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*L’« obscure odyssee » de l’objet dans « Karain », de Joseph Conrad*

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# The “Obscure Odyssey” of the Object in Conrad’s “Karain”

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- 1 “Karain” is one of Conrad’s two early stories set in the Malay Archipelago. Published in *Tales of Unrest* (1898) with its twin story “The Lagoon”, it relates an “obscure odyssey” (Conrad 1978, 43) of betrayal and revenge focusing upon the very object of epic romance – a woman. But the treatment given to the motif is radically different in each story.
- 2 The eponymous hero, Karain, is a native chief who embarks with his friend Pata Matara on a long journey to find Matara’s sister, a noble woman promised to a local chief who has eloped with a Dutch trader. In order to save the family’s honour, Matara must kill her. During their lonely years of wandering, Karain falls under the subjection of the young woman’s dream image, of her hypnotic gaze and voice. One day, the two men find the couple at last. The stage for revenge is ready. While Matara is supposed to kill his sister with a traditional weapon, Karain has to kill the trader “with a sure shot” (Conrad 1978, 40). But at the climactic moment, hidden in the bush, he cries out “return!” to the young woman and, as if by accident, he shoots his own friend, Matara. The consequence of this tragic “mistake” is that Karain will never go back to his native land. After some heroic war deeds in the local wars against the Spaniards, he becomes the chief of a small community on an island where the frame narrator, himself a gun-runner, regularly meets him.
- 3 This story particularly deserves to be read in the light of Edward Said’s comment upon the prominence in Conrad’s works of objects derived from primordial substances (ivory, silver, coal, language), affecting the protagonists in many ways:
 

One can suppose that during the writing of his fiction an essential place in Conrad’s imagination was filled by substances around which a great deal of the narrative action is organised: Lingard’s gold, Kurtz’s ivory, the ship of sailors, Gould’s silver, the women that draw men to chance and romance. A large proportion of the tension in Conrad’s fiction is therefore generated as the author, narrator, or hero

tries to make us see the object that draws out the writing, the thought, the speech, and so on. (Said 106)

- 4 "Karain" teems with objects organising all types of human commerce – ranging from raw materials to the modern commodity. In *Conrad's Secrets*, Robert Hampson has shown how the story "is framed by and revolves around the illicit trade of weapons" in the context of "the local politics of internecine struggle or anti-colonial resistance" (Hampson 27). What comes upon the stage in Conrad's fiction is the substance of a new fetishism: money, "the sublime object of ideology" (according to Slavoj Žižek's title), to which Conrad's writing will oppose a certain modality of the gaze and the voice as objects of literary transfer.

## 1. The sublime stage

- 5 The story opens on a distant view of Karain's post-apocalyptic kingdom, a "land still, complete, unknown" – the equivalent of Patusan in *Lord Jim*:

The bay was like a bottomless pit of intense light. The circular sheet of water reflected a luminous sky, and the shores enclosing it made an opaque ring of earth floating in an emptiness of transparent blue. The hills, purple and arid, stood out heavily on the sky: their summits seemed to fade into a coloured tremble as of ascending vapour; their steep sides were streaked with the green of narrow ravines; at their foot lay rice-fields, plantain-patches, yellow sands. A torrent wound about like a dropped thread. (Conrad 1978, 14)

- 6 This patch of Flaubertian word-painting bears the features of a sublime landscape, pointing to the presence of some transcendent thing, an invisible idea, an impalpable illusion<sup>1</sup> – the equivalent of Kant's supra-sensible thing – whose representative on earth here is the epic hero, the conqueror of this "insignificant foothold" shut "from the rest of the world": "a land [...] where each sunrise, like a dazzling act of special creation, was disconnected from the eve and the morrow" (Conrad 1978, 14). In this Utopian place, surrounded by the "gleam of silk and metal" (two other substances), Karain struts, "incomparably dignified, made important by the power he had to awaken an absurd expectation of something heroic going to take place [...] upon the vibrating tone of a wonderful sunshine" (15). As a respected Master with a benevolent gaze, he anticipates everyone's desire and answers for everything: "They were Karain's people – a devoted following. Their movements hung on his lips; they read their thoughts in his eyes; he murmured to them nonchalantly of life and death, and they accepted his words humbly, like gifts of fate. They were all free men, and when speaking to him said, 'Your slave.'" (14). In short Karain occupies the position of a sublime object of awe, "raised to the dignity of the thing" – in this case the illusion – to quote the Lacanian definition of the sublime.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 But to the Western narrator, there is something that protests too much. The respect enjoyed by Karain is "accorded in the irreverent West only to the monarchs on the stage". If he seems "word-perfect" (Conrad 1978, 17), it will be less because he embodies safety and guarantee for his subjects, than because of the part dictated by the illusions of the stage. Karain is the object of a kind of "fetishistic misrecognition" which, as pointed out by Slavoj Žižek, is the characteristic effect of ideological discourse, whether Eastern or Western:

'Being a king' is an effect of the network of social relations between a 'king' and his 'subjects'; but – and here is the fetishistic misrecognition – [...] they think that they

are subjects giving the king royal treatment because the king is already in himself, outside the relationship to his subjects, a king; as if the determination of 'being a king' were a 'natural' property of the person of a king. (Žižek, 25)

- 8 The text makes it clear through the high-flown rhetoric of the first pages, that there is nothing very natural about Karain's "ornate and disturbing person" (Conrad 1978, 16). Even his followers seem to "hedge him from humanity" (18), including his own. Among them is an old sword-bearer who always stands close at his back, gazing downward and exchanging with him in inaudible whispers, with a "face so covered with wrinkles that it seemed to look out through the meshes of a fine dark net". For it seems that Karain has a "dislike of open space behind him [...] a nervous preoccupation of what went on where he could not see" (19).
- 9 The scenic landscape, then, is but a screen, as suggested by proleptic details like the puff of breeze bringing "a flash of darkness" (Conrad 1978, 15), by a shadow in "the strange obsession that wound like a black thread through the gorgeous pomp of his public life" (20), reminiscent of the torrent that "wound about like a dropped thread" in the landscape. There is a secret *wound* indeed in Karain's story: "[...] one could not imagine what depth of horrible void such an elaborate front could be worthy to hide. He was not masked – there was too much life in him, and a mask is only a lifeless thing; but he presented himself essentially as an actor, as a human being aggressively disguised" (16). In other words, it may be that the Idea/Ideal, the illusion which Karain stands for, is a thing of nothing screened by the sensuous appearance. Or even, to follow Hegel's argument, that the truth of the supra-sensible Thing is just appearance as appearance<sup>3</sup>: between Kant and Hegel, the transcendent presupposition – or the ideal – has vanished into thin air.<sup>4</sup> Conrad's fiction situates itself in the days when many ideals and discourses vacillated, leaving a "depth of horrible void" which radically modified the status of the sublime. The crucial point here is that an object will be sublime not in itself, but simply because it momentarily fills the vacancy, an insight which psychoanalysis confirms. Indeed, any type of object can come in this place as a fetish standing for the Thing-in-itself, which is an empty place:
- [...] what the objects, in their given positivity, are masking is not some other, more substantial order of objects but simply the emptiness, the void they are filling out.  
[...] there is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object – according to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *Das Ding*, the impossible-real object of desire. The sublime object is 'an object elevated to the level of *Das Ding*.' It is its structural place – the fact that it occupies the sacred/forbidden place of *jouissance* – and not its intrinsic qualities that confers on it sublimity. (Žižek 194)
- 10 These observations are crucial to grasp the effect of the ideological tensions in the background of Conrad's story, between a pre-capitalist society and the age of the modern commodity based on a money economy. What is foremost is that the status of fetishism is not the same in each socially symbolic structure: "in pre-capitalist societies – commodity fetishism is not yet developed, because it is 'natural' production, not production for the market which predominates", Žižek points out (194). In the case of Karain's kingdom, fetishism manifests itself in the relations of bondage between master and slave, or between king/queen and subjects. The retreat of the Master – or of the ideal figure of the Monarch – in capitalism produces a shift, "as if the de-fetishization in the 'relations between men' was paid for by the emergence of fetishism in the 'relations between things' – by commodity fetishism"<sup>5</sup>. In this latter perspective,

human beings are no longer related by symbolic bonds, they just become inert objects affected by the forces of labour.

## 2. Three types of object

- 11 In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek differentiates three types of objects of desire: 1) The missing object which is the cause of desire and may actually be nothing at all: an indifferent void by structural necessity, a pure pretext for setting any type of action in motion, like the MacGuffin in Hitchcock's films: a trivial device for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands where there are no lions – nevertheless people travel there to shoot lions. Its significance is purely self-reflexive<sup>6</sup>. 2) The massively intrusive object and material presence, the mute embodiment of impossible *jouissance* like the strident voice which materializes the presence of the watchful gaze in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (Žižek 184). Neither of these two objects can lend itself to any sort of exchange among subjects. 3) The object as leftover, and the prop for exchange, whether it be a bodily left-over (in Conrad's fiction, ivory, pearls...) or a symbolic object which is the result of a signifying operation, like money; the paradox of its role is that "the structure of symbolic exchanges between the subjects can take place only in so far as it is embodied in this pure material element which acts as its guarantee" (183). Money comes as a good candidate for the status of the leftover as sublime object since it stands for an ideal thing, a king/queen which is the guarantee of its value: such will be the fortune in "Karain" of a small coin called *sovereign*.
- 12 Let us begin with the object cause of desire whose very absence sets desire into motion: woman as love object, whose versions in "Karain" are either symbolic – the Queen and Mother – or full-fledged characters. Karain is the son of a woman who once was a Queen, the ruler of a small semi-independent state, a woman "resolute in affairs of state and of her own heart" (Conrad 1978, 22), of whom he speaks proudly. In his discussions on board the schooner, he is curious about the Queen of England, "the Monarch of whom we spoke with wonder and chivalrous respect – with a kind of affectionate awe?" (20) The question mark here raises some doubt about the irreverent Westerners on the boat. They suspect that the image of Karain's mother "mingled somehow in his mind with the image he tried to form for himself of the far-off Queen whom he called Great, Invincible, Pious, and Fortunate" (20-21). They do their best to provide him with details "fit for his august and resplendent ideal" (21) which may not be theirs. In other words, the Queen as benevolent Other and Mother is the object of fetishistic misrecognition on Karain's part: she holds the place of the supra-sensible Thing.
- 13 The third figure is Matara's sister, the "great and wilful lady" (Conrad 1978, 34) who has ravished the Dutch trader's heart and who becomes the object of Karain's fantasy, the sovereign voice and gaze of his dreams during the nights of exile:
- 'She was beautiful, she was faithful, and in the silence of foreign countries she spoke to me very low in the language of my people'. (Conrad 1978, 38)
- 'I saw her! The consoler of sleepless nights, of weary days, the companion of troubled years! She looked straight at the place where I crouched'. (41)
- 14 In his imaginary conversations with her, one night Karain promises: "You shall not die, [...]" (Conrad 1978, 39). The cruel traversing of fantasy takes place when he sees from afar the actual person sitting by the Dutch trader, counting the "increase of her

pearls" (40) in a box on her lap – it seems that she, too, has her own fetish provided by the West. After Karain has shot Matara unwittingly, but obviously to satisfy some unconscious wish, he is presented to her as her saviour. But she does not recognize him: "No! I never saw him before. [...] Had she forgotten already? [...] My head swam with the fear of space" (42). The ideal object of fantasy has fallen, and with it the protective screen.

- 15 Another stage in the obscure Odyssey begins. Karain is now pursued by Matara's ghost with its "sunken eyes" and terrible voice floating in open space, threatening from everywhere, calling out "Kill with a sure shot!" (Conrad 1978, 44). The massively intrusive object (both gaze and voice) foreshadows the presence of a ferocious Other, inviting to the mere *jouissance* of killing. Karain will indeed fight and kill in local wars, not for an ideal but just as a mercenary, until he feels weary of all this killing, and settles in his "foothold ("insignificant foothold", 16). In the meantime he has found an old sword-bearer to whom he can tell his story, and whose presence obstructs the space behind, preventing the irruption of the ghost. The old man's downward gaze and silence mark out a vacancy, a blind spot in the field previously occupied by Matara's voice: a kind of vanishing point that will now condition the framing of Karain's new "reality", in the land of illusion where he can again play his part as master of his people: "Karain would 'take up', wide-eyed, the slender thread of his dream" (24). But after several years the old man dies, "and with him the power of his words and charms. And I can tell no one", Karain complains (31). A dramatic shift in the master-slave relationship has taken place: he has become "the slave of the dead" (45) until one night of thunderstorm, he leaps onto the schooner to seek protection, confronting the two round stern-ports glimmering "like a pair of cruel and phosphorescent eyes", while the "looking-glass over the little sideboard leaped out behind his back in a smooth sheet of livid light" (29).
- 16 Then comes the famous "redemption" scene. Karain has leaped on board to ask the sailors for "some of your strength – of your unbelief . . . A charm!" (Conrad 1978, 47). One of them, Hollis, goes to his room and returns with a box: "The quilted crimson satin of the inside put a violent patch of colour into the sombre atmosphere; it was something to look at – it was fascinating" (49). Something which, therefore, like the old man's charms, stabilizes the cruel gaze. Here, then, comes our third variety of the object as insignificant left-over:
- There were there 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 carefully tied up. Amulets of white men! Charms and talismans! Charms that keep them straight, that drive them crooked, that have the power to make a young man sigh, an old man smile. 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 . . . (Conrad 1978, 50)
- 17 These are mere little things, remains, memories whose presence marks out an absence or a loss – nothing like the supra-sensible Thing, but the possible props for a new form of symbolic commerce, like a story.
- 18 From this heap of broken things Hollis extracts a... gilt (not gold) sovereign, a Jubilee six pence: a portable object of exchange on the basis of the "engraved image" of the

Queen, the image being a mere semblance for an absence. The coin is the perfect embodiment of the commodity and of the sublime object of ideology:

[...] the sublime material, of that other 'indestructible and immutable body' which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical [...]. This immaterial corporeality of the 'body within the body' gives us a precise definition of the sublime object, [...] this postulated existence of the sublime object depends on the symbolic order: the indestructible 'body within the body' exempted from the effects of wear and tear is always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority. (Žižek 18)

- 19 By a typically Conradian turn of the screw, the sovereign will be displaced from its ideological background to become another type of fetishistic stop-gap object. Hollis holds up the coin and speaks in Karain's native language: "This is the image of the great Queen [...] The Invincible. The Pious. She commands a spirit, too, the spirit of her nation" (Conrad 1978, 51). The engraved image which overlaps with the memory of Karain's mother can thus become a personal symbol, even though the cynical turn of the performance does not escape the narrator: "His people will be shocked" (51).
- 20 Hollis suggests that for the charm to become an amulet, he has to make this gift of small value more personal. He must add something which he will really miss, among the remains of the box. Among these is a leather glove and a blue ribbon that may have belonged to a girlfriend. He cuts a piece of leather in the glove to make "a thing like those Italian peasants wear" (Conrad 1978, 52), and then sews the coin in the delicate leather which he hangs around Karain's neck. Under the effect of the new charm on his breast, Karain seems to wake up from a dream, or a nightmare, and returns again to his stage of illusions. The former symbolic structure, it seems, has been restored.
- 21 Many comments have been made on this extraordinary scene of mock magic. I would suggest that it is the inexhaustible process of its interpretation which makes of "Karain" one of Conrad's first great texts. I shall make two observations here. Does the charm simply restore a pre-capitalistic symbolic order that will defeat the forces spreading in the world in Conrad's time? The narrator's own scepticism as to Karain's ability to defeat those forces is a clear answer:
- He seemed fearless of the future, and in his plans displayed a sagacity that was only limited by his profound ignorance of the rest of the world. We tried to enlighten him, but our attempts to make clear the irresistible nature of the forces which he desired to arrest failed to discourage his eagerness to strike a blow for his own primitive ideas. (Conrad 1978, 25)
- 22 The story's coda transports the reader back to the London stage where the crowd shows the corrosive forces of reification in full swing under the power of the fetish of the time:
- A watery gleam of sunshine flashed from the west and went out between two long lines of walls; and then the broken confusion of roofs, the chimney-stacks, the gold letters sprawling over the fronts of houses, the sombre polish of windows, stood resigned and sullen under the falling gloom. The whole length of the street, deep as a well and narrow like a corridor, was full of a sombre and ceaseless stir. Our ears were filled by a headlong shuffle and beat of rapid footsteps and by an underlying rumour—a rumour vast, faint, pulsating, as of panting breaths, of beating hearts, of gasping voices. Innumerable eyes stared straight in front, feet moved hurriedly, blank faces flowed, arms swung. (Conrad 1978, 55)
- 23 It may then be that capitalism itself is a self-devouring chimera.

- 24 Secondly, if the sight of the sovereign has the effect of a cure which stops Karain's wanderings, it is clearly not because of its exchange value but of the unconscious relation with the mother figure. For Karain, the coin works as a leftover of great libidinal value, an homage to the lost object like the glove and the ribbon in Hollis's box. But there is a disturbing element which comes from the uncertain substance of language and produces a vacillation of the story upon itself: the ambiguity of the word *sovereign*, referring either to a coin, the signifier of symbolic exchange, or to a monarch. It appears that both are objects of worship, producing eerie resonances between Karain's story and Western history. The gilt (not gold) coin which energizes the exchange of raw materials becomes a potent symbol of the shift from local to global economy whose enjoyment is ruled by commodity fetishism. The West's Other, a greedy and ferocious deity, the mysterious cause driving the crowds onwards has replaced the Idea/Ideal in the former order. Thus, Žižek observes, the sublime is no longer an object indicating the dimension of the Thing-in-itself, but
- [...] an object which, but its very inadequacy, 'gives body' to the absolute negativity of the Idea [...] 'the Spirit is a bone', 'Wealth is the self', 'the State is Monarch', [...] in Hegel we are dealing with a miserable 'little piece of the Real' – the Spirit is the inert, dead skull; the subject's Self is this small piece of metal that I am holding in my hand; the State as the rational organization of social life is the idiotic body of the Monarch. [...] this very negativity, to attain its 'being-for-itself', must embody itself again in some miserable, radically contingent corporeal leftover. (Žižek 206)
- 25 In the case of Conrad's story, it may well be that the sovereign "Spirit of the great nation" is nothing but a miserable six pence.

### 3. "A marvellous thing of darkness and glimmers": the object raised to the dignity of the Thing

- 26 In the early stages of the story, the narrator wonders about the force that had driven Karain through the night to look for shelter on the schooner where he could deliver his tale, an object produced out of his struggle against "a shadow, a nothing" and out of the necessity to find a cure. It is, then, as if there were an urge to tell:
- The necessity within him tore at his lips. There are those who say that a native will not speak to a white man. Error. No man will speak to his master; but to a wanderer and a friend, to him who does not come to teach or to rule, to him who asks for nothing and accepts all things, words are spoken by the camp-fires, in the shared solitude of the sea, in riverside villages, in resting-places surrounded by forests – words are spoken that take no account of race or colour. One heart speaks – another one listens; and the earth, the sea, the sky, the passing wind and the stirring leaf, hear also the futile tale of the burden of life. (Conrad 1978, 32)
- 27 In the story's coda, the frame narrator and one of his former mates on the schooner, Jackson, meet in London. Jackson wonders whether "the thing was so, you know. . . . Whether it really happened to him. . . . What do you think?" (Conrad 1978, 55). The narrator then invites him to look at the London crowd, driven by their own powerful illusions.
- 28 Which, between the two, is more real? The thing of nothing which has produced a tale, or the crowd under their eyes? Jackson replies: "Yes; I see it' [...] 'It is there; it pants, it runs, it rolls; it is strong and alive; it would smash you if you didn't look out; but I'll be hanged if it is yet as real to me as . . . as the other thing . . . say, Karain's story'"



(Conrad 1978, 56). Whether the thing happened or not does not matter since it is made up of words. For the narrator, "the memory remains" (54) and it is out of that leftover that a story will be produced. The post-diegetic story comes as the object raised to the dignity of that nothing, an homage paid to "things invisible, [...] things dark and mute, that surround the loneliness of mankind" (30), in words that unmistakably echo Conrad's artistic credo in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, or Marlow's remark about Jim's tale in *Lord Jim*: it has the very "futility, often the charm, and sometimes the deep hidden truthfulness of works of art" (Conrad 1996, 168).

- 29 We read in the opening lines of "Karain" that "[a] strange name wakes up memories; the printed words scent the smoky atmosphere of today faintly, with the subtle and penetrating perfume as of land breezes breathing through the starlight of bygone nights" (Conrad 1978, 13). The story under our eyes is made of little shreds of language sounding against a void, which, by their metonymic power, awaken memories. Like Hollis's charm, it is an object produced out of craftsmanship, binding together a silent voice and a blind gaze. Its charm is the effect of the signifier – the mute letters that embody the sound of Karain's words as objects loaded with all sorts of affects: "His words sounded low, in a sad murmur as of running water; at times they rang loud like the clash of a war-gong – or trailed slowly like weary travellers – or rushed forward with the speed of fear" (32). This story is indeed a thing of great craftsmanship, the laboratory of two texts still to come under Conrad's pen: "Heart of Darkness" (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900). The craftsman's object concerns here words that bind together sounds, letters and images. In the author's note to *Tales of Unrest*, Conrad mentions the importance of "verbal suggestions" (11) that drive his writing. We have seen the ways in which the word sovereign rings in many unexpected directions, giving an eerie turn to one of the fundamental verbal suggestions in *Lord Jim*, "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed set of conduct" (Conrad 1996, 123), in other words, an Idea/Ideal. Another case is the insistence of the word *wound* to describe the flowing thread of the torrent on Karain's sunny hills, then the black thread through Karain's tale, and then the "narrow ragged strip of smoky sky [that] wound about between the high roofs, extended and motionless, like a soiled streamer flying above the rout of a mob" (Conrad 1978, 56). The power of the signifier consists in the fact that it both creates a world – a visual motif – and makes it vacillate by the sheer power of the written word:<sup>7</sup> the *wound* – another word for trauma – in the fabric reveals the void behind. It will become the dark thread woven in the Conradian narrative, driven by the logic of the aleatory and the accidental inherent in human languages and lives.
- 30 In the Author's Note to *Tales of Unrest*, Conrad compares "Karain" with the story's prototype, "The Lagoon". The motif of "Karain" is almost identical with "The Lagoon", he observes, but with a little something more: reading "Karain" after many years "produced on me the effect of something seen through a pair of glasses from a rather advantageous position" (Conrad 1978, 11). It is as if he had produced a frame out of which to look at the "primitive" tale in "The Lagoon". The framing device is no other than a ship, on board of which the telling takes place through the mouth of a frame narrator: the confidant drawn towards an enigmatic figure who seems to think that someone can perhaps understand him, and yet confronted with the impossibility to convey the effect of the story. In other words, he is the predecessor of Marlow in "Heart of Darkness" and *Lord Jim*. The frame here will contain a visual object made of broken fragments and phrases, a narrative in six sections written in heterogeneous styles – Flaubertian scenic panorama, first-person subjective narration, distanced

narrative –, some parts of it being presumably translated from a remote, possibly lost language. The whole is made even more complex by the numerous analepses and prolepses that profoundly disturb the chronological line. Or, to take up one of Conrad's most powerful metaphors in *Lord Jim*, the story as object has the shape of a broken kaleidoscope.

- 31 One night Karain steps off from his stage and comes to talk with the white men. The narrator observes: "sounds ceased, men slept, forms vanished – and the reality of the universe alone remained – a marvellous thing of darkness and glimmers" (Conrad 1978, 18). It is to this reality that Conrad's writing pays homage, producing an object crafted out of shreds of the past, raised to the dignity of the thing itself – a thing of nothing: a sublime object.

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## NOTES

1. "[...] when we determine the Thing as a transcendent surplus beyond what can be represented, we determine it on the basis of the field of representation, starting from it, within its horizon, as its negative limit [...]" (Žižek 205).
2. "An object aligned with this point is said to be raised 'to the dignity of the Thing'. Rather like an eclipse, when a heavenly body becomes positioned between us and the sun, and appears surrounded by an aura of light so intense that we could never look directly at it, an object located in this way between us and the unsymbolizable Thing becomes as though irradiated by the drive, bathed in jouissance, transfigured, spiritualized and resplendent. Objects positioned in this way are referred to as 'sublime'. This term was elaborated by Lacan in a way that attaches the psychoanalytical concept of sublimation (in which we renounce the immediate satisfaction of a drive in favour of some other reward) to Kant's concept of the sublime (which contrasts its awesome, uplifting splendours with the less austere charms of the beautiful" (Kay 54).
3. "The appearance implies that there is something behind it which appears through it; it conceals a truth and by the same gesture gives a foreboding thereof; it simultaneously hides and reveals the essence behind its curtain. But what is hidden behind the phenomenal appearance?"

Precisely the fact that there is a nothing to hide. What is concealed is that the very act of concealing conceals nothing" (Žižek 193).

4. "Kant still presupposes that the Thing in itself exists as something positively given beyond the field of representation [...]. Hegel's position is, in contrast, that there is nothing beyond phenomenality, beyond the field of representation. The experience of radical negativity, of the radical inadequacy of all phenomena to the Idea, the experience of the radical fissure between the two – this experience is already *Idea itself as 'pure', radical negativity [...]* the Thing-in-itself – *for this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical negativity*" (Žižek 205, original emphasis).

5. "The place of fetishism has shifted from inter-subjective relations to relations 'between things': the crucial social relations, those of production, are no longer immediately transparent in the form of the interpersonal relations of domination and servitude (of the Lord and his serfs, and so on); they disguise themselves – to use Marx's accurate formula – 'under the shape of social relations between things, between the products of labour'" (Žižek 205).

6. "[...] the famous MacGuffin, the Hitchcockian object, the pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion but which is in itself 'nothing at all'. [...] Two men are sitting in a train; one of them asks: 'What's that package up there in the luggage rack?' 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin.' 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well, it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.' 'Well, then, that's not a MacGuffin'. [...] the MacGuffin is the purest case of what Lacan calls *objet petit a*: a pure void that functions as the object-cause of desire [...] a cause which in itself does not exist – which is present only in a series of effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way" (Žižek 163).

7. According to Conrad's statement in the *Preface to the Nigger of the Narcissus*: "Fiction – if it at all aspires to be art – appeals to temperament. [...] the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions" (Conrad 1969, 146).

## ABSTRACTS

Published in *Tales of Unrest*, "Karain" is one of Conrad's most enigmatic Malay stories. It continues to draw critical attention because of the ambivalent status of an object, a gilded (not gold) sovereign, offered by a group of sailors to a native chief, Karain, in a curious scene of redemption. Obviously the shining sovereign does not have the same value for the sailors and for Karain, who sees it as an amulet, a "charm", an image of the Great Queen: almost a fetish that will fill the gaps of his existence. The gilded sovereign has two sides: one which is attractive to the imagination and one which is commonplace – it was not worth much in the Victorian era. In structural terms, the coin materializes the two sides of the object of desire – both as an object of fascination, and as a mere nothing. If we refer to the Lacanian notion of the sublime as "an object raised to the dignity of the Thing", what appears is the deeply ironic value of such an ideological object. Back in London, the frame narrator presents Karain's remote story as "this Thing": as a sublime object raised to the dignity of the Thing. From the reader's point of view, the sovereign/story with its charm and rich ambivalence both covers and shows the void, the "nothing" against which the modern artist creates with his/her own object: here, the written word.

Paru dans *Tales of Unrest*, « Karain » est l'une des nouvelles indonésiennes les plus énigmatiques de Conrad, en raison du statut ambivalent d'un objet : une pièce de monnaie, un souverain doré

offert par un groupe de marins à un chef local, au cours d'une curieuse scène de rédemption. Le souverain n'a clairement pas le même statut pour les marins que pour Karain, qui le prend pour une amulette, un « charme », l'image même de la Grande Reine : un fétiche dont la présence viendra combler les manques de son existence. L'histoire dramatise les deux versants de l'objet du désir : l'un, brillant, qui suscite l'imagination, et l'autre, commun : un presque rien – le souverain n'a guère de valeur monétaire à l'époque victorienne. L'histoire de Karain met en évidence la valeur profondément ironique de cet objet en termes idéologiques. Mais si l'on se réfère à la notion lacanienne du sublime comme « un objet élevé à la dignité de la Chose », elle nous offre aussi une précieuse plus-value. De retour à Londres, le narrateur présente l'histoire lointaine de Karain comme « cette Chose » : comme un objet précisément élevé à la dignité de la Chose. La pièce/l'histoire avec son « charme » et ses riches équivoques révèle et cache simultanément le rien, le vide contre lequel l'écrivain moderne s'appuie pour créer à partir de son objet qui n'est autre que le mot écrit, la lettre.

## INDEX

**oeuvre** Karain (J. Conrad), Lord Jim (J. Conrad), Heart of Darkness (J. Conrad)

**Keywords:** Conrad (Joseph), fetish, object, desire, Thing, sublime

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