little fellow, and begins to hate him heartily; he now piles up expressions like 'bursting with importance', 'absurd chatter of the half-caste' (p. 240), 'that half-caste croaker', 'little wretch' (p. 241). The narrator's insistence on the captain's racial standing is striking. Finally, a strange phenomenon occurs; the half-caste changes colour, passing from the 'lemon-peel' tinge of his first appearance to 'the shape and colour of a ripe pumpkin' (p. 241). I must admit that, never having encountered lemons that were not yellow or green, or pumpkins that were not orange-coloured, I never mistook one for the other. If colour had not been enough to distinguish between the two, size might have settled the question. The half-caste captain is caught in contradictions: he is at once 'cheery' and 'careworn', we saw on making his acquaintance, and now he wavers between the lemon and the pumpkin; the confusion is more natural in French, between the words *citron* and *citrouille*. The disconcerting change may after all be more lexical and Gallic than chromatic. But there remains the question of size. I am reminded of an incident that occurred when, with a party of French travellers in China, we were shown round some caverns near Guilin; the Chinese guide showed us some primitive pictures on the walls, one of which was of a very big fish. The guide said he could not remember the name of that fish in French. I obligingly suggested 'Une baleine'; the guide smiled heartily and exclaimed: 'Oui, c'est ça; une baleine . . . un bigorneau.' Yes, that's it. A whale . . . a winkle. A lemon, a pumpkin. *Un citron, une citrouille*.

It seems to me that here Conrad indulges in a form of linguistic amusement that is tempting, somewhat facile, and not wholly devoid of pedantry, in so far as it consists in ridiculing comparative ignorance by displaying superior knowledge, while that knowledge need not be imposing in order to appear superior. In short Conrad may seem to be practising the kind of exhibitionism he condemns, with something of the self-satisfaction that he also condemns. Besides, the novelist has not resisted the temptation of introducing into the episode a Franco-British pun, with the words 'weapons of a crocodile' (p. 239); in French, 'larmes de crocodile' (crocodile tears, expressing insincere grief) sounds just like 'l'arme de crocodile' (the weapon of a crocodile). But the crocodile tears or weapons have really nothing to do with a Malay mariner's linguistic position; nor does their presence in his speech possess much likelihood. However, let us admit that within a page and a half Conrad succeeds in

being amusing, in arousing curiosity, and in allusively posing one of the most significant problems of his work, that of communication, or communicability, via speech and languages.

Bad English, or faulty English, was no doubt for Conrad, and in his first career for Korzeniowski, a reality that existed close to him and by which he must have felt threatened in his own person. More foreign languages, like German, enjoy in his experience a less obvious status. How much or how little German did he actually know? His published writings do not provide a clear answer to that question. It is pretty certain that in Cracow young Konrad Korzeniowski must have learnt German at school. My own paradoxical impression is that the strongest influence the German language exerted on Conrad is to be observed in the letters written by him in French, where he almost systematically uses capital initials for personal pronouns, thus treating *Vous* as German does *Sie*. In *Lord Jim*, as we saw, we come across several Germans, or germanophones, the most interesting being the *Patna*'s repellent skipper and Mr Stein, who seems to embody in his person an ideal of delicacy and refinement.

The very first words uttered by the captain of the pilgrim-ship concern the Muslim pilgrims: 'Look at dese cattle!' (p. 15), he exclaims, and the *d* in *dese* for *these* is his linguistic and national signature. He regards the Arabs as cattle, but he himself is a disgusting animal, a heap of inert flesh ('There was something obscene in the sight of his naked flesh. His bared breast glistened soft and greasy' (p. 21)). And his speech is extremely coarse: 'a torrent of foamy, abusive jargon that came like a gush from a sewer [. . .]. [Jim's] gorge rose at the mass of panting flesh from which issued gurgling mutters, a cloudy trickle of filthy expressions' (pp. 21–22). He is several times termed 'renegade' ('a sort of renegade New South Wales German, very anxious to curse publicly his native country' (p. 14)); the anonymous narrator and Marlow both hate him. Conrad does not venture to quote any of the skipper's filthy expressions. His German may not have been sufficient for the purpose. The character's Germanness and his germanophonia are expressed by a few German words: *schwein* (without the capital initial), *Gottam*, *Gott-for-dam*,⁶ *verfluchte*, *Mein Gott*; it is while writing about him that Marlow uses the word *ewigkeit* (again without the required capital initial (p. 47)); the skipper's Germanness is further characterized by odd pronunciations: *friendt* (not easy to articulate), *I am well aguaindt* (meaning 'I am well acquainted' (p. 41)), *your tam country*, *I shpfit on it*. The objectionable captain uses very few Germanisms in syntax: *I vill an American citizen begome* (p. 42) is the only striking one. On the whole, then, this sorry representative of the German nation does not provide evidence of any real familiarity possessed by Conrad with the minutiae and subtleties of the German language; he is treated throughout in a strikingly hostile fashion, and the author makes no great effort to characterize him linguistically.

Stein's is a much more elaborate and interesting case. Before examining his linguistic features, let us dispose of a few minor figures. Should one count Schomberg among the Germans in *Lord Jim*? No, for in that novel he is still Alsatian. He is defined as 'a hirsute Alsatian' (p. 198): hirsute, but Alsatian

⁶ *Gott-for-dam* presumably stands for *Gottverdammmt*; *Gottam* may be the German captain's version of the universal American *goddam*.

(even 'hirsute' in this context seems to mean no more than 'hairy'). Schomberg will finally become German, and thus definitely hateful, only in *Victory*. Conrad may be doing no more than reflecting a historical reality in thus changing Schomberg's nationality, for Alsations became German in 1870, French in 1918, German in 1940, French again in 1945. Schomberg in *Lord Jim* speaks correct English, in any case. So does Eggström, 'a raw-boned, heavy Scandinavian' (p. 191). Contrast another character, more fleetingly appearing in *Lord Jim*, named Yucker. Siegmund Yucker is a 'native of Switzerland' (p. 198), but quite obviously of the German-speaking province of that country, so he occasionally drops an *Ach* and says things like *Es ist ein Idee* (the German word *Idee* is feminine and should therefore be preceded by *eine* rather than *ein*).⁷ Yucker pronounces English with a thick German accent; he calls *gabasidy* what English terms capacity—that is, 'Ability in the abstract'. Yucker's major linguistic achievement consists in uttering the sentence: '*It's a great ting in this goundry to be vree from tispep-shia*' (p. 199). And that seems to belong to the order of the most conventional caricature.

Returning to Stein, one enters a much more attractive and rewarding field. From his very first introduction to the reader, Stein is shown under a very favourable light: he is *trustworthy*, he is *gentle, intelligent*, the narrator uses words like *good-nature, benevolent, upright and indulgent, intrepidity of spirit and physical courage, distinction* (pp. 202–03); it is almost too much. Mention will be made later of his voice as being *quiet and humorous* (p. 204), and details will be given about his personal history, from his birth in Bavaria, via his itinerary through Mediterranean Europe to the Far East. That history reads like a miniature novel; it has led him to Samarang, where, when we become acquainted with him, he has recently retired from business or at least placed some distance between trade and himself, now that he is rich and can indulge in his true passion, entomological studies.

How does Stein speak English? Most of the time with elegance, almost with refinement; in short, he speaks Conrad's English. One example may suffice to illustrate that phenomenon. Stein says: 'Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him; for if not, why should he want all the place? Why should he run about here and there making a great noise about himself, talking about the stars, disturbing the blades of grass?' (p. 208). Is there anything Germanic about such a speech, in which philosophical reflection is harmoniously blended with poetical perception? In a more general way, when he wishes to remind the reader that Stein is a German speaking English, Conrad can, and does, use three procedures, but he does so only intermittently. He can sprinkle his sentences with German words; he can ascribe to him unusual pronunciations; and he can make him employ particular sentence structures. Conrad displays in his case skill amounting to virtuosity.

The reader thus soon enough perceives differences between Marlow's English and Stein's: 'I had a very big emotion' (p. 208) sounds like a Gallicism. In a later speech by Stein several expressions are, to varying degrees, slightly unusual and out of true: 'what a great wickedness it was for me to go alone', 'I laughed with

⁷ Here Conrad may be merely transcribing the blurred impression produced by the words in spoken German: *ist 'n' Idee*.

pleasure a little', 'my hat jumps to the back of my head', 'My pony snort, jump, and stand', 'my friends, why you not wait long enough before you shoot? This is not yet *gelungen*' (p. 209). The sprinkling of German words never becomes very insistent; the longest passage in German is the quotation from Goethe, which runs to two lines (p. 211). Elsewhere we find mere crumbs: *Na!*, *gewiss*, *schön*, *nicht war*, *ewig*, *Ach!*, *Ach so!*, *Ja! Ja!*, *bleibt ganz ruhig*. The phonetic Germanisms are scarce: 'In the words of the poet (he pronounced it "boet")' or "'I had the love" (he said "lof") "of woman [. . .]"' (p. 211).

The most striking phenomenon remains to be discussed: the syntactical Germanisms. An early example seems facile, but convenient and evocative: 'One thing alone can us from being ourselves cure!' (p. 212), or a little further on, 'man he will never on his heap of mud keep still' (p. 213), which, incidentally, is not very good German, unless 'keep still' translates one German verb (probably *stillstehen*); in any case, we are still faced with a mere unsystematic sprinkling. Some sentences deliberately leave out any Germanness in the construction of sentences: 'as I think there is a daughter left, I shall let him, if he likes to stay, keep the old house' (p. 220). Stein, as already noticed, does not completely master verbal forms; he more than once uses faulty expressions like 'He want to be so' (p. 213). He goes on practising occasional inversions, as in 'for the reason that you not strong enough are' (p. 213), or in the most celebrated example: 'The way is to the destructive element submit yourself' (p. 214); in the last-quoted case, it is by no means certain that Stein uses the literal English translation of a current and correct German phrase, but no rule of the art of fiction demands that he should do so. For Stein's creator the purpose is rather to produce a general impression of Germanness in the background of Stein's speech. And that result is indeed achieved. Complete coherence does not seem to be aimed at either. The 'he want', repeated after an interval of a few lines, rubs shoulders with a superb sentence beginning with 'He wants': 'He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil—and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow' (p. 213). In any case neither Marlow nor the invisible supervisor of the whole story pretends to reproduce verbatim the speeches uttered by Stein or by the other characters. There are moments when what counts is the subtlety of Stein's thinking and when everyone—author, speaker, narrator, reader—forgets his linguistic origin; a good example is provided by the passage beginning thus: 'And do you know how many opportunities I let escape, how many dreams I had lost that had come in my way?' (p. 217).⁸

Conrad's moderation in the use of 'la prononciation figurée'—the representation in writing of inadequate pronunciation—is understandable, since his own spoken English, far from achieving perfection, laid him open to misunderstanding, and occasionally to humiliation. In the case of Stein's speech, Conrad's restraint in the practice of other signs of Germanness seems to be connected with his feeling that one should never overdo the best things or the most amusing games, and that in any case a mere sampling is enough to attain the objective aimed at. Jim, who is dazzled by Stein's fluency in English, never-

⁸ A native speaker of English would have said 'come my way'; the unidiomatic 'in' may be read either as a deliberate Germanism ('die mir in den Weg gekommen waren') or as an example of Conrad's own occasionally slightly imperfect English.

theless utters a remark on his pronunciation: 'didn't Mr. Stein speak English wonderfully well? Said he had learned it in Celebes—of all places. That was awfully funny, was it not? He did speak with an accent—a twang—did I notice?' (p. 233). Jim himself, in this passage as often elsewhere, appears to speak a kind of public-school English, rather childish, and bristling with idioms that have long become obsolete.

Stein reappears in Chapter xxxvii, because Jewel and Tamb' Itam have turned up in his house. Stein on that occasion says almost nothing; his only German words are *Ach!*, *sehen sie* (again without a capital *S*), and *schrecklich*. Thus the final episode adds nothing valuable to the observations previously made.

There remains the most interesting and fertile of the linguistic fields explored by Conrad in *Lord Jim*, that of the French language, which the novelist knew particularly well, since French had been his second language from an early age, and he liked to display his familiarity with it, the way in which he had become permeated by it. Throughout his life he wrote many letters in French; it is noteworthy that he preferred to address Henry James in that language, perhaps because he considered his own mastery of English insufficient to confront James's idiosyncratically powerful way of writing it, perhaps also partly because French is the only language in which he could begin a letter with 'Cher Maître'. In any case, French had been part of Conrad's culture and even of his identity since early childhood. If there is one piece of advice in his life that he took seriously and followed literally, that was the exhortation of his governess (Mademoiselle Durand), when she told him, at the end of his mother's leave of absence from Vologda: 'N'oubliez pas ton français, mon chéri.'⁹ The way in which Mademoiselle Durand's darling remembered his French is illustrated in many of his works, and his wordplay with French would deserve a separate study. A few provisional remarks will have to suffice here. In 'The Idiots' (1898), where the subject and decor are entirely French, with no single English character, it is rather striking to find that practically no French words are used (the slight exceptions being only 'Malheur' and 'Monsieur le Marquis'—not italicized), while everyone in the tale speaks ordinary English, that being unquestionably one of the methods available to the writer of fiction staging adventures in a foreign country. A small number of French words and phrases will, on the other hand, be found scattered throughout the pages of both *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) and *The Rover* (1923). In the former, for instance, we come across some good things, such as *un proche parent*, *homme de mer*, *homme de guerre*, *une petite robe de deux sous* (and this time all the French and Spanish words are italicized); the most unexpected tribute to the French location is the fact that Blunt claims his Americanness in the famous French statement: '*je suis Américain, catholique et gentilhomme*'¹⁰ (not even condescending to call himself a gentleman, which he is, up to a point, rather than a *gentilhomme*, a much more questionable claim on his part). The use of French in *The Rover* is more perfunctory, though not without picturesqueness, with historical references like *sansculotte*, *A mort le buveur de sang!*, and occasional mixtures of

⁹ *A Personal Record* (1912), in *The Mirror of the Sea: Memories and Impressions; A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences* (London: Dent, 1946), p. 65.

¹⁰ *The Arrow of Gold: A Story between Two Notes* (London: Dent, 1947), p. 18.

English and French in ‘*You look bien malade, hein?*’ or ‘*that sacré Scevola*’,¹¹ no italics being used. Most of the time, as in ‘The Idiots’, normal English represents normal French. It is perhaps in *Nostramo*, with *boulevardier* Decoud’s lapses into Gallic speech, that one finds Conrad’s most elaborate, refined, and convincing coinages of French sentences. It is clear that his command of my country’s idiom was on the whole sufficiently masterly to enable him to vary his approaches and techniques in its treatment through his fiction.

Conrad’s major performance with the French language when he wrote *Lord Jim* was, of course, the episode of the French lieutenant. That episode differs significantly from the other passages examined so far. The Malay captain, the German skipper, Schomberg, Jucker, Stein, all speak English, more or less correctly, but intelligibly. The French lieutenant is a real Frenchman in that he is imperturbably monoglot. Hence the reader’s discovery that Marlow is not: since it is Marlow who receives and conveys the French lieutenant’s memories, Marlow must be able to speak French.

Conrad’s linguistic gamesmanship with French had glamorous precedents in British literature, such as Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, not to speak of Scott’s *Waverley*, of Thackeray, one of the most genuinely cosmopolitan of English writers, and of ‘Mon cher Maître’ Henry James, much and unrepentantly addicted to exhibiting his large store of French vocabulary. An English novelist locating his story in France can adopt various attitudes: he can pretend that he is unconscious of the linguistic background; in that case, his French characters speak normal English, which is supposed to . . . to do what exactly? To be French, or to represent their French speech? The novelist can also introduce, for local colour’s sake, a few words and short phrases in French. Or again, if French characters are supposed to express themselves in English, the novelist can ascribe to them a kind of Frenchified English, which tends to become playful, and might turn into a perilous temptation. A writer who is either English or what one might term anglograph can venture into the field of bold linguistic amusement, without falling into excess. I call Conrad an anglograph, not an anglophone writer, because, while he was not *sensu stricto* English-speaking—he never lost his recognizable foreignness in speech—he was unquestionably and brilliantly English-writing.

In *Lord Jim* the French lieutenant is present only during part of Chapters XII and XIII. His arrival on board the *Patna* creates a situation worthy of Babel: ‘Two officers came on board, listened to the serang, tried to talk with the Arab, couldn’t make head or tail of it’ (p. 137). The failure to communicate is confirmed later: ‘Nobody in the gunboat knew enough English to get hold of the story as told by the serang’ (pp. 138–39). The reader then comes across French phrases which sound refined and slightly archaic: ‘*fort intrigués par ce cadavre*’ or ‘*exigeait les plus grands ménagements*’ (pp. 137, 139); the lieutenant’s French is italicized for the English reader’s greater convenience; the intrusive acute accent on the first letter of *exigeait* comes as a surprise, but the forthcoming Cambridge edition of *Lord Jim* will show whether the mistake was Conrad’s—as seems probable, on the evidence of letters written by him in French.

¹¹ *The Rover* (London: Dent, 1965), pp. 41, 128, 189.

Marlow reveals to us that he did not spend more than one hour with the French lieutenant, and that was 'a long time after' (p. 137), in Sydney. The French officer, besides, is described as a rather taciturn interviewee, and Marlow does not fail to lay stress on the man's impassive attitude. Among his earliest statements comes this: '*Impossible de comprendre—vous concevez*' (p. 138), which does not strike me as entirely natural French; *vous comprenez* would be the obvious expression in such a context, but it could not be tagged on to *impossible de comprendre*; hence the stiffness and oddity. I am tempted to wonder whether or not Marlow is to be considered as reporting the words spoken by the Frenchman with literal accuracy, but nothing in the book makes such a question allowable; the reader is implicitly invited to accept the convention of a perfect recording by a never-failing memory; Marlow acts as a tape recorder in excellent condition.

The technique employed by Conrad comes into existence gradually; it consists in a double game: inventing French sentences, then inventing their literal rendering into English. To which are added a fair number of words, idioms, and sentences given in the supposedly original French, often accompanied by their English translation. Here are a few examples of deliberate and even calculated Gallicisms: 'people were beginning to agitate themselves', or 'I could figure to myself in my quality of a seaman' (p. 139); in the latter case, there is some trickery, for the French phrase using the same idiom (*en votre qualité de marin*) omits the indefinite article which the English translation needlessly introduces. The game is indeed complex. Another example, of more sterling quality, will be found in 'What would you! One does what one can (*on fait ce qu'on peut*)' (p. 140). It is, however, highly probable that what the French lieutenant really said was *Que voulez-vous?* (What will you?) and not *Que vouliez-vous?* (though Conrad, hampered by his French culture, may have been influenced by Corneille's famous line in *Horace*, 'Que vouliez-vous qu'il fit contre trois?'). Nor did the lieutenant really say *Que voudriez-vous?* But how can I claim that I know what a fictitious character really said or did not say under any circumstances? Do I know better than Conrad? In fact I simply mean that a genuine French speaker would normally and correctly express himself in such-and-such ways. A little further on there occurs a variant of the same French idiom: 'One has done one's possible' (p. 141). From beginning to end the brief episode goes on offering literal or semi-literal translations, as one form of the game in which the novelist indulges; 'such a droll find (*une drôle de trouvaille*)' or 'you are extraordinary—you others' (p. 141). The reader who takes into account the slight inadequacies I have pointed out may feel that the whole linguistic amusement thus indulged in—which has to remain relatively discreet, in order not to obfuscate the moral and philosophical purport of the episode—comprises a modicum of exhibitionist complacency, or even a little dust in the eyes. Of course, there must have been something exhilarating for the Polish-born writer in the consciousness he had of his ability to juggle with two foreign languages. As to the occasional impression that my fellow countryman the gunboat lieutenant speaks a highly literary and somewhat unreal brand of French, that is easily accounted for, since Conrad's French is that of Flaubert, Maupassant, Anatole France, Madame Poradowska née Gachet, and Mademoiselle Durand; the last-named

person, as an émigrée, must have been a preserver of ageing linguistic fashions, cut off as she was from the evolution of the language in its native country, not unlike, *si parva licet componere magnis*, the francophone inhabitants of Quebec.

The French lieutenant's French, as perceived through Marlow's English translations, occasionally puzzles the reader. His rejoinder, at the conclusion of Marlow's narrative, sounds impeccably English: 'That's it. That *is* it' (p. 145). Yet, knowing that he is speaking in French, we would like to know how he said that in French. Again, on the next page, we relish the superb English of 'One talks, one talks; this is all very fine; but at the end of the reckoning one is no cleverer than the next man—and no more brave', a fragment which Marlow does not translate, or more precisely does not give in the original French of which this is supposed to be the translation; it is clear enough that 'at the end of the reckoning' renders the French 'au bout du compte' (or 'en fin de compte'); yet, though I for one rather like the English of 'at the end of the reckoning', I would regard it as belonging to a speech level perceptibly higher than the French 'au bout du compte'. One could easily provide plenty of similar examples by quoting words and phrases taken from the two or three pages that follow. They would not add much to my demonstration. So I shall content myself with pointing out two peculiarities that seem to me interesting. When leaving Marlow, the lieutenant takes his farewell with the word 'Serviteur' (p. 149). Is that not a chronological lapse? Is the lieutenant not suddenly mistaking himself for a character in one of Molière's plays, a kind of 'précieux ridicule', or at least one of Marivaux's 'petits marquis'?

The other case concerns the most philosophical statement of the French officer. What we read in *Lord Jim* is this: 'Man is born a coward (*L'homme est né poltron*)' (p. 147). I firmly believe that here the French and the English phrases say two different things and that the true translation of '*L'homme est né poltron*' ought to be 'Man was born a coward', while the true translation of 'Man is born a coward' would be '*L'homme naît poltron*'. Admittedly, other readings of the passage have been propounded and seem legitimate. Cedric Watts, who heard me put forward my views on this subject, later wrote to me to express disagreement with them, pointing out that most English translations of Rousseau's statement that '*L'homme est né libre*' render it as 'Man is born free', and fewer use 'was born'. While paying respectful attention to Watts's arguments, I think on the whole I may remain convinced that I am justified in sticking to my guns. I am in part influenced by my familiarity with Dickens, and particularly with *David Copperfield*, which I translated into French more than half a century ago. I need not get to the end of the thousand pages of that splendid novel before I find support for my position. The very first words I encounter are in the heading of the first of its sixty-four chapters: 'Chapter 1: I am born'; the following chapters are called 'I observe', 'I have a Change', 'I fall into Disgrace'; in all the chapter-headings that include a verb, that verb is in the present tense. 'I am born' clearly signifies 'Je nais', and not 'Je suis né'. Being born is a process, and that process is what Chapter 1 of *Copperfield* describes, whereas 'je suis né' can be used only after the event, as a reference to the past. David, in later life, writing his CV for a prospective employer, would say 'I was born in Blunderstone', 'je suis né à Blunderstone'. I firmly

believe that when saying that 'L'homme est né poltron' a speaker would allude to mankind at its inception, at the time of its divine creation or of the Big Bang. This means that it is in man's nature, as a consequence of man's nativity, to be cowardly. On the other hand, 'L'homme naît poltron' ('Man is born a coward') seems to concern each individual destiny: a man is born a coward, yet can in later life acquire and cultivate and practise courage. There exists, of course, a profound kinship between the two ideas, but the difference between them does not seem to me insignificant. In the present essay I have been mainly discussing Conrad's gamesmanship, his linguistic amusements. At this particular point we leave his playing field, for in this passage Conrad seems to address the reader with a serious, painful, almost brutal question.

The novelist's treatment of the French lieutenant's episode is not perfect, not exempt from blemishes when scrutinized in detail. But such an examination is indiscreet; when it is not thus scrutinized, the episode justifiably produces an overall impression of genuineness and masterly skill. In its success there remains something stupendous: a Pole indulging in such adroit and brilliant games on the linguistic frontier between English and French, occasionally adding shreds of Malay and German—that is indeed a prodigy.

The nature of Conrad's polyglot verbal games in *Lord Jim* may lead a French student of Conrad to ask another question: how, then, could one translate *Lord Jim* into French? To me personally that is by no means a rhetorical question. It has been my fate to criticize one very old French translation of that novel, to exclude it from a new French edition of Conrad's works, to discuss it in a friendly spirit with the early translator's son, then to supervise in two distinct stages the writing of a second translation, and finally to provide a postface for a third one. Another phase of my career that gave me plenty of food for thought and leaves a lingering memory is the excruciating experience of translating Shakespeare's *Henry V*, for that play comprises scenes written in French of a kind, bristling with bilingual wordplay, as often as not obscene and delectable. The reply to the question 'How can one—or, more bluntly, can one—translate *Lord Jim* into French?' is inevitably that there is no correct reply, that people can write and publish as many translations of *Lord Jim* as readers like, as they are ready to buy, but that 'at the end of the reckoning' the outcome cannot be an equivalent in French of Conrad's novel. There will always inevitably be a certain loss of important linguistic elements. *Lord Jim*, more than the rest of Conrad's fiction, appears as a veritable linguistic melting-pot, in which, undoubtedly, what predominates, by a long way, is Conrad's miraculously beautiful and efficient command of English, but in which that mode of expression is enriched and diversified by a number of elements external to it. Conrad, while writing that novel, indulged in a large variety of linguistic entertainments, without ever losing sight, of course, of the essential seriousness of his general purpose.