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- ¹ Conrad begins his volume of reminiscences, *A Personal Record*, by recalling how he wrote the tenth chapter of his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*, in the winter of 1893, on board a 2,000-ton steamer called the *Adowa* “alongside a quay in Rouen” (Conrad 1923c, 3). This was Conrad’s way of acknowledging the importance of Flaubert for his conception of the novel as a form – and a way of invoking the spirit of Flaubert at the start of his reminiscences as a patron saint.¹ Thus, he describes the ship’s original berth, “in the neighbourhood of the Opera House”, and the view through his cabin porthole window onto the café where “the worthy Bovary and his wife [...] had some refreshment” (5). He then compares this with his later view, through the same port-hole, of a very different café, “a little café with curtained windows and a shabby front of white woodwork, corresponding with the squalor of these poorer quarters bordering the river” (5). A year earlier, in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska (6 April 1892), written from on board the *Torrens* in Port Adelaide, Conrad had testified to his intense interest in *Madame Bovary* and his respect for Flaubert’s verisimilitude (Conrad 1983, 110–111). He praises Poradowska’s writing in the following terms: “You both observe and describe. In the [...] striking simplicity of your descriptions, you remind me a little of Flaubert, whose *Madame Bovary* I have just reread with respectful admiration. [...] In him, we see a man who had enough imagination for two realists” (111). Some ten years later, in December 1909, he wrote to Robert d’Humières, confirming Ford Madox Ford’s assertion that he knew “entire pages of *Madame Bovary* by heart” (309–310). However, in June 1918, he rejected Horace Walpole’s assertion that Conrad’s works showed the stylistic influence of Flaubert:

You say that I have been under the formative influence of *Madame Bovary*. In fact, I read it only after finishing *A.F.*, as I did all the other works of Flaubert, and anyhow, my Flaubert is the Flaubert of *St Antoine* and *Ed: Sent: [L’Éducation sentimentale]* and that only from the point of view of the rendering of concrete things and visual impressions. I thought him marvellous in that respect. I don’t think I learned anything from him. What he did for me was to open my eyes and arouse my emulation. (Conrad 2002, 228)

- 2 Although this letter demonstrates the unreliability of author's statements about their own life and work, that reference to "the rendering of concrete things and visual impressions" and the letter's emphasis on the important lesson from Flaubert ("to open my eyes") provide a way into the consideration of Conrad and objects.
- 3 If we return to the opening pages of *A Personal Record*, there is plenty of attention to "the rendering of concrete things and visual impressions", as the quotations above suggest. The reminiscences begin by describing the material conditions of this scene of writing for his tenth chapter: Conrad's reference to "the berth of a mariner on board a ship frozen fast in a river in the middle of a town" is made more concrete by focusing on "the grey paper of a pad which rested on the blanket of my bed-place" (Conrad 1923c, 3). In this focussed attention to memory objects, he then recalls the "steam-heater" with which he keeps his berth warm and even the tin he had placed under its "leaky water-cock" (4). He concludes this description with his own "person from Porlock" moment: the interruption of his "mood of visions and words" (3) by the arrival of the third officer with his banjo. This banjo now becomes a focus of narrative attention, and references to it are used to articulate this encounter. First, Conrad provides a general observation: "When he did not play the banjo he loved to sit and look at it" (4). This is demonstrated in this particular instance: the young man "proceeded to this sentimental inspection" and meditated "a while over the strings" before asking: "What are you always scribbling there [...]" (4). Conrad's response is to turn "the pad over with a movement of instinctive secrecy", and the encounter ends with the third officer lowering "a tender gaze on his banjo", while Conrad "went on looking through the port-hole" (5). The reminiscence is organised by reference to a repeated set of objects: the banjo, the writing pad, and the brass-rimmed porthole. The porthole provides the frame for a series of different views, while the pad is the prompt, the locus, and the intended destination of those "visions and words", the products of another kind of seeing. The way these details are selected and used also helps us to understand what Conrad meant, in his praise of Flaubert, by the realist's need for imagination.

1. Cultural artefacts and commodities

- 4 What Conrad was writing was, as he puts it, "a sunset in Malayan Isles" and the "hallucinated vision of forests and rivers and seas" (Conrad 1923c, 3). This tenth chapter that Conrad was writing in Rouen begins with an extended dialogue between Almayer's Sulu wife and their daughter, Nina, as Nina prepares to depart with her lover, the Balinese prince, Dain. This is followed by Mrs Almayer's return home to collect the dollars she has amassed before she, too, leaves Almayer, crossing the river to join her Sulu compatriot, Babalatchi, in the Rajah's compound. Before she collects the dollars, she takes a last look at her husband, "huddled up" in a chair asleep on the verandah: "At his feet lay the overturned table, amongst a wreck of crockery and broken bottles", while the chairs, "scattered violently all over the place", "now lay about the verandah with a lamentable aspect of inebriety in their helpless attitudes" (Conrad 1923a, 157). It is, of course, not the chairs, which were the worse for drink. Conrad's description of this constellation of objects is an economical reminder of the dinner party of the previous evening and the disappointed Almayer's drunken harangue of the visiting Dutch naval officers, which had been the subject of the

previous two chapters. In addition, the “chaos of demoralized furniture” and the moon-light illumination of “the objects on the verandah” in “all the uncompromising ugliness of their disorder” provide the objective correlative to Almayer’s own demoralization with the collapse of all his dreams of “wealth and power” (3).

- 5 What I want to consider in relation to *Almayer's Folly*, however, is not just these objects that are part of reality effect or part of the narrative semantics of the novel, but three other kinds of objects. First, I want to consider a detail from the account of Nina’s first sight of Dain: “The crude light of the lamp shone on the gold embroidery of his black silk jacket, broke in a thousand sparkling rays on the jewelled hilt of his kriss protruding from under the many folds of the red sarong gathered into a sash round his waist, and played on the precious stones of the many rings on his dark fingers” (Conrad 1923a, 54). The black silk jacket, the jewelled hilt of the kriss, the sarong and sash and the precious stones are obviously cultural objects, the objects of the ethnographic gaze that permeates Conrad’s Malay fiction. In *The Rescue*, the third volume of the Lingard trilogy, we find a similarly detailed description of Lingard’s Bugis allies, Hassim and Immada. Hassim is introduced with the following description:

He was clad in a jacket of coarse blue cotton, of the kind a poor fisherman might own [...] From the twist of threadbare *sarong* wound tightly on the hips protruded outward to the left the ivory hilt, ringed with six bands of gold, of a weapon that would not have disgraced a ruler. Silver glittered about the flintlock and the hardwood stock of his gun. The red and gold handkerchief folded round his head was of costly stuff, such as is woven by high-born women in the households of chiefs, only the gold threads were tarnished and the silk frayed in the folds. (Conrad 1924b, 65)

- 6 Conrad presents again a series of cultural objects – the jacket, the sarong, the kriss, the gun, the red and gold handkerchief – but he also provides a reading of their cultural coding: the expensive weapons and the red and gold handkerchief point to Hassim’s high status within his community, while the fisherman’s jacket, the tarnished gold and the frayed silk indicate the turn in his fortunes from which the narrative takes off. His sister, Immada, is described in similar detail:

Her *sarong*, the kilt-like garment which both sexes wear, had the national check of grey and red, but she had not completed her attire by the belt, scarves, the loose upper wrappings, and the head-covering of a woman. A black silk jacket, like that of a man of rank, was buttoned over her bust and fitted closely to her slender waist. The edge of a stand-up collar, stiff with gold embroidery, rubbed her cheek. She had no bracelets, no anklets, and although dressed practically in man’s clothes, had about her person no weapon of any sort. (Conrad 1924b, 65–6)

- 7 This is another complicated image: this time with its mix of male and female dress, which also anticipates the role Immada is to play in the novel, as a woman engaged in the armed struggle for the restoration of her brother’s kingdom. What is striking is how this ethnographic gaze not only understands how to read these cultural objects through national, class and gender codes (“the national check”, “like that of a man of rank”, “man’s clothes”), but is informed enough to draw attention to objects of dress that are missing: no belt, no scarves, no loose upper wrappings; “no bracelets, no anklets”.
- 8 This documentation of cultural artefacts, which is also a form of salvage anthropology, inevitably suggests a process of othering. At the same time, however, we have to notice that, in the first instance, the passage from *Almayer's Folly*, the gaze is actually Nina’s and is expressive of her “admiration and desire” (Conrad 1923a, 55). It is like the Lady

of Shalott's vision of Lancelot in Tennyson's poem. This moment also initiates the novel's counter-plot: the mixed-race Nina's struggle to establish her identity within a racially polarised world finds some degree of resolution through her love for the Balinese prince, Dain (see Hampson 1992, 11–31). In the case of *The Rescue*, the description of Hassim and Immada is the prelude to an account of Sulawesi politics – more specifically, the war of the Wajo succession. This, in turn, points to an often-overlooked aspect of the Patusan section of *Lord Jim*: Patusan is not simply the exotic setting for an adventure story, but Conrad's narrative is rooted in an understanding of the culture and politics of Eastern Borneo. Jim's arrival in Patusan coincides with, and becomes an intervention into, the tense balance between three “antagonistic forces”: the Malay Rajah Allang, who controls the river, which provides access to Patusan; Sherif Ali, “an Arab half-breed” who “on purely religious grounds, had incited the tribes of the interior”, and had now “established himself in a fortified camp on the summit of one of the twin hills’ outside the town of Patusan”; and the Bugis, Doramin, with whom Jim allies himself (Conrad 1923f, 228, 257). Stein is Marlow's source for this information, and Marlow indicates also the basis of Stein's knowledge: “He was as full of information about native States as an official report [...] He had to know. He traded in so many” (227). Marlow points to two modes of colonial information gathering: the knowledge production that was part of official engagement with native States, the kind of report that Conrad's friend Hugh Clifford wrote as part of his work with the British administration in Malaya; and the understanding of local customs and politics that were a necessary part of successful trading in the archipelago.

- 9 The second kind of object I want to note in Conrad's early fiction is the object as commodity. As Maya Jasanoff has noted, Conrad had a first-hand experience of globalization. As she puts it, “Conrad watched the emergence of the globally inter-related world” from the deck of a ship (Jasanoff 6). Conrad's own experience of South-east Asia was the result of his varied maritime experiences – including, most productively, his work as first-mate in the *Vidar*, following what he called a “huckster's round” of trading between Singapore and various small ports in Celebes and Borneo (Conrad 1923g, 166). As Francis reminds us, in this period, “the responsibilities of ships' captains embraced both navigation and commerce” (Francis 23).² This experience on board the *Vidar* provided Conrad with the basis for his first two novels. It is not surprising, therefore, that Conrad's first novel is permeated by the circulation of objects of trade. Dain, for example, presents himself to the people of Sambir as a trader and is very precise about his ostensible trading interests: he asserts that he is not interested in buying gutta-percha or beeswax, but wants to collect trepang (sea-slug) and birds' nests. These are staples of inter-island trade. Sea-produce (including trepang and pearls) and jungle-products (such as birds' nests, beeswax, gutta-percha) were traded by Arab, Bugis and Chinese traders. *Almayer's Folly* provides evidence of the role of the Arabs and Bugis in these trades, and it also registers the supply chain by which forest produce was gathered by the interior peoples (called the Dyaks by Europeans) and brought down river to these Arab and Bugis traders (The novel is silent, however, about the reverse trade in slaves from the coastal Arabs and Bugis to the Dyaks to supply the labour to gather this produce).
- 10 Almayer is also a trader – though one who, at the time of the narrative, has lost his monopoly of trade to the Arabs – and has gone into decline. His “ruined go-downs” contain “a few brass guns” and “a few mouldering cases of Manchester goods” (Conrad 1923a, 28). The “brass guns” are small locally made *lantakas*, originally from foundries

in Malacca and Pahang, which were often exchanged as gifts – Lakamba, for example, wants “to buy a couple of brass guns as a present to his friend the chief of Sambir Dyaks” (32) – but they were also recognised as a form of currency – and could be traded for rice, drums, canoes, tools. The Manchester goods are probably cotton. They are a reminder of the “assorted cargo” that Lingard used to carry in his brig *Flash*: “Manchester goods, brass gongs, rifles and gunpowder”, which he traded for “gutta-percha and rattans, pearl shells and birds’ nests, wax and gum-dammar” (8). They are evidence of the larger trading networks that bring about the penetration of the local culture by objects from Europe and China. The audience chamber of the rajah’s residence, for example, is “curtained off, by heavy stuff of European manufacture” (75) and is illuminated by a “European lamp with a green shade” (76). Perhaps most interesting, in this context, is the rajah’s “small hand-organ” (88). This is a small barrel-organ operated by a crank-handle: the rajah relaxes by having Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* played for him on the hand-organ. Francis discusses this in relation to the Sulu’s skill in cultural adaptation. As he puts it, “Malay culture can embrace both ‘a wooden drum’ and the ‘small hand-organ’” (Francis 36).

- 11 However, we might also compare this catalogue of European imports – curtains, lamps, hand-organs – with the objects that characterise Almayer’s domestic life. When he returns home at the end of the first chapter, the house to which he returns is presented by reference to the following objects: a paraffin lamp without a globe (Conrad 1923a, 15), “torn rattan screens” (15), and a table laid with a “cracked glass tumbler” and a “tin spoon” (16). While Almayer has “absorbed himself in his dreams of wealth and power away from this coast” (3), clearly his trading business has fallen apart as these objects indicate – even the words “Office: Lingard and Co” are “half-obliterated” though “still legible on the dusty door” on the side-wall of the house (15). In addition, other domestic objects have suffered from (and testify to) the conflicts in the Almayer marriage. Almayer recalls his wife “burning the furniture, and tearing down the pretty curtains”, which he interprets as motivated by her “unreasoning hate of those signs of civilisation” and as evidence of her “savage nature” (26). However, as the narrative later reveals, she does not simply destroy the curtains and furniture, but she turns the western curtains into sarongs for the slave-girls and uses the western furniture to cook rice (91). In short, she makes over European items for local uses. She engages in a form of cultural detournement as a strategy of resistance.
- 12 What I want to suggest, then, following Andrew Francis and my own earlier *Cross-Cultural Encounters in Joseph Conrad’s Malay Fiction*, is that Conrad’s early Malay fiction shows an informed understanding of the various objects of inter-island and international trade (Hampson 2000). More than this, it shows Conrad’s attention to trading networks, local supply chains (for example, to bring produce from the forests of the interior to riverine trading posts), various colonial trading networks, and also various illicit trading networks. As Francis observes (and demonstrates): “Conrad’s portrayal of commerce in his Asian fiction offers an informed, complex, and historically specific context” for the narratives he produces (Francis 5). How ingrained this attention to commerce, commodities and trading networks was is suggested by Conrad’s son, John, in his reminiscences about the interest Conrad and his friend Hope took in John’s “maritime activities” – playing with model ships in the moat that surrounded the Conrads’ home, Capel House. John recalls how the two former captains “would want to know what the cargo was, where it came from and where it was consigned to” (Conrad 1924b, 23). Indeed, John was required to produce small bundles

of ripped-up newspapers for each of his ships to satisfy their demand for “the ships’ papers”.

- 13 There is a similar attention to the circulation of commodities in “Heart of Darkness”. Nathalie Martinière has discussed the “bit of white worsted” worn round the neck of the African helmsman. She has also mentioned the ivory, which is the central commodity in the novella. Ivory is present in the opening scene on board the *Nellie* in the form of the dominoes with which the Accountant toys “architecturally”; it reappears at the return to Europe in the piano keys in the Intended’s apartment. Through this attention to the commercial uses of ivory, instead of contrasting the two worlds of Europe and Africa, as Achebe claims, Conrad actually shows the intimate connectedness of the two – and the complicity of the Intended and the audience on board the *Nellie* in the horrors perpetrated in the Congo (Achebe 782-794). The comparison of the African steamer to a Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tin, as Stephen Donovan, Johan Warodell and others have suggested, intimates another aspect of the history of the commodity (see for example Donovan 116). The comparison of the steamer to a biscuit-tin might seem like a giant leap of the imagination: what has a Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tin to do with the Congo? It is true that, in his second essay on the loss of the *Titanic*, Conrad compared the *Titanic* to a Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tin (Conrad 1924a, 229-248).³ In this case, however, another factor comes into play. African expeditions like Stanley’s were equipped with Huntley and Palmer biscuits: the biscuit tins travelled into the continent with them and were photographed alongside them⁴ (Scott also took these biscuits with him to Antarctica in 1910).⁵ However, this is not just evidence of the circulation of the commodity but also of the pervasiveness of commodity culture. Thus Conrad justifies his comparison of the *Titanic* to a biscuit-tin by describing Huntley and Palmer biscuit-tins as “almost a national institution” (233). Furthermore, Felix Driver has drawn attention to the Victorian picturing of the commodity “on the frontiers of knowledge and power” as a way of associating “the glamour of overseas exploration” with “consumption at home” (Driver 207). On the one hand, explorers like Stanley and Livingstone were associated through advertising with various commodities “such as soap, tea and pills” as a form of celebrity endorsement (207). On the other, commodities were represented in adverts in a variety of colonial settings to present “a striking picture of imperial progress” (209). As Thomas Richards puts it, “the commodity was represented as the bulwark of empire” (Richards 142). Thus Marlow’s imagined Roman might regret the absence of Falernian wine during his occupation of Britain, but modern explorers could take their Huntley and Palmer biscuits with them. Indeed, it was not just modern explorers: Reading Museum notes that, by 1874, the firm was boasting that “seldom a ship sails from England” without “a Reading biscuit” on board. More significantly, the Museum has an 1890s photograph of a Congo trading steamer with a Huntley and Palmer’s biscuit-tin prominently displayed. At the same time, as the Huntley and Palmer’s Gallery in the Reading Museum also shows, Major Powell-Cotton’s Congo expedition (1904-1909) came back with a photograph of a young African man holding a thumb piano with a recycled Huntley and Palmer’s biscuit tin as its sounding box.⁶ As with the Almayers’ curtains, European objects can be recoded, transculturated and turned to local uses.

2. The object as fetish

- 14 The third category of object I want to discuss is the object as fetish. I want to approach this through Conrad's second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, in which he goes back some 15 years to relate the series of events which resulted in Almayer losing the trading monopoly in Sambir through the treachery of Willems. Willems is another of Captain Lingard's *protégés*. When he is disgraced and thrown out by his wife, Lingard rescues him and brings him to Almayer's trading station in Sambir. To try and make things "ship-shape", Lingard then persuades Willem's wife to come with him to Sambir and take back her husband (Conrad 1928, 40). I want to focus on two passages from Chapters 1 and 2 of Part V of the novel. Part V opens with Almayer "alone on the verandah of his house", musing and gazing on the river as the sun sets (291). The setting and Almayer's thoughts obviously recall the opening of *Almayer's Folly*. As in that novel, he contemplates his dreams for himself and his daughter: "In less than ten years their fortune would be made and they would leave this place, first for Batavia – yes, Batavia – and then for Europe" (293). This time, more clearly than in the earlier novel, Conrad presents the strength and bitterness of Almayer's feelings: "he hated all this; he begrudged every day – every minute – of his life spent amongst all these things" (292). However, through his dream, these things are also "very precious to him": they constitute "the present sign of a splendid future" (292).
- 15 This is the context in which I wish to discuss the first passage.⁷ This passage occurs after Almayer has finished his evening meal on the verandah: it describes the setting up of the Lingard and Co. "office" in Sambir and Almayer's original feelings about it. The paragraph begins with a glance towards "the closed door" in "the whitewashed wall of the house":
- Black letters were painted on it proclaiming the fact that behind that door there was the office of Lingard and Co. The interior had been furnished by Lingard [...] and it had been furnished with reckless prodigality. There was an office desk, a revolving chair, bookshelves, a safe: all to humour the weakness of Almayer, who thought all those paraphernalia necessary to successful trading. (Conrad 1928, 299)
- 16 There is then a long account of the marvelling reactions of the locals as this furniture is moved, with some difficulty, from the ship which brings it to the office. Since this account is focalised through the local people, the narrative produces a defamiliarized account of these various objects. Thus the office desk is seen as "a big meza, with many boxes fitted all over it and under it" (Conrad 1928, 299), and it prompts the question: "What did the white man do with such a table?" (299).⁸ Ian Watt introduced the term "delayed decoding" into Conrad studies: for example, when Marlow in "Heart of Darkness" is navigating upriver towards the Inner Station, he glimpses "vague forms of men" in the bush through the shutter-hole of the pilot-house, then something strange happens to his African helmsman, who has been firing at these "vague forms":
- Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little camp-stool.⁹ (Conrad 1923d, 111)
- 17 As Watt defines it, "delayed decoding" involves a mode of representation which "combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their

meaning" (Watt 175). In this instance, as the sentences accumulate, we realise that the "something" was a spear and that the helmsman has been killed by it. In the passage from *Outcast*, however, the opposite happens: the local description of the writing desk begins with the Malay word for a table and then responds to the desk's drawers by describing them as boxes. The resulting description has something of the quality of a riddle – except that we have already been given the solution by the narrator before we were given the riddle. The question ("What did the white man do with such a table?") completes the riddle. It has an obvious answer for us, and, in this, it resembles one of the possible effects of "delayed decoding". Watt describes this effect as "amusement, because we feel a certain patronising contempt for those who do not understand things as quickly as we do" (178). However, while the question ("What did the white man do with such a table?") has an obvious answer (it is a writing desk) which might produce this effect of superior amusement in the reader, the question also poses a deeper question: "What *did* the white man do with such a table?" We know, from *Almayer's Folly*, what Almayer did next – and what became of Almayer's dreams. The context also provides another answer to the question. As I said a moment ago, "things" constitute for Almayer "the present sign of a splendid future" (Conrad 1928, 292).

- 18 I want to explore this phrase further through another set of objects, which are not included in the list I have just quoted. These are more accurately identified by the locals as "a pile of books". Again, they prompt the question among the bystanders: "What were they for?" (Conrad 1928, 299). This time, "an old invalidated jurumudi" (that is, another helmsman) "explained to a small knot of unsophisticated citizens of Sambir that those books were books of magic – of magic that guides the white men's ships over the seas, that gives them their wicked wisdom and their strength" (299). In the case of the writing desk, the defamiliarized description that constitutes the riddle invites our amusement based on superior knowledge, but then subverts that cultural hierarchy by the insistence of a more profound question: "What *did* the white man do with such a table?" In this instance of Almayer's books, there is a layering to the hierarchy: the jurumudi, with his professional knowledge of Europeans through working with them on ships, can identify and explain the objects to the "unsophisticated citizens of Sambir". The sophisticated European reader might be amused by this explanation of Almayer's account books as "books of magic". However, Conrad makes clear that Almayer's ideas about the furniture and fittings for his office are no less magical, no less primitive: "he thought himself by virtue of that furniture, at the head of a serious business" (300). Furthermore, as Francis shows, the jurumudi is not so wrong about these "books of magic". We have already seen their pre-printed "blue and red ruled pages" in *Almayer's Folly* (Conrad 1923a, 199). As Francis notes, "double-entry book-keeping, representative of the force of Western culture, is crucial to commercial success in the increasingly globalized world" (Francis 57), and the lack of knowledge of this system was one of the contributory factors to the decline of Arab trading in the region in the period immediately after the end of the novel.
- 19 As I have suggested, the opening of Part V has already indicated to the reader that "things" are valued by Almayer not for themselves but for their assigned place in his plans: they are "signs" instead of reality. Not objects so much, perhaps, as fetishes. Conrad reinforces this suggestion by the imagery with which he describes the failure of Almayer's plan: "He found no successful magic in the blank pages of his ledgers; and gradually he lost his old point of view in the saner appreciation of his situation. The

room known as the office became neglected then like a temple of an exploded superstition" (Conrad 1928, 300). The long account that follows of Willems's wife's temporary occupation and use of the office and its furniture emphasises the failure of Almayer's plans and the lost power of these objects:

The big office desk was pushed on one side [...] Bits of white stuff; rags yellow, pink, blue: rags limp, brilliant and soiled, trailed on the floor, lay on the desk amongst the sombre covers of books soiled, grimy, but stiff-backed, in virtue, perhaps, of their European origin. The biggest set of bookshelves was partly hidden by a petticoat, the waist-band of which was caught upon the back of a slender book pulled a little out of the row so as to make an improvised clothespeg. (Conrad 1928, 300-301)

- 20 As Francis observes, the changes made by Joanna's temporary occupation of this space emphasises "the hollowness of Almayer's aspirations" (Francis 57). However, the making over of the desk, the bookshelves and even the books to other uses and the intimate intermingling of "the uses of commerce with the needs of the body" (58) do more than this: they also suggest a desecration. The failure of the dream is accompanied by the loss of power of these fetish objects.

- 21 *Almayer's Folly* shows us the final stages of this process. When Almayer returns to his house at the end of the novel after Nina's departure, first he confronts "the chaos of overturned furniture" (Conrad 1923a, 197) on the verandah, which I discussed earlier on its first appearance in Chapter 10; then he comes upon Nina's "European trunk" with "the large initials N.A. on the cover" and a "few of Nina's dresses hung on wooden pegs" in the "women's room" – relics of an abandoned European identity; then he opens the locked office: "He entered in a cloud of dust that rose under his feet. Books open with torn pages bestrewed the floor; other books lay about grimy and black; looking as if they had never been opened. Account books. [...] For many years there had been no record to keep on the blue and red ruled pages" (199). The magic really has fled from these objects. And, one by one, the narrative ticks off the catalogue of items of furniture:

In the middle of the room the big office desk, with one of its legs broken, careened over like the hull of a stranded ship; most of the drawers had fallen out, disclosing heaps of paper yellow with age and dirt. The revolving office chair stood in its place, but he found the pivot set fast when he tried to turn it. [...] The desk, the paper, the torn books, and the broken shelves, all under a thick coat of dust. (Conrad 1923a, 199)

- 22 The objects are all in their correct place – the desk has not been displaced by Joanna's bed; they have not been recoded by another use or culture; but they are objects without use or aura: a non-functioning desk; yellowed paper; torn books; a revolving chair that doesn't revolve. Almayer's self questioning – "And all for what?" – reminds us of the questions asked by the local on-lookers when the furniture first arrived – in the book that Conrad was yet to write. As Bill Brown observes: "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (Brown 4). Objects re-assert themselves as things, and Almayer's response is to recode them. Almayer reads them now in terms of "wreck, ruin, and waste" (Conrad 1923a, 200). The office is, indeed, "the temple of an exploded superstition", and Almayer's response is appropriately iconoclastic: "[He] feverishly began to rake in the papers scattered on the floor, broke the chair into bits, splintered

the drawers by banging them against the desk, and made a big heap of all that rubbish in one corner of the room" (200). The objects which arrived with such high expectations, with so much financial and emotional investment, are reduced to "rubbish" and are consigned to the flames.

- 23 At the same time, the transtextual narrative of Almayer's 25 years in Sambir reveals how he has transferred his allegiance from the office furniture to another object. At first, Almayer had "sought refuge" from his wife in the office, but, later, when Nina could talk "he found courage and consolation in his unreasoning and fierce affection for his daughter" (Conrad 1928, 300). The suggestion of transferred allegiance is confirmed by the second passage from *Outcast* that I want to discuss: the description of the interior of Almayer's house in Part V Chapter 2. This begins by focussing on another piece of furniture, Nina's cot: "In the middle of the room a small cot, under a square of white mosquito net, stood – the only piece of furniture between the four walls – looking like an altar of transparent marble in a gloomy temple [...]" (319-320). This temple imagery, which links the cot to the earlier description of the office furniture, is reinforced by the imagery used to describe Almayer in his apparent moment of tenderness beside his child's cot, which has the full force of the reverential feelings of a worshipper at a shrine. The passage begins with the material circumstances of the scene: "Almayer, the smoky light in one hand, his pipe in the other, stood before the curtained cot looking at his daughter" (320). However, these material concerns are soon left behind. First, there is that moment of apparent tenderness: "it was as if he had been bathed in a bright and warm wave of tenderness, in a tenderness greater than the world, more precious than life" (Conrad 1923a, 320). We note the "as if" and the doubt it casts on Almayer's emotions; we notice also the feeling of exaltation as the sentence goes on. In this mood of "rapt attention", Almayer appears "strangely impressive and ecstatic: like a devout and mystic worshipper, adoring, transported and mute; burning incense before a shrine, a diaphanous shrine of a child idol with closed eyes" (Conrad 1928, 320). The cot is transformed into a shrine; the smoke from the pipe and the lamp transmuted into incense. Almayer has moved from the fetishizing of the furniture to the idolising of this child. In this context it is significant that, when he burns the furniture at the end of *Almayer's Folly*, "he heard distinctly the clear voice of a child" (Conrad 1923a, 199). This is the prelude to his later haunting by the figure of Nina as a child: "wherever he went, whichever way he turned, he saw the small figure of a little maiden with pretty olive face, with long black hair, her little pink robe slipping off her shoulders, her big eyes looking up at him in the tender trustfulness of a petted child" (202). However, to understand this haunting, it is necessary to return to that lengthy passage in *Outcast*, where the object of Almayer's worship is presented as follows: he is "looking at his daughter – at his little Nina – at that part of himself, at that small and unconscious particle of humanity that seemed to him to contain all his soul" (Conrad 1928, 320).

3. Fetish and talisman

- 24 In the preceding section I have analysed *Outcast* in terms of a shift between two modes of venerating objects – that is, a shift from the fetish to the idol – from the fetishizing of objects as "the present sign of a splendid future" (Conrad 1928, 292) to the idolising of the child within "the temple of self" as representing the best part of himself. In this

section, I want to consider the anthropological concept of the fetish a little further. William Pietz has argued that the concept of the fetish emerged from the encounter between Europeans and Africans on the West African coast as part of a process of translating and transvaluing objects (Pietz 6). In his 1985 essay, the problematic he confronts is “the capacity of the material object” to embody “religious, commercial, aesthetic and sexual values” (7). More specifically, the issue he addresses is “the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems” (7). In contrast to the idol, which has a representative function, Pietz affirms that the “truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material object” (7). He emphasizes the irreducible materiality of the fetish: for him the issue is the value to be attributed to material things and the embodiment of socially significant values in objects.

- 25 In this context I want to consider briefly Conrad's other African fiction, his neglected short story “An Outpost of Progress”.¹⁰ This is set on another Congo trading station, manned by two incompetent Belgians, Kayerts and Carlier, and a very competent Sierra Leonean, Henry Price. In this story, not only does Conrad differentiate between a range of African cultures, but he also makes the central figure an African. I have discussed elsewhere Henry Price's centrality and how, because of his Sierra Leone background, he skilfully mediates between European and African cultures (Hampson 2001, 211-230). I want to focus here on objects, and I want to begin at the end of the story. At this point, Kayerts and Carlier have had no communication with the Company for eight months: “one of the Company's steamers had been wrecked, and the Director was busy with the other, relieving very distant and important stations on the main river” (Conrad 1923e, 109). This is where “An Outpost of Progress” and “Heart of Darkness” briefly intersect. While the Director is travelling upriver with Marlow, Kayerts and Carlier have been left to a diet of boiled rice without salt, and coffee without sugar. Apart from that they have a half-bottle of cognac and fifteen lumps of sugar, which Kayerts has locked away for use “in case of sickness” (109). The two Europeans fall out over the fifteen lumps of sugar, and Carlier is shot and killed by Kayerts. The chase which concludes with this killing is the most activity that they have shown in the course of the narrative. Up to this point, Conrad describes them as getting on well together “in the fellowship of their stupidity and laziness” (92). Their conception of their role in Africa is to “sit still and gather in the ivory those savages will bring” (90). Henry Price, of course, does the actual bargaining with the men who bring the ivory to the station and the ivory is then stored in the “fetish”. The narrator drily observes: “the storehouse was in every station called the fetish, perhaps because of the spirit of civilization it contained” (93). This comment is typical of the mordant irony deployed by the narrator. What interests me, here, is the use of the word “fetish” to describe the storehouse for the ivory. The word used by Europeans to describe African practices in relation to objects seems to have been turned around to explain the Europeans' investment in ivory and the collection of ivory. A term generated in the context of cross-cultural encounter to describe a perceived irrational investment in objects is turned back to question the obviously entirely rational European investment in ivory.
- 26 Something similar happens in “Karain: A Memory”. This story of European gun-runners and their relations with a Bugis leader, Karain, builds up to a climactic scene in which Karain seeks a charm to protect himself against the spirit of the dead friend who haunts him. One of the gun-runners, Hollis, creates a charm from one of the objects in a

box he produces. It is a Jubilee sixpence with “a hole punched near the rim”, which he offers as “the image of the great Queen”, “more powerful than Suleiman the Wise, who commanded the genii”, who “commands a spirit, too – the spirit of her nation” (Conrad 1923e, 49). This charm is, apparently, effective. But this incident is not just a trick at the expense of the Bugis leader, showing his superstition and gullibility, while the reader shares with the European characters a comfortable sense of superiority. The box Hollis produces and the objects it contains undermine that possible position taking. The list of contents begins: “There were a couple of reels of cotton, a packet of needles, a bit of silk ribbon, dark blue [...]” (48). So far this sounds like the contents of a sewing box: things that a sailor would need for the repair of his clothes. However, that “bit of silk ribbon” actually marks the transition to another kind of object: “a cabinet photograph” of a young woman; and then, “amongst a lot of various small objects, a bunch of flowers, a narrow white glove with many buttons, a slim packet of letters carefully tied up” (48). These are clearly mementoes connected with a young woman at home, with whom Hollis has presumably spent time during his recent six months’ leave of absence. The narrator observes archly: “Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans!” (48). However, that observation points to the deeper significance of the objects involved in this encounter. There is an equivalence between Hollis and Karain: there is a form of magical thinking involved in Hollis’s keepsakes and love-tokens as there is in Karain’s trust in the charm. The narrator continues: “Potent things that procure dreams of joy, thoughts of regret; that soften hard hearts, and can temper a soft one to the hardness of steel. Gifts of heaven – things of earth [...]” (48). These are objects that have power in a man’s life. These are “things of earth” invested with magical powers.

- 27 As Pietz suggested, “desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing a practice are also fixed (or fixated) by the fetish” (Pietz 7). Hollis’s various “Charms and talismans” are self-evidently invested with “desires and beliefs”; they are embedded in a “narrative structure” – though that narrative is somewhat occluded; and that narrative structure establishes a practice that includes the giving of keepsakes, the exchange of photographs. The Jubilee sixpence is evidence of another kind of primitive, magical thinking, the selection of a “royal” individual for veneration. Here, however, as Hollis’s anxieties about whether the Moslem Karain will accept the image of a human indicate, we are shifting from the fetish to idolatry.
- 28 “Karain” and “An Outpost of Progress” were both published in 1897. In 1894, another sailor, Arnold Ridyard, Chief Engineer in the SS *Niger*, on the Elder Dempster line’s Liverpool-West Africa run, began to donate African objects to what is the World Museum in Liverpool.¹¹ Between 1895 and 1916, when he retired, Ridyard gave the museum over 2,000 artefacts from West and Central Africa. Ridyard was drawing on a network of some 200 contacts along the African coast, who donated the objects to the museum through him. These donors included European traders and government officials, but also some 80 West Africans, 77 of them from Sierra Leone. As Zachary Kingdon has shown, these donations were part of an unofficial paracolonial cultural exchange: in which objects from West Africa were donated by West Africans, in exchange, for example, for British illustrated magazines (see Kingdon). Interestingly, these objects were catalogued in Liverpool with the name of the donor – in contrast, say, to the cataloguing of objects in the Royal African Museum in Brussels. These donors included Krio traders from Sierra Leone such as Mrs W.E. Johnson and Miss B. Yorke – and the marvellously named Claudius Dionysius Hotobah During (1886-1973),

who attended the Methodist Boys' High School in Freetown and then came to London to study law (1908–1911). The early donations were “powerful objects”: masks and Central African *minkisi* (power figures). These objects, when used by a skilled operator, the *nganga*, could intervene on behalf of the supplicant with enemies or evil spirits. They were called “fetishes” by Europeans. According to Wyatt MacGaffey, the word fetish is “an entirely European term, a measure of persistent European failure to understand Africa” (MacGaffey 32).

- 29 Most of these cultural objects, though given by people from Sierra Leone, were not from Sierra Leone: they were collected from various parts of central Africa: Nigeria, Ghana, the Gambia, Matadi. They thus testify to the Sierra Leone diaspora – which Henry Price also represents. They also testify to another process. Nicholas Mirzoeff has argued that *minkisi* were objects of resistance to colonial rule: they were not an old tradition but a new cultural form produced through the transcultural process (see Mirzoeff). They were ritual objects, activated by the appropriate ritual, with power against illness, spirits, and individuals. They were destroyed by Christian missionaries for obvious reasons; they were also confiscated and destroyed by colonial authorities. According to Mirzoeff, the Belgians understood that the removal of *minkisi* was a necessary military action: the *minkisi* were not relics of an archaic religion, but “a means of organising resistance to colonial culture” (Mirzoeff 145). The *minkisi* gifted by Sierra Leonians to the Liverpool Museum, have a different, but related function. First, as Alisa LaGamma has noted, these *minkisi* have been carefully deconsecrated by the removal of certain parts (cowrie shell navels, beards, fibre skirts): they have been de-activated to make them safe for the new owner, but also to prevent their use in the wrong hands (see LaGamma). The framing European motivation for assembling these objects in the museum was “knowledge gathering”. The incomplete nature of the object frustrates this project, but also, as with the gifts that During brought with him to the UK, the objects attempt to reframe the European image of Africa as static and a-historical through their transcultural nature, their embodiment of a response to European colonisation. Besides his two African stories, Conrad's other “loot” from Africa was “two African figures”, perhaps *minkisi*. Unfortunately, his wife, Jessie, made him get rid of them.
- 30 I want to end by going back to *A Personal Record*, and Conrad's account of his time in Rouen, writing that tenth chapter of his first novel amid “hallucinated visions of forests and rivers and seas” (Conrad 1923c, 3). I want to pick up on that word “hallucinated” and juxtapose it to Conrad's account of how he started to write *Almayer's Folly*: “in the front sitting-room of furnished apartments in a Pimlico Square [...] Unknown to my respectable landlady, it was my practice directly after my breakfast to hold animated receptions of Malays, Arabs and half-castes” (9). With “hallucinated” and “haunted” (8), we are not talking about objects of perception – like Jim's iron plate or Marlowe's “sticks”; instead, we are in the realm of what Yael Levin has called “the otherwise present” (Levin 3ff). We might think of the figure of the child that haunts Almayer at the end of *Almayer's Folly*; the haunting of Karain by his dead friend; or the haunting of Razumov by the spectre of Haldin in *Under Western Eyes*. We might think of Hugh Epstein's brilliant reading of the rocks passage in “The End of the Tether”, where the opacity of the object leads to the projection of the English sailor's remembered English landscape onto the Malay space. It is this realm which helps understand another comment I started with: Conrad's statement that Flaubert had “enough imagination for two realists”. It is good, but not enough to learn to “open [one's] eyes”. It is good, but

not enough to learn techniques for “the rendering of concrete things and visual impressions”. What is also needed, for Conrad, at least – and this is a different power of the imagination – is that openness to the otherwise present: to ghosts, haunting, hallucinations.

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NOTES

1. Flaubert was born in Rouen in 1821; after a period in Paris, he left there in 1846 and moved to Croisset near Rouen for the rest of his life. He died there in 1880 and was buried in Rouen.
2. Francis notes that, along with Lingard, Hermann in "Falk" is shown carrying out both duties. The captain of "The Smile of Fortune", with his deal in potatoes, is the clearest instance of a captain, even one who is an employee, taking initiatives as a trader.
3. In his first essay, "Some Reflections on the Loss of the *Titanic*", Conrad had reflected on the limits of increasing the thickness of metal plates relative to the tonnage of a ship (Conrad 1924a, 219). In the second essay, still thinking about the claim of "unsinkability" and the thickness of metal plates, he suggests that, "for the hazards of her existence", the *Titanic* was "about as strong as a Huntley and Palmer biscuit tin" (233).
4. See the Huntley and Palmer collection in Reading Museum: www.readingmuseum.org.uk (last accessed 17 March 2019).
5. See the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge (www.spri.cam.ac.uk, last accessed 17 March 2019). and the Antarctic Museum, Dundee, on board the Royal Research Ship, *Discovery* (www.rrsdiscovery.com, last accessed 17 March 2019).
6. The Museum also has two thumb-pianos which use Huntley and Palmer tins as their sounding box.
7. For an earlier take on this material, see Hampson 1976.
8. Compare the description of the safe: "a green square box, with a gold plate on it, a box so heavy that those twenty men cannot drag it up the bank" (Conrad 1928, 299).
9. Hugh Epstein has more recently shown how this term is inaccurate: the process involves encoding rather than decoding.
10. "An Outpost of Progress" was first published in *Cosmopolis* in 1897.
11. See www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk (last accessed 17 March 2019).

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