

JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE READER

Questioning Modern Theories of
Narrative and Readership

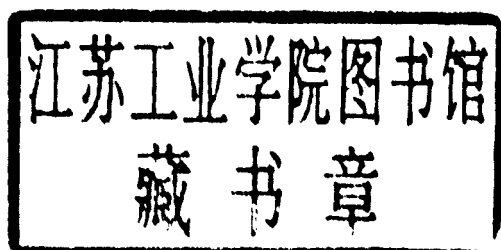
Amar Acheraïou



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List of Abbreviations

AF	Joseph Conrad, <i>Almayer's Folly</i> (Dent: 1949)
AG	Joseph Conrad, <i>The Arrow of Gold</i> (Dent: 1947)
Amy	Joseph Conrad, 'Amy Foster' (in <i>'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales</i> , Oxford World's Classics: 1998)
C	Joseph Conrad, <i>Chance</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 1988)
CL	Joseph Conrad, <i>Collected Letters</i> , Vols 1–9, eds Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies (Cambridge University Press: 1983–2007)
HD	Joseph Conrad, 'Heart of Darkness' (Oxford World's Classics: 1998)
JA	Henry Fielding, <i>Joseph Andrews</i> (Random House: 1939)
JF	Denis Diderot, <i>Jacques the Fatalist</i> , trans. David Coward (Oxford World's Classics: 1999)
K	Joseph Conrad, 'Karain: A Memory' (in <i>'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales</i> , Oxford World's Classics: 1998)
LJ	Joseph Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2000)
MS	Joseph Conrad, <i>The Mirror of the Sea</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 1988)
N	Joseph Conrad, <i>Nostromo</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2007)
NLL	Joseph Conrad, <i>Notes on Life and Letters</i> (Dent: 1949)
NN	Joseph Conrad, <i>The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'</i> (Dent: 1950)
OP	Joseph Conrad, 'An Outpost of Progress' (in <i>'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales</i> , Oxford World's Classics: 1998)
PR	Joseph Conrad, <i>A Personal Record</i> (Cambridge University Press: 2008)
PRR	Joseph Conrad, 'Prince Roman' (in <i>'The Lagoon' and Other Stories</i> , Oxford World's Classics: 1997)
SA	Joseph Conrad, <i>The Secret Agent</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2004)
T	Joseph Conrad, <i>'Typhoon' and Other Tales</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2002)
TJ	Henry Fielding, <i>Tom Jones</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 1996)
TS	Laurence Sterne, <i>The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman</i> (Random House: 1940)
UWE	Joseph Conrad, <i>Under Western Eyes</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2003)
V	Joseph Conrad, <i>Victory</i> (Oxford World's Classics: 2004)
Y	Joseph Conrad, 'Youth' (in <i>'Heart of Darkness' and Other Tales</i> , Oxford World's Classics: 1998)

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Last but not least, I tenderly thank my wife, Laetitia for her unwavering support. I am deeply grateful for her warm affection, commitment, and valuable criticism which made this project possible. My five-year-old daughter Louise deserves also special thanks; she has the knack of gently reminding me that weekends are not for writing.

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Introduction

Joseph Conrad and the Reader is the first book-length study fully devoted to Joseph Conrad's relation to the reader, visual theory, and authorship. With regard to authorship, specifically, the leading view in modern literary criticism, notably in structuralist and poststructuralist theories, is Roland Barthes's notion of the death of the author.¹ This book revisits Barthes's theory and uncovers its theoretical and empirical limits. It provides an alternative critical line that substitutes the idea of the writer's demise with the theory of authorial dissemination, which is implied in several modern texts, including the writing of Flaubert and Conrad. My contention is that the theory of authorial diffusion advocated in the present discussion renders more fittingly the articulation of power and authority in modern literary texts. For rather than being redundant or impotent as deconstructionists claim, the modern writer remains a powerful epistemic and signifying enterprise. What happens in practice is that the author's authority is merely reshaped and renegotiated in disguised, elusive forms.

The other predominant topic in modern criticism, which deserves close critical re-evaluation, is the role of the reader. Over the last decades, dominated by deconstructionist approaches to texts, the reader has emerged as an overpowering interpretative agency. Following their proclamation of the author's demise, deconstructionist theorists have 'divinized' the reader. They elevated him/her into an absolute interpretative authority of literary texts. As a result, the question of the production of textual meaning is mostly confined to the polarized transaction between reader and text. This monograph moves away from the deification of the reader. It resituates the latter as a component in a tripartite textual transaction, including text, reader, and author, but taking also into account the cultural, ideological, and political forces informing

every literary work and act of reading. In short, the critical line adopted in this study abandons the predominant insular, exclusionary approach to literary works in favour of an inclusive, holistic theoretical stance that considers the text in its multiple identifications. It also questions the deconstructionist doxa in connection with the important issue of reception theory.

Joseph Conrad and the Reader is divided into three parts illuminating variously Conrad's narrative form and reader theory. The first part gives a historic overview of authors' perceptions of their audiences, from ancient Greece to the modern era. This relatively short, but dense, section deals centrally with the crucial issue of authorship and discusses the role of the reader in fiction and modern criticism at large. It examines Conrad's perception of authorship and the reader in the light of modern theories of representation, conceptions of the author, and reader-response analysis. It offers a cross-examination of Conrad's vision of the reader against the ideas of such leading theorists as Roland Barthes, Marie Louise Rosenblatt, Wayne Booth, and Wolfgang Iser. In the process, it explores the significance and shortcomings of these theorists' views. The aim of this cross-examination consists of illustrating the ways in which Conrad anticipates a critique of those deconstructionist theoretical trends that have pronounced the author's 'irrelevance' and deified the reader. In the main, this section shows how far Conrad adopts a reader-response analysis theory and a notion of authorship that together challenge the modernist and postmodernist theories of textuality, readership, and authorship.

Such an observation may sound paradoxical, for many scholars have taken Conrad's postmodernist streak for granted. In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson, for instance, famously argued that Conrad anticipated postmodernism: 'A case could be made for reading Conrad not as an early modernist, but rather an anticipation of that later and quite different thing we have come to call variously textuality, *écriture*, postmodernism, or schizophrenic writing' (1981, 129). Other critics have, since, frequently reiterated Conrad's status as a precursor of postmodernism in terms that often undermine his multifarious, elusive literary identity.² Admittedly, Conrad has in some ways anticipated postmodernism. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that Conrad's aesthetics is no single, monolithic set that can be easily categorized. Rather, it has ramifications with various literary traditions and narrative modes, including those of ancient Greek poets. Because of these numerous filiations, Conrad cannot be readily fitted into any specific literary genre, nor can his works be explained strictly

by one specific mode of literary criticism or theory, whether modernist or postmodernist. That being said, Conrad's writing displays features that are now identified as defining characteristics of postmodernist aesthetics.

Judging from the open-endedness of his texts, their narrative indeterminacy, polyphonic orchestration, multi-layered signification, and contestation of absolute sites of knowledge and truth, Conrad might rightly be considered a forerunner of the postmodernist ethos. Conversely, in view of his handling of narrative strategies and perception of the reader, he may as well be said to have anticipated a critique of postmodernist theories of readership and authorship. Specifically, Conrad's theory of authorship and, to some degree, his conception of the reader conflict with postmodernist author and reader theories. Above all, Conrad's challenging conception of authorship, which posits the novelist as a proliferating consciousness rather than a total absence (as deconstructionist theorists contend) is highly significant in relation to reception theory, the focus of the book's second part.

Building on this fresh theoretical basis, Part I demonstrates that the deconstructionist celebration of the author's death and the reduction of literary works to mere textuality cannot be taken at face value. The reason is that as tools of analysis deconstructionist theories are too exclusionary and limited to account accurately for the complex issue of authority and power in modern texts. Moreover, these theories prove especially unconvincing when they are brought to bear upon the reception of fictional works by the large reading public, critics, and reviewers. The deconstructionist idea of authorial dismissal, in particular, is unable to withstand any thorough theory of reception. For it is difficult to imagine how a reliable theory of reception of literary works could ignore the place of the author in his fictional universe, or overlook the writer's insidious power, identity, and cultural background.

Chapters 2 and 3, which constitute the book's second part, focus on the reception of Conrad's works in Poland and Great Britain. My central line of argument in this section is that culture and its attendant ideologies are the basis for any account of reception. Starting from this fundamental assumption, I show that the Polish and British reading publics, critics, and reviewers did not respond to Conrad's texts as if they were merely strict linguistic artefacts devoid of all authorial origination and cultural, ideological, and political dimension. Their reading testifies instead to the extent to which culture, race, and ideology have contributed to shaping reading tastes and the reception of Conrad's works both in his native land and in his adopted country.

This section first explores Conrad's ambivalent attitude towards his dual cultural heritage. It traces how Conrad projects in his works an elastic readership – Polish and British – in compliance with his multi-faceted, resilient literary and cultural identity. The main issue here consists of uncovering the extent to which the act of reading for both Polish and British readers proves an overwhelming cultural, ideological, and racial construct. The reception of Conrad's works in Poland was, I argue, determined by stringent cultural, political, and ideological forces that often led to mystified readings of his fictional works. This response confirms that the Polish reading public – past and present – has seen the act of reading and the ethics of collectivity, which unconditionally ties the individual writer to his community, as being closely connected. While exploring the intricate links between reading, ideology, and patriotism, I reveal how Conrad's texts have been subject to essentialist readings generated by Polish readers' adherence to a strict sense of Polishness.

The third chapter follows a similar train of thought and examines British readers' responses to Conrad's fiction at the turn of the century in the light of British cultural and race politics embodied by the theory of Englishness. In discussing the reception of Conrad's writing in Great Britain, the chapter investigates the overlooked cultural, ideological, and racial factors that stood in the way of Conrad's popularity in his adopted country. This chapter teases out the intricate connections between the act of reading and Englishness, patriotism, and race politics. It traces how far British readers' responses to Conrad were influenced by cultural, ideological, racial, and political contingencies that transcend more aesthetic considerations of his texts. And in this, Conrad may, ironically, be said to have become a victim of the very Englishness for which he was such an enthusiast.

The book's third part shifts the focus from reception proper to Conrad's own conception of the reader and the act of reading, both in his fiction and in actuality. It connects Conrad's notion of the reader and visual aesthetics to, on the one hand, the poetics of ancient Greece and Rome, and on the other to eighteenth-century fiction. The reason for this broad critical perspective is that both Conrad's narrative form and reader theory are greatly indebted to these specific periods. It is ironic that these important connections have been so widely neglected in Conrad criticism, and Chapter 4 discusses at length this major, overlooked topic. It probes Conrad's theory of narrative form and ethics of readership and visuality through the lens of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as with regard to ancient theories of representation. This chapter unearths the links between Conrad's visual aesthetics

and classical theories of representation and audience as formulated by such poets as Homer, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Together with investigating the relationships between Conrad's aesthetics and ancient poetics, I show that Conrad conceives of fiction as a mega-poetics which encompasses a spectrum of artistic forms, including sculpture, painting, and music. In Conrad's fiction the pictorial, visual, and verbal constantly interact and fuse. They form powerful synergetic relationships by which Conrad intends to make his reader *see*.

This synergy of word and sight, sound and colour, and voice and gesture is explicitly rendered in Conrad's literary credo, conveyed in the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. This Preface exposes the complexity and theoretical ramifications of Conrad's literary theory. Most importantly, it illustrates how Conrad's visual aesthetics echoes strongly classical visual poetics or *enargeia*, defined by the ancient critics as the language's power to create visual presence and strong emotions by bringing vividly the event before the 'reader's eyes'.³ In view of these close connections, we may argue that Conrad's striving to make the reader see is continuous with the aesthetic inclination of classical poets and orators. And like the ancient writers, too, Conrad's appeal to the immediacy of sight is intended to reduce the distance between the represented material and the visual presence. Through the same visual appeal Conrad also seeks to collapse the distance between speaker and hearer, shower and viewer. Furthermore, in line with the ancient authors' distrust of the representational powers of language, Conrad's emphasis on visual effects betrays an identical awareness of the limitations of language as a means of representation and communication. This awareness may precisely account for Conrad's struggle – particularly in works like 'Typhoon' – to redeem the word by resorting to the expressive powers of gesture and visibility.

Chapter 5 pursues Conrad's perception of readership and visual theory in works such as 'Heart of Darkness', *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *Victory*. It offers a detailed examination of these reader-oriented narratives and maps out a cartography of Conrad's fictional readers (nominal/metaphoric, myopic/profound, horizontal/vertical). Along with probing the subtle interplay of the writing/narrating instances and the reading/listening fictional audiences, this chapter explores and accounts for Conrad's propensity to establish a hierarchy among his fictional readers. Chapter 6 elaborates on the issue of a reading hierarchy alongside the question of truth, meaning, and identity – major preoccupations in Conrad's writing. The device of *narrative hierarchy* is characteristic of Conrad's narrative method. It is paradoxically embedded in the overall idea of

narrative solidarity, crystallized in Conrad's blending of voice and perspective, listening and hearing, and telling and showing. This chapter traces how far the overlap and collusion between these levels of perception partake of Conrad's holistic conception of art and life. While unscrewing the nuts and bolts of this narrative solidarity, I unveil the ways in which the various voices feeding the story are tacitly competing for narrative power and authority. Uncovering these discursive concurrences should help us realize how Conrad at once promotes centrifugal truth and implicitly subjects this multiple, decentred truth to a centripetal agency. In short, Conrad fosters perspectivism and pluralistic representation, and is simultaneously tempted by a hegemonic narrative impulse.

This ambivalence, which is at the heart of Conrad's narrative method, is also perceptible in his conception of the real reader. Chapter 7 addresses specifically Conrad's relation to and construction of his audience. It connects Conrad's representations of his fictional readers, evoked previously, to his perception of the actual reader. Bringing together the fictional and meta-fictional levels should enable us to discover how Conrad's fictional representation of narrator-narratee instances reflects his own relation to his real readers. This chapter discusses the interaction between these two dimensions, brings to light Conrad's narrators' ambivalence towards their audiences and examines the implications of this ambivalence. It then extrapolates from the fictional narrator-narratee relationships to probe Conrad's own relation to his real-life readers. Conrad's construction of the reader, as my argument goes, wavers between a democratic vision and an aristocratic leaning. Through subtle rhetorical devices and strategies of representation, Conrad – the 'aristocrat of the mind', as Morf (1976, 297) called him – constructs elect fictional readers, reminiscent of the actual privileged 'coterie' of readers that he knew would always be receptive to his allegedly elitist writing.

The issue of Conrad's elitism is here put centre stage and read in connection with such elitist writers as Flaubert and Stendhal,⁴ two leading novelists who left their mark on Conrad's writing. Flaubert is a major influence on Conrad's fiction generally and on his theory of readership in particular. Flaubert's impact on Conrad received much critical attention,⁵ whereas Stendhal's influence is not sufficiently explored. This chapter examines the affinities of Conrad's ethics of readership with that of Stendhal and Flaubert and hints at the literary, cultural, ideological, and social forces that shaped these writers' readership aesthetics. While discussing Conrad's elitism in the light of the elitism of Flaubert and Stendhal, it also charts the areas of continuity and rupture between all

three writers' conception of the reader. The aim is to determine how far Conrad's relationship with his audience is, in essence, more in tune with Stendhal's conception of the reader than with that of Flaubert – Conrad's acknowledged master in relation to whom he is often evaluated. Furthermore, as it assays Conrad's elitism and its implications, this chapter reveals the ways in which Conrad constructs an ideal reader or alter ego that is expected to shun literal readings in favour of vertical, deeper ones. Concomitantly, it demonstrates how Conrad is constantly torn between a liberal approach that encourages the readers to derive autonomously their own meanings and an insidious didactic impulse subtly guiding their interpretation. This ambiguity is manifest in such works as *Lord Jim*, 'Heart of Darkness', and *Under Western Eyes*. My belief is that the evoked ambivalent process testifies to Conrad's perception of the ideal reader as both a discerning consumer of textual truths and a responsible producer of literary meaning.

For all its ambivalence and elitism, Conrad's theory of reader response in the end seeks to make the reader a dynamic partner and active collaborator in the construction of textual meaning. As he explicitly declared in his letters, Conrad expects his readers to be active, if not simply to become co-authors 'writing the other half of the book'. Conrad's perception of the reader as a dynamic, creative agency, intimated in this statement, can easily be discerned in his fiction; most prominently in such works as *Under Western Eyes* and *Lord Jim*, which are examined in detail in Chapter 8. This chapter focuses on narrative self-consciousness and the act of reading, which it assesses from a comparative perspective. It analyses these key issues in *Under Western Eyes* and *Lord Jim* in the light of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist*. Meanwhile, it explores the methods and implications of these authors' handling of the issues of narrative self-consciousness, narrator-narratee relationship, stage theatrics, ethics of denegation, and irony. Basically, this chapter uncovers the ways in which narrative self-consciousness forms both a privileged mode of representation and a fundamental epistemic tool. It testifies to Conrad's complex process of storytelling and theory of transmission and reception of knowledge.

Under Western Eyes and *Lord Jim* are by far Conrad's most sophisticated novels in regard to narrative method and, above all, to reader-response analysis. Through a close examination of the narrator-narratee and implied author-reader relationships in *Under Western Eyes*, I highlight the ways in which Conrad frames a reader theory that echoes the narrative methods of Sterne and Diderot in *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques the*

Fatalist. The major concern consists of investigating the implications and paradoxes of these deftly orchestrated technical devices.

Conrad's articulation of the reader's pact in his novels is highly sophisticated, to say the least. It is certainly much more elaborate than it is in Sterne's work, which might have inspired Conrad. In *Under Western Eyes* in particular the reader's pact is based principally on the art of self-denegation, dramatized from the novel's outset. The narrator openly disclaims all powers of imagination and further denies possessing the capacity to make the merest transition. This declaration implicitly deems the narrator, and via the narrator the writer, a helpless mediator of his fictional universe. At first glance, this assertion supposes the idea of authorial demise prominent in modern criticism. However, given the language teacher's omnipresence and his constant comments and generalizations about the Russians, this implicit authorial demise announced in the first pages turns out to be no more than a rhetorical device. It is mostly intended to elicit the readers' interest and spur them into active participation in the tale.

The ethics of denegation, on which *Under Western Eyes* rests, is a powerful narrative strategy with far-reaching implications with regard to both authorship and reader theory. While uncovering the motives of Conrad's ethics of denegation, I demonstrate that this rhetorical orchestration is a strong, dramatic gesture of affirmation rather than a sheer case of renunciation or denial. In the process, I show how Conrad's recourse to the rhetoric of denegation – along with artifice, irony, and dramatic devices – serves to provoke and shock the reader into active participation in the process of meaning-making. This is strongly implied in the novel's very structure. More exactly, Conrad's narrative method in *Under Western Eyes* is staged in a manner that makes the work appear as a text in progress anticipating the reader's active collaboration.

As evidenced by the various theoretical devices evoked earlier, Conrad in this novel – and more generally in his writing – conceives of the reader as an entity in-the-making or state of becoming. He constructs the reader as a significant agency that should not only be constantly stimulated and interested in the story, but also compelled into collaboration and scriptural solidarity with the author. However, judging from his sophisticated narrative method we may rightly argue that Conrad in *Under Western Eyes* postulates a highly competent reader. He projects in this novel a reader who is apt to participate actively with the narrator/implied author in the arduous intellectual gymnastics suggested from the novel's start.

Part I

Theoretical Perspectives

