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## Time of Agreements in Joseph Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the temporality of human agreements on the basis of Joseph Conrad's novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and in reference to John M. Taggart's thesis about the unreality of time. The execution of contracts is a mastery over time, but since, as Conrad's contemporary, the philosopher J.M. McTaggart proclaimed in his work *The Unreality of Time*, time is not part of the real world, contracts cannot be so either. Commercial contracts, civil contracts, gentlemen's agreements, and marriage contracts – although they concern very specific matters that are fraught with consequences and they are a kind of farce precisely because of their temporal aspect. Making alliances and taking up responsibilities turns out to be, in the light of McTaggart's theory, not only a contractual, but also hazardously ambivalent action, because it never stops time, nor does it lead to eternal duration, but contradicts it entirely. From such a perspective, knowledge of the explicit and hidden terms of the contract becomes more important than the struggle for its duration.

KEYWORDS: time, Joseph Conrad, agreement, John M. McTaggart, gambling

### STRESZCZENIE

Czas umów w *Wyrzutku* Josepha Conrada

Artykuł bada temporalny aspekt umów międzyludzkich w powieści Josepha Conrada *Wyrzutek* oraz w nawiązaniu do tezy Johna M. Taggarta o nierealności czasu. Realizowanie kontraktów jest formą panowania nad czasem. Skoro jednak, jak głosił współczesny Conradowi brytyjski filozof John M. McTaggart w dziele *Nierzeczywistość czasu*, czas nie jest częścią realnego świata, to kontrakty zawierane między ludźmi również nie są rzeczywiste. Kontrakty handlowe, umowy cywilnoprawne, dżentelmeńskie i małżeńskie, choć dotyczą spraw bardzo ważnych i brzemiennych w skutki, są swoistą farsą właśnie ze względu na swój aspekt czasowy. Zawieranie sojuszy i branie na siebie odpowiedzialności za ich realizację okazuje się w świetle teorii McTaggarta działaniem nie tylko umownym, ale także niebezpiecznie ambiwalentnym.

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Nie zatrzymuje ono czasu ani nie prowadzi do wiecznego trwania, lecz raczej całkowicie zaprzecza temporalności. Z tej perspektywy istotniejsza jest znajomość jawnych i ukrytych warunków umowy niż czas jej trwania.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: czas, Joseph Conrad, umowa, John M. McTaggart, hazard

## Introduction

One of the outcomes of technological improvement at the end of the 19th century was a rapidly growing fascination with the concept of time. The new fourth-dimensional geometry became a highly discussed matter, not exclusively in sciences but in humanities too (Henderson, 1983; Throesch, 2017). As Laurence Davies notes in his Introduction to George Wells's *The Time Machine*: "Developments in mathematics during the nineteenth century posed a challenge to a common-sensical understanding of the world" (Davies, 2017, vii). Davies refers to the most radical new ideas such as those of Herman Minkowski who laid the mathematical foundation of the theory of relativity. In the light of the non-Euclidean geometries, parallel lines can meet on curved surfaces, convex or concave, they can converge or diverge. The idea of fourth-dimensional space, the space-time continuum, nurtured artistic imagination too, and not only that of Wells. Conrad examined the boundaries of time management too. This article explores how his novel, *An Outcast of the Islands* refers to the meaning of time as the fourth dimension which is duration. In this regard, John Mc Taggart's idea of time has been used as a point of reference in order to provide a broader theoretical scope.

## McTaggart's theory of time

In his article, "The Unreality of Time" (1908) McTaggart observes:

Time cannot be true of reality. Whenever we judge anything to exist in time, we are in error. And whenever we perceive anything as existing in time – which is the only way in which we ever do perceive things – we are perceiving it more or less as it really is not (McTaggart, 1908, p. 470).

John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925), a fellow at Trinity College Cambridge is known as a philosopher and a British idealist metaphysician, an author of "The Unreality of Time." McTaggart refers in his concepts to Baruch Spinoza, and Georg Wilhelm F. Hegel, Immanuel Kant

and Arthur Schopenhauer, as to those who posited the unreal character of time, and yet he adds new arguments to their stances. Firstly, McTaggart notes that the distinction of the past, present, and future is essential to time. Secondly, he asserts that time involves change. Apparently, how to order events in time appears crucial to the definition of time itself. Thus, he observes: “If M is ever earlier than N, it is always earlier. But an event, which is now present, was future and will be past (McTaggart, 1908, p. 458)”.

Therefore, one can focus on the relation earlier than in ordering the events that produce series McTaggart called the B-series. To McTaggart, facts about positions in the B-series are fixed and always true independently of which time is present.

A second way of ordering time derives from pointing out some moment within the B-series as the present moment which gives rise to McTaggart's the A-series. The scholar claims that both series must exist for time to be real. It is beyond the scope of this essay to reconstruct in detail McTaggart's argument but, in short, the philosopher states that time is real only if a real change occurs; however, real change occurs only if the A-series exists, which, the philosopher assumes, cannot exist and thus time is not real.

McTaggart's theory was widely discussed and criticized in philosophical circles. Today it can still be inspiring to literary scholars in terms of the historical context of the works analysed. Indeed, one might assume that time does not exist as an independent entity but rather as a feature of facts. Relative to the A-series, the B-series appears to be of secondary significance, which counters the common conviction regarding the chronology of events contributes to reasoning.

From my perspective, the possibly best illustration of this aporetic problem is a quote from Conrad's second novel *An Outcast of the Islands* published in 1896 and later known later as the second part of Lingard's Trilogy. It demonstrates that time itself seems to be rather a kind of agreement on how to perceive reality. The narrator observes:

There are in our lives short periods which hold no place in memory but only as the recollection of a feeling. There is no remembrance of gesture, of action, of any outward manifestation of life; those are lost in the unearthly brilliance or in the unearthly gloom of such moments. We are absorbed in the contemplation of that something, within our bodies, which rejoices or suffers while the body goes on breathing, instinctively runs away, or, not less instinctively, fights – perhaps dies. But death in such a moment is the privilege of the fortunate: it is a high and rare favour; a supreme grace (*An Outcast of the Islands*, p. 64).

The narrator describes parallel and simultaneous experiences that involve the body and soul, and are not events or facts, but feelings, “the contemplation of that something.” The feeling and sensing subject experiences life on various levels that appear as independent however interrelated. In order to remember a man needs to recollect events, gestures or words – without them memory contradicts itself as it needs to remember something, to be memory of something. Unexpectedly, however, there are memories of “that something” that cannot be described in already-known dimensions neither in the past, nor in the present time. The body goes on – like the story of Conrad’s protagonists whose bodies act on the scene, catch the reader’s attention and redirect the attention from the serious dilemmas to the surface of the plot. The subject is lost in unearthly brilliance.

These short periods described above cannot be placed within the B-series as they are not events but placing them in the A-series multiplies the difficulty to an even greater degree. Such moments of contemplation reveal that human perception is not entirely time-limited nor time-determined. This leads to posing a question about time – when does time matter? Conrad seems to provide an answer in the mode confirming McTaggart’s ideas, namely that time matters when real change occurs: real change means a change in the position in the A-series which is impossible for cause-effect logic. Nothing that can be described as *earlier than* can be equally accepted as present. If nothing is truly ever present, past or future – then change does not occur. Regardless the assumption that time is unreal, the human perception apparently orders temporal events in the sequence past-present-future as held within the B-series. McTaggart seems to have perceived the inherent contradiction and, referring to Hegel’s claims (1983), he signaled the viability of the existence of a hidden reality of time to which the apparent reality corresponds, which he called *the C-series*. Apparently, the hidden reality of time does not rely on chronology nor does it identify itself with timeless eternity. In my opinion, the concept of *the C-series* explains the highly problematic notion of time featured in Conrad’s novel.

### Time of Gamble/Gamble of Time

Various Conradian scholars have shown that Conrad’s method of managing time manifests deep insightful skills to reveal psychological and moral aspects of protagonists’ decisions in his novels. This method is named the Conradian time shift, the distorted chronology, or the Impressionist method of narration. The retrospective narration, time shifts, fore-sayings, flashbacks, dreams, and memories create an atmosphere of uncertainty and simultaneously give directions to find the meaning of every single

action. According to Bernstein (2012, p. 44), shifting and floating perspectives of narration allows a reader to share all cognitive limitations of the novel's protagonists. Notwithstanding vivid obviousness of such a statement, there is one aspect I would like to highlight: a reader hardly knows more than the protagonists, yet he/she knows it differently, and indeed the dissonance might lead to the assumption that the readers and the protagonists know different things. Zdzisław Najder (2007, p. 455) remarked that Conrad was under the influence of a French philosopher, Henri Bergson, whose concept of "duration" revolutionized the perception of time. Bergson (1910, p. 86) illustrates this idea of an unsegmented relation between the past, the present, and the future with a chiming bell:

I retain each of these successive sensations [the sounds of the chimes ASW] in order to combine it with the others and form a group which reminds me of an air or rhythm which I know: in that case I do not count the sounds, I limit myself to gathering, so to speak, the qualitative impression produced by the whole series [Bergson's emphasis].

The conceptualization of time is a fascinating interdisciplinary topic and tells more, I suppose, about the participants of the academic debates, their needs, and goals than about the subject.

I would argue that time serves as a factor of narrative efficiency in Conrad's novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*, and simultaneously its role is subordinated to the tensions between the characters. The novel was published in 1896 as the second part of the Lingard Trilogy but it features the events as earlier to its first part, *Almayer's Folly* (1895). The third part, *The Rescue*, was published many years later in 1920 and it relates the story of Lingard's fame amongst the far-Asian people. The key character of *An Outcast of the Islands* is Peter Willems, who is Rotterdam-born, half-orphaned boy sent by his father to pursue a career on the sea but who escaped the ship whose crew he once became a part of. Peter joins Captain Lingard and promises to obey him. Sooner than expected Willems proves to be disinterested in seamanship disappointing Lingard who nonetheless remains loyal to Willems and supports him in his further career as Hudig's clerk. In McTaggart's theory, the abovementioned events are ordered within the B-series and recalled by the narrator as earlier than but they seem meaningless in the A-series of the novel's plot; indeed, they could have brought the protagonist to totally different decisions, places, or jobs. Peter's life story appears as accidental and therefore just one option amongst others. I would argue that this dimension of endless possibilities opens the gates of temptation: the lack of cause-effect logic resembles gambling. Gambling in this case suggests that Willems could have met another captain than Lingard.

The time of a gamble can be taken literally as the time of men's entertainment. The first scene in the novel introduces the main protagonist, Peter Willems, as a gambler:

He liked the simple games of skill: billiards. Also games not so simple, and calling for quite another kind of skill: poker. He had been the aptest pupil of a steady eyed, sententious American ... The memory of the Californian stranger was perpetuated in the game of poker... Willems was a connoisseur in the drink and an adept at the game (*An Outcast of the Islands*, pp. 14–15).

Peter Willems is presented on his 30th birthday as a white married man, a skilled Hudig's clerk, very self-confident, and ready to teach all who envy him how to achieve a spectacular success. Blinded by his self-admiration and power over the Da Sousa family of his wife, he expects to become Hudig's financial partner. The key protagonist is presented directly and in the middle of his life, on the top of his achievements, which seem effected by mere chance. Such an introduction violates McTaggard's line of events within the B-series. Willems becomes known to the reader in the present moment, with "present" meaning the time in the novel; he has become a man of success by accident and appears as a man without the past and the future, and not even curious about it. Such a strategy reoccurs in Conrad's prose regularly as noticed by Joseph J. Martin who observes that

The in médias res portrait and the crucial flashback work together dynamically: the first great structural moment of each work bestows upon the second great moment an aura of inevitability, and the second fulfills the first by confirming and deepening our understanding of the hero in the most dramatically impressive way (Martin, 1974, p. 100).

There is a gamble on the reader's part to follow Willem's story and a warning from the narrator that the tale about Willem's success is created by the protagonist so his tale seems to gamble with time. The limited reliability of the story is enhanced by the information that the key protagonist is a gambler. Moreover, the tale of success refers to Willems' past which exerts a double significance. For once, the past has been constructed to impress Willems' fellows at the bar. by its retrospective logic; and this leads to the assumption that success belongs to the past, which obviously counters the presumptions of the A-series. The plot features Willems' decline, in effect – sudden and total – approaching unavoidably, however unnoticed for many years. In general, this decline could have been stopped, however, but the reader subliminally expects it to be unstoppable. If the time of a gamble means more than the time of entertainment then

the reader concludes that Willems made his life decisions in the mode of gambling, that is in the process of reckless risking. Whereas Willems' B-series understood as his cause-effect life story is presented by himself as a story of success, it can also be reported as a story of escape and betrayal, both quite accidental and indiscriminate, as indicated by Caspar Almayer, the key protagonist of *Almayer's Folly* intertextually present within *An Outcast of the Islands*. Indeed, it can also be received as a story of despair – as indicated by Lingard whose ongoing efforts solved Willems from death, at least twice. Conrad seems to play with the concept of the B-series by multiplying its relativisation of time. To my mind, the structure of the novel resembles a poker game in which the key character takes part without seeing the cards and instead relying upon good luck and calm nerves.

The gamble of time refers to the mode of Willems' time management and also to the structure of narration. Willems's irresponsibility encouraged him to undertake some speculation; moreover, although he experienced bad luck with cards, and his sense of superiority does not prevent his exploitation on the part of various members of his wife's family. As the narrator writes:

He applied himself to the task of restitution and devoted himself to the duty of not being found out. On his thirtieth birthday he had almost accomplished the task –and the duty had been faithfully and cleverly performed. ... Nobody would dare to suspect him, and in a few days there would be nothing to suspect. He was elated. He did not know that his prosperity had touched then its high water mark, and that the tide was already on the turn (27).

This quote proves that time does not exist in the same manner for various characters but particular timelines cross each other or run parallelly. They can meet on curved surfaces, convex or concave, they can converge or diverge, as also noted on different occasions by John Peters (2000, p. 431). Willems had a sense of governing time but that is one of his many illusions because he disregards the time of the others. When he loses a chance to fulfill his dreams, he intends to commit suicide and yet he does not learn from his experience. Hidden by Lingard in a village at the Pantai River, the place that was kept as a treasured secret by Lingard, Willems is irritated rather than thankful. Facing the timelessness of his existence, he takes the risk of seducing a native woman, Aissa, the local chief Omar's daughter. Again, the manner of gambling is at play as Willems disregards Sambir and its rules of the game: "That same evening he startled Lakamba by announcing that the time had come at last to make the first move in their long deferred game." The same pattern is repeated many times in the

novel: the protagonists are not aware of each other's intrigues and their subjectivity of time. This, in turn, allows them to assume that their perception of time relies on the notion of agreement – the mode of agreement upon what time actually means.

## Agreements

The time of agreement, i.e. the notion of time agreed upon by all the parties in terms of, for example, the settled dates or contracts, seems to be violated in the novel. Indeed, it seems that the characters have different notions of time and its coordinates in their minds. This can be observed when Lingard investigates Almayer about Abdulla's arrival, or when Aissa discusses Willems' return with Babalatchi. This phrase "time of agreements" also involves the duration of agreements which allows us to reference McTaggart's concept of A- and B-series in describing time in general. However, in Conrad's novel, the time of agreements occurs to be defined mostly by the completion of mutual obligations that are not exclusively temporal.

In my opinion, *An Outcast of the Islands* is constructed on the reciprocal contradictions between the time of action and the time of coherent truth about reality. The truth about the characters and events is not given immediately and directly stated but, instead of being displayed in the presentative spectrum, it is to be discovered speculatively. The method of distorted chronology known as the Conradian time shift, or an Impressionist method of narration, allows a reduction of curiosity about the plot and stimulation of the reader's curiosity regarding the character's motivation.

Willems seduces and cheats others to the extent that he starts to believe in his own lies. Described as a preacher of success imposing directions on others, Willems is trivialized in contrast to the silent Abdulla who is a respected man of many secrets and an ultimate winner. While Willems is defined as an Outcast (of Europe, of his family, of the Isles – of European colonies), Abdulla is defined by his multiple connections with close and extended family members. While Willems acts as a lonely, particular subject that becomes an unreliable traitor who cannot cooperate with anyone, Abdulla appears as "wise, pious and fortunate" (92) and has many agreements with numerous people who trust him for their benefit or loss. Abdulla is the head of a huge family and a leader for far relatives, which shows him as a part of the community rather than a single man. Willems escapes constantly, while Abdulla just pays visits. Both of them make agreements with relation to time, which to Willems are only the effects of his seductive power and which become to Abdulla the tools to extend his



influence on the other side of the contract; interestingly, Abdulla does not feel obliged himself to act according to the agreement. Willems' life goes without logic, there is nothing earlier than that would have brought effects to his present as is assumed in Mc Taggart's B-series. Abdulla always looks up to Allah and includes the higher order over the human word, which may serve as an excuse but can also manifest an entirely different cultural understanding of time experience between these two men.

There are numerous agreements between Peter Willems and other characters of the novel that rely upon the notion of time: an agreement between him and Lingard, an agreement between him and Hudig, a marriage agreement between him and Joanna Da Souza, an agreement between him and Abdulla, and an agreement between him and Aissa. Each of these agreements has a temporal scope but only of descriptive significance. This particularity agrees with McTaggart's claims. If the present cannot be rooted within the past then time does not exist. Lingard's expectations of Willems are suddenly cut off by the boy's ambitions and preferences. He stays with Lingard as long as he has not had a different choice or rather as long he did not have the illusion of making a choice. Lingard does not sign any formal agreement with him. Once Willems makes his choice to pursue his career as Hudig's clerk, Lingard realizes the futility of his confidence in the boy. Lingard is not naïve but he pretends to be on Willems' side as his supporter (this attitude is vivid in the gradation of comments on Willems) but he does not warn Willems about the complicated relations between Hudig and Da Souza family. Nevertheless, it is Lingard who reveals to Peter Willems to whom the latter was married. The irony of this situation seems to be exemplary proving that Willems was blinded and detached from reality, whose picture he bases upon the cause-effect logic and which made him a harmless toy in his boss's hands, since the boy lives his life according to the rules of gambling, which finally means there are no rules. Simultaneously, Willems has a formal agreement as Hudig's office worker but he also has an informal agreement with his boss to discover Lingard's trade secrets. Lingard's secrets are also the object of Abdulla's desire as well, which is obvious to Lingard from the very beginning. The cordial greetings being sent from Abdulla mean only that Abdulla follows Lingard almost obsessively and wants him to be aware of it. Taking into account the events witnessed, a reader cannot be surprised by the agreement which Willems makes with Abdulla against Lingard. As for Aissa – Willems lies to her not mentioning that he has a son and a wife. His dream is to shape her according to his will and desires but he does not have the slightest idea of her view of him:

He was indeed a man. She could not understand all he told her of his life, but the fragments she understood she made up for herself into a story of a man great amongst his own people, valorous and unfortunate; an undaunted fugitive dreaming of vengeance against his enemies. He had all the attractiveness of the vague and the unknown – of the unforeseen and of the sudden; of a being strong, dangerous, alive, and human, ready to be enslaved (*An Outcast of the Islands*, 66).

On the contrary, that is Aissa who is ready to enslave him for her purposes. Though her understanding is limited, Aissa creates her own version of his biography, of the chronology of his life, her own version of the B-series.

In none of his agreements is Willems a real party as he has nothing to offer; similarly, he cannot act neither against nor for somebody, even for himself. The time of such agreements cannot be described positively because it indicates only the spontaneous moments of reactions Willems's agreements have starting points but they prove to be the dates only without real duration.

Following McTaggart's claims, the plot in *An Outcast of the Islands* seems to involve the meaning of time that opposes the time of gambling and the time of agreements. Moreover, if time is defined by deeds, events and facts ordered according to cause-effect logic only conscious decision as in making agreements provides meaning to it.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Willems is first of all a traitor and not a partner of these agreements. Willems is actually as if already dead at the very time of his conversation with Abdulla, as in Abdulla's and Babalatchi's agreement they decide that he will remain alive as long as he will be useful, not longer.

Peter Willems had a quite dynamic biography and he could be material for a key protagonist of an adventure novel but he fails to play such a role for various reasons. Willems presents a kind of a self-made man, pretending to be recognized a man of success, an ignorant who plays billiards and life with the same passion, and a loser who sees his ultimate goal and a reward at once. Is he the same person all the time? In a way, an affirming answer is possible because he seemed not to learn from his experience and he did not change. Until the last moment of his life, he acts as a gambler, with self-confidence trying to stop Aissa from shooting, but he fails and dies.

Willems thinks of himself as a lord, even a god, who rules the family and shines brighter than any of Hudig's clerks, but similarly to Almayer's,

his importance comes from that of his protectors. He remained so self-oriented that he did not take into account the level of Lingard's competition with Abdulla and did not realize that to them, he is only like a billiard ball touched off on the sensitive points of his ambitions and desires. He disregarded these two enemies and a simple fact the he became only an episode in the long story of their competition, a point in the B-series of their relation in McTaggart's terms. In a similar fashion to Almayer, Willems got married to a woman pointed out by Hudig – Joanna da Souza – without knowing that she was his protector's daughter. The marriage was just a commercial transaction.

Various scholars (Crankshaw, 1963, pp. 167–215; Zabel, 1947, pp. 31–38) stated that Conrad's nonconventional method of the handling of time allowed him to furnish a detailed insight into the deepest psychological and moral implications of the worlds he created, and to control his readers' sympathies. The analysis of time structure suggest Willems' goal is the need to be cared-for and desired human being, which can be interpreted as reworking the trauma of being a spare part of his family, of being orphaned and sent out from Europe by his father. As an adult man, Willems transformed his experience of separation and fear of the unknown and dangerous world into a gambler's courage and lack of any feelings towards his close ones. Therefore, he helps Lingard with managing and accounts, he pleases Hudig by making interests with the local traders and promises him to discover Lingard's secret, he plays with da Souza family by securing their finances and making them dependent on himself. His emotional vacuum consumes the expectations of his fellows without evoking in him the sense of guilt. Apparently, such a dense psychological structure of his thoughts has influenced the manner in which he perceives time: for Willems, the events placed within time have no foundation within the B-series. Indeed, he seems to negate the cause-effect-logic in the world lived in time. The harsh lesson brought Peter Willems to quite a common consciousness that the world can exist without him and that he is not indispensable.

By raising a statue of Willems, Lingard does not exclusively “mark” the past in the present time but he attributes significance and meaning to Willems' life and by doing so he transfers Willems into the world of eternal values that is called *the McTaggart's C-series*. Lingard's functioning in McTaggart's A-series manages time and meaning of Willems in his own life. It is a pity that, apparently, Willems cannot appropriate the viability of *the Lingard's B-series*.

Despite of the agreements contracted, Lingard lost his exclusive control of the river, Willems lost his life at the hands of Aissa, and Almayer lost his dreams and died as an isolated opiumist. Nevertheless, from the

B-series perspective, they still exist within their life stories, agreements, and betrayals as the protagonists of the novel. In literature, the B-series supplies a writer patiently with stories, life adventures, and biographies, but an author remains immersed in his quest for the meaning that is to be discovered within the relation established between facts and moments rather than in the particular acts. Any relation thus assumes duration. Chronology understood as the order of events earlier than, and characterising the nature of the tenets within the B-series does not exclusively shape the protagonists, neither does it tell the entire story. Their choices and dilemmas veiled for the reader's eyes nurture the integrity of Conrad's novel which is, ultimately, founded upon the third category introduced by McTaggart, that is the C-series. This hidden time which addresses the essence of existence, exists and cannot be a subject of gambling. I would argue that Conrad's time handling mirrors McTaggart's conceptualisation of time in terms of the experience of timelessness of moments without equalising them to eternity. These two modes of time: time of gambling and time of agreements negotiate the existence of a yet third mode of time, the hidden time, which refers to the C-series but underlines subjectivity of perception and the experience of timelessness as its distinctive features. There are hazardous agreements that go along with agreeable hazard. The winner seems to be a timekeeper who maintains a poker face.

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