Conrad and the Being of the World

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A Reading in Speculative Metaphysics

By

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“Now I will believe
That there are unicorns, that in Arabia
There is one tree, the phoenix’ throne, one phoenix
At this hour reigning there.”

The Tempest

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Even an independent scholar working in comparative isolation requires the benign but tough critical support of those best placed to supply it, and in a Janus-faced study such as this—whose gaze is drawn to Conrad on one side and to philosophy on the other—that support is vital to produce anything of worth. Whether or not what follows can lay claim to such a quality is not for me to say; I know only that behind it all have been two presiding figures who, in their different ways, have made the whole project possible.

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INTRODUCTION

> "Life knows us not and we do not know life—we don't even know our own thoughts."
> —Joseph Conrad

1

On 14 January 1913, Joseph Conrad wrote this to Jean Masbrenier, the editor of the magazine *Le Divan*:

> Here, no one has written anything about me that is worth bothering to read. But yes, a very intelligent young man has recently written an article that is a fairly successful analytical essay. I shall send you a typescript of it because I cannot find the issue of the slim and obscure review where it appeared.[1]

At this point Conrad had only known the "very intelligent young man" for a matter of weeks, but already the nucleus of a symbiotic relationship was beginning to form between them, though they were separated by a generation; the young man in question—Richard Curle—would go on to become Conrad's friend, confidante, acolyte and literary populariser until the last day of the writer's life. The article which had attracted Conrad's attention—subsequently dismissed as superficial and naïve by critics[2]—appeared in *Rhythm*, a modernist arts journal which punched impressively above its weight during the two short years of its existence, featuring stories and poetry by Katherine Mansfield and D H Lawrence, as well as showcasing artwork by Henri Manguin and Margaret Thompson.

Yet Conrad's enthusiasm for Curle's piece, albeit tempered ("a fairly successful analytical essay"), is puzzling; amongst its expressions of admiration, Curle—who clearly at the time of writing did not understand the architecture of *Nostromo* and the novella "Heart of Darkness"—criticised both works for weak construction and their perceived lack of consideration for the reader. These were not observations calculated to best please the author, so in the face of them we can only conclude that Conrad saw something else in the article that powerfully transcended their effect; enough indeed to make him not only write as he did to Masbrenier, but also to want to meet its author. We should ask what this might be.

It has been suggested that, despite Curle's overall gaucheness, he touched three spots with his blunt needle that Conrad recognised as being true and valuable indicators of his art:[3] a resistance to pigeon-holing that ran counter to the superficial impression of his being just a writer of sea stories and eastern Asian romances; his uniqueness as an artist; and the impressionistic nature left in the minds of readers of his settings, descriptions, and characters. In different language, we might point instead to Conrad's autonomy, the depth of his individuality, and his ability in language to capture the world of appearances using a unique palette. These three elements are resonant starting points for introducing a way of reading Conrad quite different from any other, because they chime with a development in contemporary philosophy called Object-Oriented Ontology—"OOO" for short, read as "triple O"—an influential branch of speculative metaphysics developed in the twenty-first century by the philosopher Graham Harman. Reading the work of Conrad through this speculative lens is the driving force of this study in an experiment both symmetrical in tone and intent, with philosophy and Conrad playing Virgil to each other's Dante—an idea which would have certainly appalled Conrad, could he have known of it. Indeed, ten years after initiating contact with Curle, he wrote this to him:

> It is a strange fate that everything that I have, of set artistic purpose, laboured to leave indefinite, suggestive in the penumbra of initial inspiration, should have that light turned on to it and its insignificance (as compared with I might say without megalomania the ampleness of my conceptions) exposed for any fool to comment upon or even for average minds to be disappointed with […][4]

But as we shall see, OOO itself labours to make definite the indefinite in a description of reality that might have been agreeable to Conrad, given that his insistence on leaving things "indefinite" goes to the very heart of the new philosophy of realism that OOO expresses. Certainly, OOO's insistence that my thoughts and everything they represent are not the sum of me is in keeping with the tone of Conrad's letter to Curle; that important as they are, such thoughts are no more than expressive messages issuing from an unreachable interior.

The aim of this study then is to achieve a reasonable symmetry, summed up in an antimetabole: philosophy speaks, Conrad illustrates—Conrad speaks, philosophy seeks to explain. Its dual focus means that what follows is as much about Conrad's work and thought as it is about offering an intriguing new reading of the structure of reality; one is meant to inform the other so intimately that it is hoped that the reader will cease to care for the

ship of passage of the moment and instead fix their eyes on the nearest shore. Literature and philosophy have been intermittently entwined since the time of the Greek pre-Socratic philosophers, the engine of which was traditionally epistemology, the theory of knowledge; by contrast, the engine of the new metaphysics presented here is aesthetics. Reading Conrad is a supremely aesthetic experience, and this sits well with the structural arguments of OOO, which take aesthetics to have a primacy in philosophy that was previously accorded to an outworn epistemology. As will become clear later, this rejection of the classical epistemological ball and chain is the result of repudiating the anthropocentric vision that has clung to philosophy in multiple guises from Plato onwards; indeed, every chapter that follows bears the imprint of this freedom.

The dual aspect of this study brings with it certain tensions, though. Those approaching this book primarily as lovers or scholars of Conrad are entitled to ask, how much knowledge of philosophy is required or assumed? Equally, those coming at it from a philosophical perspective to see a great writer viewed through the prism of contemporary metaphysics may well wonder if any level of familiarity with Conrad's work is assumed. It would be as well to get these questions settled before proceeding further.

To Conradians, this study is presented with the assumption of only the loosest acquaintance with a few ideas and key figures in philosophy, but even so, everything that is needed is explained on the hoof: no technical term is dropped into the text without enough explanation to see how it functions in relation to its use. And to those coming at this study from the vantage point of philosophy, whether or not they are au fait with the tenets of OOO, no familiarity with Conrad's work is assumed; each example quoted is briefly contextualised and where necessary, elaborated upon.

A separate issue is the choice of subject. Of all writers, why Conrad? The long answer is contained in the chapters as they unfold, but the curious reader might appreciate some hint before investing in the study as a whole. It is certainly true that any writer of fiction could be treated in this way—OOO as a description of reality makes no evaluative judgements about aesthetic products, despite being deeply concerned with their effect—but Conrad's concentration on the world before his eye, his disinterested observation of objects large or small, his ability to flirt with paradox by using words to describe a hidden reality forever out of reach all speak with real force to the aesthetic heart of OOO. OOO paints a tenfold picture of the structure of reality, while the range and depth of Conrad's work embraces each part of that structure with a clarity that is as stark as it is impressive. From my own point of view there were many moments during the writing of this book that made me stop and reflect in wonder that this was a writer

seemingly born to explicate a philosophy that did not emerge till almost ninety years after his death; side by side with this there emerged other moments that made me think that this philosophy seemed to make sense of Conrad's metaphysics—never satisfactorily or completely explained before—in a way that worked at a deep level. This is not perhaps the vicarious piece of arrogance that it seems: one eminent Conrad scholar has said of this marriage of Cadmus and Harmonia, "I don't know if Conrad was made for the theory or the theory for Conrad, but the two go together incredibly well. Indeed, this […] seems to offer a coherent explication for Conrad's weird metaphysics."[6]

What is weird about Conrad's metaphysics is that it presents competing versions of reality that sit side by side without any attempt at resolution: on the one hand reality lies in a world of appearances scrupulously observed with a cinematic eye, where every object, however grand or insignificant, is of equal metaphysical weight, and on the other it lies veiled and beyond reach, impenetrable to eye or any depiction beyond suggestion, allusion, or pregnant silence. It is the task of OOO to show that these competing versions of reality grow out of an inadequate and constricting vision that always entails a human presence, and which when abandoned allows Conrad's unique vision of the world both to suggest coherence and integrity. Conrad's metaphysics is no longer "weird" when seen through a philosophical lens that not only admits weirdness but explains it in metaphysical terms—as the reader will see in Chapter Six.

That said, various paradoxical knots remain within the weave of Conrad's expressive thought. These are discussed in Chapter Seven, but that they exist is no obstacle: OOO shows why we can never know everything about anything, be it a mote of dust, Peter Pan or the Venetian State Inquisitors of the eighteenth century, and once this is granted then so must be things that are inconsistent and paradoxical. In this way reality behaves like an ocean of boundless depth which harbours even the illogical. Although he came at this from a different direction, Conrad instinctively understood what the Socrates of Plato expounded, lessons ignored by twenty-four centuries of system-building philosophies: that we can learn from questions without insisting on answers; that complete definitions of everyday concepts are so elusive as to be beyond reach; and that philosophy does not refer to a body of ascertainable knowledge like chemistry or heraldry, but indicates rather a desire for wisdom and the pleasure to be found in its pursuit. In a bald sense it might seem that this renders such philosophy misty and imprecise—but this is to make the mistake of conflating a lack of certainty with complete ignorance, careening in effect between ends of a spectrum. Socrates' cautionary message—as ignored by

most professional philosophers today as it was by the populace of fifth century Athens—remains a salutary cleanser to analytic thought, and one which OOO embraces.

Here an apparent flaw emerges which might be thought to subvert the whole project before it is even begun. Earlier, it was stated that OOO presents a tenfold picture of the structure of reality: does this not fly in the face of Socratic caution against the erection of complete systems of thought claiming to provide knowledge and universal truth in the manner of Plato, Spinoza or Kant? We are returned to paradoxes: the answer is both yes and no. Yes, because OOO *does* hold with deducible truths about the universe which can be presented in a comprehensive metaphysical schema and no, because what those deducible truths discover is that reality is in retreat from itself and is only available to us (and everything else) through translation. In contrast with traditional philosophical systems which mostly present us with lavishly illustrated maps of human cognition and experience displaying carefully marked out boundaries, continents, cities and oceans according to the taste of the cartographer, the map which OOO produces accords no special privilege to human concerns and shows as much interest in dung-beetles and gas nebulae. Indeed, it goes further, placing the metaphysical sea of the universe opposite an unknown continent with no knowable features, beyond a trenchant marking of "here be dragons". This is where we begin, for it turns out that a most useful and engaging interpreter of this apparently unsatisfactory and unfinished map is a Polish born sailor and writer who thought in two languages and wrote in a third.

2

> 'I got the first hint in an inn on the Achensee in Tyrol. That set me inquiring, and I collected my other clues in a fur-shop in the Galician quarter of Budna, in a Strangers' Club in Vienna, and in a little bookshop off the Racknitzstrasse in Leipzig. I completed my evidence ten days ago in Paris. I can't tell you the details now, for it's something of a history.'
> —John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*

In the short time that has elapsed since OOO made its philosophical and cultural presence felt—it is roughly two decades old, with the first critical responses coming in 2014[7]—it is significant that it has been more enthusiastically embraced by the arts than it has by the professional occupants of the citadels of analytical and continental philosophy. It is too soon to speak of permanence or evanescence, of sea-changes or cul-de-sacs, but one sign of health in a body of thought is its ability both to adapt and be adaptable, thereby producing fruitful results across a variety of disciplines;

in the case of OOO a far from comprehensive list of cross influence would include design theory, painting, sculpture, architecture, musicology, and literature. Within twenty years OOO has proved to be protean in its fecundity, which I would argue is an impressive indicator of both its value and vitality.[8]

OOO's growth and trajectory over a mere two decades can appear so rapid that it is easy to get the impression that it sprang into the world fully armed like Athena from the head of Zeus, but in fact it has scattered roots that can be traced across millennia; however, in the manner of roots these lie below the surface and are not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, an idea here—a pregnant remark there—an unexpected turn in thought—an unformed conclusion waiting to be drawn—are all elements which have played their part in the development of OOO, reminiscent of Scudder's snapping up of bits and pieces of information about the sinister plot in *The Thirty-Nine Steps.* In different but resonant ways Aristotle, Leibniz, Husserl, Whitehead, José Ortega y Gasset, Heidegger and the formalism of the art world in the 1960s have all contributed to a comprehensive metaphysic whose account of reality is very different from traditional norms.

The philosopher Graham Harman is the progenitor of OOO, its architect and to a certain extent its custodian, the author of an impressive array of beautifully crafted books of both a scholarly and general nature, as well as many papers and articles. He has spearheaded a movement which now sees many scholars across a wide selection of academic areas working to mesh OOO with the theory and praxis of their different disciplines, a testament to the stimulating and fruitful nature of his conceptual thought.[9] The present literary and philosophical study is offered as but one example. In all key essentials it has been possible to interpret the zodiac of Harman's metaphysics through Conrad's work without corruption; only in a few areas have I extended basic ideas in a way to illuminate particular texts, though hopefully without stepping out of kilter with the central tenets of the metaphysics. These extensions have chiefly been to do with the relationship between similes and metaphors: Harman regards them as one and the same,[10] but I argue in this book that these figures are rather different metaphysically and attempt to show why. I also develop a metaphysics of irony—something indispensable when discussing Conrad—as well as of personification, neither of which plays any special part in formal OOO theory. I further distinguish metaphysically between the weird and the uncanny in a more theoretical manner than does OOO, for these are also prominent registers that Conrad employs. Otherwise, no claim is made in this book for any originality of thought beyond what results from its application to Conrad's work. Naturally enough, the bent here is literary;

but the reader should be aware that when I discuss its relationship to other practices such as painting, architecture, sculpture or the performing arts, the innate pliancy of OOO may well result in different but equally arresting insights.

3

We begin in the first chapter with a discussion of Conrad's cinematic presentation of the multifarious objects which abound in his work, illustrating it with varied extracts from *Almayer's Folly*, "The Secret-Sharer", "Typhoon", "Falk", *The Arrow of Gold* and "Karain", using them to lay the philosophical groundwork of what it means to be an object. This is the first step in uncovering the metaphysical schema of Object-Oriented Ontology which will, step-by-step, offer the reader a radical way of looking at what lies behind Conrad's powerfully elusive art. Behind the objects of the world which Conrad declares it is his business to make us see lies a veiled withdrawn world of reality which he senses and alludes to, here thought of as a bifurcation of the universe into twin realms of the *sensual* and the *real* that, when the individual qualities of objects are built into the account, offers a fourfold outline as a metaphorical compass to indicate different pathways for negotiating reality.

Instead of the anthropocentric view of the universe traditionally offered by philosophers, the elaboration of the basic ideas in this chapter presents a horizontal rather than a hierarchically vertical view of existence, resulting in a kind of loose democracy of objects that articulates a distinction between existence and reality. Allusion is then made to what lies ahead: a step-by-step discussion of Conrad's art that will elaborate a basic fourfold structure of reality into a fully-fledged tenfold one that encompasses the universe and everything in it.

The second chapter is devoted to Conrad's interaction with just the sensual world of appearances through its multifarious objects and their qualities. This pairing of sensual objects and sensual qualities is seen to produce the effect of psychological *time*, while also having the ability to produce the effect of charm for some beholders in some contexts—explored here through passages in *The Secret Agent* and the short story "The Return". The discussion then widens to consider Conrad's fascination with the smallest details which routinely pass unnoticed in a world of appearances, concentrating on light, colour and sound, qualities which most compel in his writing, and examining selected passages in *An Outcast of the Islands, The Rescue, The Secret Agent, The Arrow of Gold, The Rover, The Nigger of the Narcissus* and *Nostromo.*

Finally, in a discussion of the quality of charm and its contrast with beauty, the shadow of the philosopher Kant emerges; consideration is given to charm's limitations, effects and asymmetrical nature through extracts taken from "Freya of the Seven Isles"*, Chance,* "A Smile of Fortune" and "Il Conde". A short coda follows this to draw attention to the restrictions inherent in the discussion so far, confined as it is just to the sensual world of appearances without any reference to the withdrawn nature of reality. Besides indicating the study's trajectory, the coda emphasises that an object is and always must be something more than the mere sum of its qualities.

The introductory section to the third chapter begins the exploration of the hinterland of reality by using Conrad's ability to allude to something's being mysteriously alive in the depths at the same time as being inanimate on the surface. Such objects as a headless dummy, a pair of bronze griffins and a mad ship bent on destruction illustrate Conrad's recognition of reality as being the province of the unexpected as well as that of the sequestered and unapproachable.

The second section formally introduces the most significant pairing in the metaphysical compass for aesthetics, that between a withdrawn real object and certain sensual qualities which break away from it to leak into the world. What results from this crossbreeding between the sensual and the real is metaphysical *space*; the space in the world created between the withdrawn object and its allusive qualities creates the arena for animate creatures to experience such things as allure, beauty, and the sublime. One way to appreciate this type of space in literature is through similes, a rhetorical device Conrad uses with great imagination and flexibility; the reciprocal yet asymmetrical nature of their component terms becomes the focus here.

At this point we arrive at the heart of this reading of the new metaphysics through a discussion of the nature of *allure*, the enchantment which underpins diverse aspects of Conrad's literary aesthetics, as well as that of many other great writers. The tantalising nature of allure is experienced through oblique allusion to what cannot be seen, experienced or spoken about directly, emerging as a way of replacing direct literalised knowledge. Allure has the capacity to breed beauty and the sublime, and the fourth section of this chapter is devoted to both, examining the differences between the philosopher Kant's description of these experiences and those of OOO. Conrad's work is then considered in the light of how much his own approach to beauty and sublimity is consonant with these two different philosophical yet complementary approaches.

In the fourth chapter Conrad's exploration of reality continues with the remaining two pairings of the metaphysical compass. First, as opposed to

the transient inessential qualities of the moment, the elusive real qualities possessed by sensual objects that are before us are considered: these we can only experience through allusion. Passages from *Lord Jim, Chance, Under Western Eyes* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus* illustrate how Conrad approaches this, underlining his innate polyphony of thought and expression. The last point of the metaphysical compass indicates the ineffable, those withdrawn objects of reality whose qualities are also withdrawn, and the discussion focusses on Conrad's extraordinary attempts to communicate something meaningful about entities whose poles of reality are submerged beyond any direct access. Both *Lord Jim* and "Heart of Darkness" present paradigmatic examples of how Conrad uses breakdown, incoherence, lapses into silence and the language of dreams to allude to what is both unsayable and unknowable—which is to say reality itself, a realm ultimately impenetrable to human thought.

The central focus of the fifth chapter is an exploration of the readers' (or beholders') theatrical presence within a work of art, first through their participation first in the creation of metaphor, then in personification and irony. This begins by unpacking the difference between similes and metaphors to see why they have a different metaphysical aspect, moving on to the very heart of all aesthetic experience via the introduction of the only relation of direct unmediated access between objects permitted in the metaphysical universe: that between a real object and a sensual one. Schematic diagrams are employed to underline the different stages of these arguments, before going on to analyse examples of Conrad's use of simple, complex and hidden metaphors from a variety of his works. A sideways shift to metaphor's cousin, personification, looks at their similarities and differences through Conrad's eyes before going on to discussing his pervasive and subtle use of irony. Finally, all the main arguments of the chapter are brought together to coalesce around the great ironic scene of Winne Verloc's psychic shock in *The Secret Agent* as she is slowly brought back by her insensitive and fatuous husband from a state of incomprehension to face the horror of a new reality.

Chapter Six explores Conrad's frequent engagement with both the weird and the uncanny, first by laying bare the difference between the two in metaphysical terms and then examining how Conrad approaches them across the full range of his work. Both the uncanny and the weird share a similar sense that ambiguity haunts reality, of the strangely familiar or the familiar as strange, but the two manifestations are shown not to be the same. The uncanny's hallmarks include defamiliarisation, dislocation and a sense of something being out of joint; Conrad deals with these under two different compass points of reality, reserving the other two for what is weird in the

universe. It turns out that direct allusion (or the lack of it) holds the metaphysical key to understanding the difference between them. What Conrad finds uncanny allows him to allude to a particular type of hidden reality that is in some way unsettling in its often-unintelligible wavering between the familiar and unfamiliar; but what he describes as weird does not, either because such allusion is unnecessary (the objects being openly and sincerely before his gaze and therefore the reader's too) or else they are completely withdrawn and beyond any such approach. By the end of the discussion the seemingly less significant experiences of the uncanny and the weird are shown to cover the ontological universe in a way that other grander topics such as beauty, the sublime, irony, and allure do not.

The concluding chapter presents the completed tenfold structure of the universe through a philosophical world view Conrad once expressed in a letter to a close friend. Written at a time in his life when he was settling into his role as a professional writer, Conrad employs a compelling metaphor for both the operation of the universe and the forces behind it, describing it as a vast knitting machine—something impersonal, remorseless, and autonomous—allowing us to use it as a prism to articulate the complete tenfold structure of reality. In the preceding chapters only five of the ten aspects of this metaphysical picture were required to engage fully with Conrad's art, but his account of the autonomous knitting machine enlarges the scope of the discussion so that every aspect of being can now be included. A final schema of four central object/quality *poles*, three object/object *junctions* and three quality/quality *radiations* emerges, so that by the end the projected symmetry of this study can be gauged by how far the reader is unsure whether through this fascinating metaphor Conrad has illuminated OOO or OOO has illuminated Conrad.

A short summary in fine concentrates on Conrad as a real object in himself, whose qualities have been intuited through his creative work. The point here is to remind us that that we have been reading the man through the artist: the real object that was Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski remains just as stubbornly withdrawn, regardless of the sensual detail of his presence on the page.

We can view Conrad finally as a thinking writer whose prime instincts appear consonant with many aspects of OOO, despite surmising that the application of such a theoretical lens would have disturbed him. These consonances include (but are not limited to) a respect for objects, their autonomy and presence; the withdrawn unreachable nature of reality; an intense appreciation of the sensual world of appearances whose dream-like and illusory aspects suggest the veiling of reality; the ability of aesthetics and art to offer oblique glimpses of that reality without ever penetrating it;

and the vital presence of a beholder in a loose independent but symbiotic relationship with the text. It is a match between artist and theory founded on both the intensity and depth of such consonances, allied to the power of Conrad's gaze, the beauty and felicity of his expression and the polyphonic nature of his thought.

CHAPTER ONE

THE METAPHYSICS OF CONRAD'S OBJECTS

1. A cinematic eye and shoes that gambol

In all his major works Conrad presents a plethora of objects of all kinds, revealing a fascination with detail that celebrates the gaudy, grave, subtle and sensual, the trivial and the profound in such a determined manner that it is often dazzling—and even overwhelming. Whether or not as readers we are convinced that Conrad truly defined the alpha and omega of his art in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, where he claimed that his task was "[…] by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is before all to make you *see.* That—and no more, and it is everything",[1] no attentive reader will be in any doubt as to the exact truth of the first part of the statement. Conrad is a hugely visual writer, recording everything with a cinematic eye, but it is difficult to accept this as "everything", for he is equally a writer who forever alludes to something other and larger, something felt or intuited lying just beyond the reach of words; something metaphysical, as opposed to what is palpably before our gaze.

First consider this, a typical passage showing the detail of his vision, where the narrator and his companions are about to open a box, a talismanic object that houses others:

> Karain seemed to take no notice of us, but when Hollis threw open the lid of the box his eyes flew to it—and so did ours. The quilted crimson satin of the inside put a violent patch of colour into the sombre atmosphere; it was something positive to look at—it was fascinating […] He plunged his fingers into it. Karain's lips were parted and his eyes shone. We looked into the box.
>
> There were a couple of reels of cotton, a packet of needles, a bit of silk ribbon, dark blue; a cabinet photograph, at which Hollis stole a glance before laying it on the table face downwards. A girl's portrait I could see. There were, amongst a lot of various small objects, a bunch of flowers a narrow white glove with many buttons, a slim packet of letters.[2]

This level of descriptive detail is representative of Conrad's narrative style from "The Black Mate" through to the posthumous *Suspense*, and in every fiction he wrote in between. Conrad is obsessed with capturing the world of appearances—what philosophy calls the phenomenological realm—as if the world might slip away or metamorphose should the record of his gaze be incomplete.[3] Thus, the satin lining the inside of the box is not just crimson, but it is quilted; the silk ribbon inside it is dark blue; the glove is narrow and white, with many buttons; the packet of letters is slim. Conrad is not just dressing his fictional stage with props for the sake of decoration, but through the ascription of such qualities as colour, number, texture, and size he is saying that objects are the stuff of the universe—and as such they matter.

That said, Conrad's bluff declaration that seeing is "everything" melts away like mist when he begins to dwell on objects at length. There is always the suggestion of something lying at the back of them—or beyond them, and the passage above turns out to be no exception. It continues:

> Hollis rummaged in the box.
>
> And it seemed to me, during that moment of waiting, that the cabin of the schooner was becoming filled with a stir invisible and living as of subtle breaths. All the ghosts driven out of the unbelieving West by men who pretend to be wise and alone and at peace—all the homeless guests of an unbelieving world—appeared suddenly round the figure of Hollis bending over the box; all the exiled and charming shades of loved women; all the beautiful and tender ghosts of ideals, remembered, forgotten, cherished, execrated; all the cast-out and reproachful ghosts of friends admired, trusted, traduced, betrayed, left dead by the way—they all seemed to come for the inhospitable regions of the earth to crowd into the gloomy cabin, as though it had been a refuge and, in all the unbelieving world, the only place of avenging belief…[4]

This is not the ordinary everyday world of phenomenological appearance, of sensory sensual perception; this is an allusion to a hinterland where objects mysteriously endure with an untapped excess that is always more than any sum of their individual qualities. We might ask though, what counts as an object here? Reels of cotton, packets of needles and a girl's photograph, certainly; but is the shade of a loved woman an object, or the reproachful ghost of a once traduced friend? And the subtle breath of the infiltrated cabin and its invisible stir? At what point do we stop speaking about "objects" and instead allude to just "things"?

The answer to these questions goes not just to the heart of the particular type of speculative metaphysics with which this study has to do but leads us to the metaphysical underpinning of Conrad's art, that moment he steps over the shadow-line between what is before us and what is hidden. To this end

it will be worthwhile to consider other examples of presence and concealment in Conrad's interpretation of reality before going on to speak about the nuts and bolts of the new metaphysics.

Almayer's Folly, Conrad's first novel, shows that the collocation of what is sensually before the eyes and what remains hidden from them was discernible in the zodiac of his creative thought right from the beginning. In the following passage the bitter and resentful Mrs Almayer is making her way to her estranged husband's house at night, intent on silently recovering her dowry dollars before leaving him for good. Conrad's cinematic eye makes her pause on the verandah to look back on "the empty and silent courtyard, now lit up by the rays of the riding moon." A vague shape flits out from the banana plantation— "it might have been the shadow of a driving cloud"—but it is surely a bird, whose passage disturbs the feathery heads of the grass, causing them to tremble and sway in the moonlight, before falling still, gleaming "like a design of silver sprays embroidered on a sombre background." Entering the house, she finds her husband in a drunken stupor slumped in a chair amidst a "chaos of demoralized furniture" that has the appearance of being host to a desperate struggle. Chairs are scattered everywhere, including some on the verandah in a grotesque parody of their drunken owner, with an overturned table lying "amongst a wreck of crockery and broken bottles."[5]

But this is just the *mise en scène* for the images Conrad wants to capture. Now comes this:

> A couple of bats, encouraged by the darkness and the peaceful state of affairs, resumed their silent and oblique gambols above Almayer's head; and for a long time the profound quiet of the house was unbroken, save for the deep breathing of the sleeping man and the faint tinkle of silver in the hands of the woman preparing for flight. In the increasing light of the moon that had risen now above the night mist the objects on the verandah came out strongly outlined in black splashes of shadow with all the uncompromising ugliness of their disorder, and a caricature of the sleeping Almayer appeared on the dirty whitewash of the wall behind him in a grotesquely exaggerated detail of attitude and feature enlarged to a heroic size. The discontented bats departed in quest of darker places, and a lizard came out in short, nervous rushes and pleased with the white table cloth stopped on it in breathless immobility that would have suggested sudden death had it not been for the melodious call he exchanged with a less adventurous friend hiding amongst the lumber in the courtyard. Then the boards in the passage creaked, the lizard vanished, and Almayer stirred uneasily with a sigh; – slowly, out of the senseless annihilation of drunken sleep, he was returning, through the land of dreams, to waking consciousness. [6]

Again, the world of appearances is presented in fastidious careful, almost loving detail, to the point where Conrad seems incapable of putting down an unadorned noun: the majority of these have one and one only adjective attached, a trait so persistent throughout this novel that it amounts to a literary tick. The bats and the lizard are anthropomorphically presented—the bats are "discontented", the lizard is "pleased" and possesses a "friend"—and both have a more significant presence than the two humans, one of whom appears like a spectre, while the other is virtually unconscious. The author's cinematic eye moves in and out of close-up shots (the bats, Almayer's head, his distorted shadow, the lizard on the white tablecloth) varied with long shots (the woman, the sleeping man viewed whole from a distance), with the establishing shot of the house in the moonlight, all allowing the reader to conjure the scene effortlessly.

Yet Conrad's concern with objects is not entirely lodged in their appearances. What may lie beyond the purview of the eye must somehow be recorded too:

> Almayer's head rolled from shoulder to shoulder in the oppression of his dream: the heavens had descended upon him like a heavy mantle and trailed in starred folds far under him. Stars above, stars all round him; and from the stars under his feet rose a whisper full of entreaties and tears, and sorrowful faces flitted amongst the clusters of light filling the infinite space below.[7]

A dream is a substance-less thing, crawling out of a private ocean, unreified phenomenologically, but with the capacity to affect our emotions as if it possessed physical presence. Conrad's persistent bifurcation of the universe into that which lies before us and that which lies beyond us is old wine in even older bottles, naturally; since the early Greeks the division of the world into two parts, the world of appearances on one side and everything else on the other has been captured by various invested nuanced terms (noumenal/phenomenal, mental/physical, spiritual/temporal, etc.) standing like so many trees along the majestic via Appia of western philosophy. But the persistence of this duality is not what is interesting in Conrad; what is of more importance is that he is very concerned to isolate the multiple *qualities* of any entity, object, or thing, whether before our gaze or not, so that lizards are pleased with white tablecloths and the voices of our dreams are owned by faces that are sorrowful.

This highly cinematic manner of focalisation is supported by Conrad's own words, though he does not use the term. In a letter of 1917 to William Howe, he makes clear why his writer's eye is kinetic as opposed to photographic:

> It's the static quality of a grouping that disconcerts my imagination. When writing I visualize the successive scenes as always in motion—a flow of closely linked effects.[8]

It is unsurprising that he adapted his short story "Gaspar Ruiz" as a screenplay for the cinema, a tale with particularly dramatic visual features.[9]

Conrad was however alert to a crucial distinction between the art of the novelist and that of the cinematographer, alluding to it in a public address during his visit to America:

> "…but the author unlike the camera had the power to react not only to light, shades and colour but also to form."[10]

This distinction, pointing to a limitation, will be seen to have real resonance in discussions ahead.

The lens within was just as important to his vision. In the comic tale "Falk", Conrad reverses his presentation of reality in a particular passage, pointing to what is hidden in a man first, and only then bringing him physically before our eyes. The unnamed narrator is recounting the seizing of an opportunity to engage with Falk, a man whom he has unwittingly offended and who is master of the only available tug capable of towing his ship out to sea from harbour. Before the narrator describes what Falk looks like however, he tells us what he *is*. We see Falk shying away in disgust at the repulsive figure of Schomberg, the local hotel owner, who is also seeking to buttonhole him, and with the narrator in tow Falk seeks refuge on the verandah. And then comes this:

> I felt him become suddenly tractable again like an animal, like a good-tempered horse when the object that scares him is removed. Yes. I felt in the darkness there how tractable he was, without my conviction of his inflexibility—tenacity, rather, perhaps—being in the least weakened […]
>
> This was the first of my knowledge of Falk. This desire of respectability, of being like everybody else, was the only recognition he vouchsafed to the organization of mankind. For the rest he might have been the member of a herd, not of society. Self-preservation was his only concern. Not selfishness, but mere self-preservation. Selfishness presupposes consciousness, choice, the presence of other men; but his instinct acted as though he were the last of mankind nursing that law like the only spark of a sacred fire.[11]

What seems to lie within is presented first. It is not until some while later that the narrator begins to describe his companion cinematically, in an intmate close-up:

> And the more I saw into him the more I saw of him. The wind swayed the lights so that his sunburnt face, whiskered to the eyes, seemed to successively flicker crimson at me and to go out. I saw the extraordinary breadth of the high cheek-bones, the perpendicular style of the features, the massive forehead, steep like a cliff, denuded at the top, largely uncovered at the temples. The fact is I had never before seen him without his hat; but now, as if my fervour had made him hot, he had taken it off and laid it gently on the floor. Something peculiar in the shape and setting of his yellow eyes gave them the provoking silent intensity which characterized his glance. But the face was thin, furrowed, worn; I discovered this through the bush of his hair, as you may detect the gnarled shape of a tree trunk in a dense undergrowth. These overgrown cheeks were sunken. It was an anchorite's bony head fitted with a Capuchin's beard and adjusted to a herculean body.[12]

"And the more I saw of him the more I saw into him." This is the neatest—indeed starkest—formulation of Conrad's dualism, his division of the world into what (to speak crudely) we may call the physical and the metaphysical.

As it stands though it will not do, for two reasons, quite apart from Conrad's inherent suspicion of any kind of neat formulation of anything, beyond the manners and *mores* of shipboard life. One, because it is predicated on a description of the world that places human cognition and its concerns on one side and everything else in the universe on the other; and two, that a simple reductive dualism supposedly has the capacity to account for the being of everything, as any metaphysical account must do if it is to have cash value. What is fascinating about Conrad is that, unconsciously, with his obsessive visual dwelling on the qualities of objects, he expands a traditional dualistic account of the universe into a vastly richer fourfold one. The question, "what does it mean to be?" was for Joseph Conrad, the retired sailor who sat in his study complaining of the chronic pain in his limbs and his inability to summon the inspiration to write, actually meant, "what does it mean to be *a man*?" But the Conrad of the pen who addressed this second question so superbly in such works as *Lord Jim* and *The Shadow-Line* also is much exercised over the question, "what does it mean to be an *object*?" This is the reason he describes objects in so much detail, and why—just as significantly—it is a significant trait in his writing that objects seem invested with a separate life of their own, possessed even of a disconcerting unpredictability. Take, for example, the dummy in *The Arrow of Gold*:

> Mills without a word flung himself on the divan and, propped on his arm, gazed thoughtfully at a distant corner where in the shadow of a monumental carved wardrobe an articulated dummy without head or hands but with beautifully shaped limbs composed in a shrinking attitude, seemed to be embarrassed by his stare. [13]

Later, the unnamed narrator recalls this suggestive object, describing it as "shy", remarking not that it was placed at the end of the studio but that it "lurked" there, adding that it was "pitiful and headless in its attitude of alarmed chastity".[14] This is not just anthropomorphism as a literary conceit—it is a metaphysical view of the world that goes to the core of Conrad's vision.

In the same novel there is a lovely passage depicting the stealing of dusk into the cavernous room in which the narrator and the woman he loves, Doña Rita, are sitting; the walls show "on a black background and in vivid colours, slender women with butterfly wings and lean youths with narrow birds' wings" in the old Roman manner.[15] A little later we read this:

> Slowly, the fantastic women with butterflies' wings and the slender-limbed youths with the gorgeous pinions on their shoulders were vanishing into their black backgrounds with an effect of silent discretion, leaving us to ourselves.[16]

Again, this is a deeply characteristic passage. It is as if the images are alive with a will of their own, an impression soon reinforced when the darkness is dispersed by the lighting of the lamps:

> In the flood of soft light the winged youths and butterfly women reappeared on the panels, affected, gorgeous, callously unconscious of anything having happened during their absence.[17]

This sustained anthropomorphism is an inveterate hallmark of Conrad's writing, traceable through his preference for presenting objects in the active rather than the passive voice.

For this reason, the commonplace and the quotidian are treated in the same way. In "Typhoon", Captain MacWhirr's boots seem imbued with some strange mimicry of life in the comic scene of the flustered man's attempts to dress himself and get up on deck to assess the impending storm. He takes off his ordinary shoes and climbs into a pair of hardier sea-boots, but the shoes he has discarded seem animated, which irritates the captain:

> The shoes he had flung off were scurrying from end to end of the cabin, gambolling playfully over each other like puppies. As soon as he stood up he kicked at them viciously, but without effect.[18]

Just as in the earlier example of the dummy lurking in the shadows, it is the active rather than passive depiction that produces a simulacrum of life; had the first sentence begun, "The shoes he had flung off *were driven* from end

to end of the cabin, as if gambolling playfully…" the effect would be bland and unremarkable. Conrad puts the verb in the active voice to draw attention to the malignity of the storm, as if it has some personal animus against the good captain and his ship the Nan-Shan; he wants us to "see" the storm as a live thing—making the metaphysical physical, as it were. The point becomes immediately reinforced as Captain MacWhirr staggers to the end of his cabin:

> As soon as he attempted to open the door the wind caught it. Clinging to the handle, he was dragged out over the doorstep, and at once found himself engaged with the wind in a sort of personal scuffle whose object was the shutting of that door. At the last moment a tongue of air scurried in and licked out the flame of the lamp.[19]

This apparent malignity of intent on the part of inanimate objects—we will return later to the question of regarding formless entities such as the wind as objects—is a not infrequent occurrence in Conrad. In "The Secret Sharer", for example, the young narrator is confounded by the apparent non-compliance of a ladder he attempts to haul in from the side the ship:

> Not from compunction certainly, but, as it were mechanically, I proceeded to get the ladder in myself. Now a side-ladder of that sort is a light affair and comes in easily, yet my vigorous tug, which should have brought it flying on board, merely recoiled upon my body in a totally unexpected jerk. What the devil!...I was so astounded by the immovableness of that ladder that I remained stock-still, trying to account for it to myself… [20]

That there is a rational explanation for this surprise—just as there is for gambolling shoes or a dummy that seems embarrassed and lurks—is irrelevant for the purposes of the argument here, because it is the capacity to surprise rather than any explanation of it that puts before us the pregnant idea that objects have a kind of life held back in reserve that is not immediately apparent to an observer. It suggests that their presence, as well as any relations they may enjoy, is not the whole story—or rather, not *their* whole story. And from this much will come.

2. Existence, reality, and the autonomy of objects

> There have been of course many potential candidates within philosophy for an ultimate metaphysical foundation; God, for instance, or Platonic ideas, eternal substances, fundamental laws of pure logic such as the law of identity (A=A), and certain other fundamental categories of thought abstracted from the structure of declarative propositions, as in the work of Aristotle and Kant.

> These candidates had to be eternal or even extra-temporal; they had to be grasped as prior to and possibly even independent from humanity.
> —Wolfram Eilenberger, *The Time of the Magicians*

We must now digress somewhat in order to survey the philosophical territory over which this study of Conrad will travel, and one effective way to do this is to begin with two such closely related questions that only deliberate emphasis can separate them: what does it mean to be an *object*, and what does it mean to *be* an object? To bridge these questions successfully allows us to read Conrad's work with new eyes, which we can do by looking in a new way at the nature of being; in turn this will free us from worries over traditional distinctions between subject and object. The conventional subject/object distinction will prove to be a philosophical cul-de-sac in a metaphysic which dethrones dependence by granting an inside and an outside not just to human beings, but to everything that exists. Every subject will be an object; every object will be a subject.

This is our formal entry then into the terrain of metaphysics, a fuzzy term against which the senate of traditional twentieth-century philosophers (be they analytical or continental) has thundered in various tones of dismissal and contempt. The historical reasons for this do not concern us here, but a running sore on the body of traditional metaphysics has always been a resistance to a definition that can satisfy everyone. To define metaphysics open-endedly as "the investigation of the ultimate nature of reality" is perhaps the most useful shorthand for our purposes; but this has rankled with those who see philosophy as just the handmaiden of science, language, or epistemic analysis. For much of the twentieth century the portion of the map of philosophy once reserved for metaphysics was simply torn away and discarded. The current re-emergence of metaphysics under the aegis of various speculative realists (as they initially called themselves) has put questions about the nature of reality and the ground of being firmly back on the table in a plethora of original ways, consonant with the new century's creeping angst: those gods in whom we once had cultural, political, and philosophical confidence have lost much of their cash value in the face of various assaults. Thus, the unapologetic presence of the word metaphysics in this study's subtitle. As it stands though, it is too vague: we need another term to sharpen the focus of this reading, and that term is *ontology*.

Ontology—like the word metaphysics itself—derives from two Greek words, which put together give us "the science of being", and its relationship to metaphysics is akin to that of a river to its source. We need to introduce it because the observations about objects in Conrad with which we began will be enormously expanded as we ask about the ontological status of those objects—and by extension, all objects everywhere. Thus, when we speak of