

# Joseph Conrad

## *Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*

JEREMY HAWTHORN

*Professor of Modern British Literature  
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*For Bjørg*

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Joseph Conrad

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Jeremy Hawthorn  
University of Trondheim, Norway  
November, 1989

# A Note on References and Abbreviations

Conrad's work presents some problems to the literary critic wishing to quote from it. Conrad makes frequent use of ellipses, and it is frequently necessary to distinguish between his ellipses and those which represent the critic's omissions. In common with other recent studies of Conrad I use double-spaced ellipses to represent Conrad's own ellipses, and single-spaced ones to represent my own omissions from his text. All ellipses in quotations from writers other than Conrad represent my own abbreviation of the text unless otherwise indicated.

Conrad's 'Marlow' works also offer some additional difficulties. The standard Dent Collected Edition sets an opening inverted comma at the start of each paragraph 'spoken' by Marlow, but only at the end of full passages of narration. For the purpose of clarity, I have enclosed all quotations spoken by Marlow in opening and closing inverted commas. In common with current British practice I have used single inverted commas where the Dent Collected Edition uses double ones, and vice-versa.

All quotations from Conrad's works are from the Dent Collected Edition, and from the initial printing rather than from reset editions. The plates of this edition are photographically reproduced with some minor corrections in the recent World's Classics edition of some of Conrad's works published by OUP. Where such World's Classics editions exist I have checked quotations against them so as to include any minor corrections made to the text.

The following abbreviations have been used.

AF	<i>Almayer's Folly</i>
OI	<i>An Outcast of the Islands</i>
NOTN	<i>The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'</i>
TOU	<i>Tales of Unrest</i>
LJ	<i>Lord Jim</i>
HOD	<i>Heart of Darkness</i>
TEOTT	<i>The End of the Tether</i>
MOS	<i>The Mirror of the Sea</i>
SA	<i>The Secret Agent</i>
SSix	<i>A Set of Six</i>
UWE	<i>Under Western Eyes</i>

APR	<i>A Personal Record</i>
SL	<i>The Shadow-Line</i>
NLL	<i>Notes on Life and Letters</i>
TOH	<i>Tales of Hearsay</i>
LE	<i>Last Essays</i>
CLJC 1/2/3	Frederick R. Karl & Laurence Davies (eds.), <i>The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad</i> , vol. 1 1861-1897, Cambridge, CUP, 1983; vol. 2 1898-1902, Cambridge, CUP, 1986; vol. 3 1903-1907, Cambridge, CUP, 1988.
JCLL1 & 2	G. Jean-Aubry, <i>Joseph Conrad Life and Letters</i> , vols 1 & 2, London, Heinemann, 1927.
LCG	C. T. Watts (ed.), <i>Joseph Conrad's Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham</i> , London, CUP, 1969.

# Introduction

The value of creative work of any kind is in the *whole* of it. Till that is seen no judgment is possible. Questions of phrasing and such like – *technique* – may be discussed upon a fragmentary examination; but phrasing, expression – *technique* in short has importance only when the Conception of the whole has a significance of its own apart from the details that go to make it up . . .

(CLJC 2, p. 332)

This comment – from a 1901 letter to Ford Madox Ford – provides ample confirmation of Joseph Conrad's understanding that technical skill and virtuosity were not alone sufficient to guarantee 'the value of creative work of any kind'. Conrad's development as a novelist involves the maturing and refinement of a variety of technical skills, but until and unless these are complemented and subtended by a larger vision and commitment – a 'conception of the whole' – they do not result in great art.

The present book is concerned with certain specific aspects of this interplay between technical accomplishment and artistic conception. Since the publication of my first book on Conrad in 1979, I have become increasingly engaged by the dialectic between the consummate control of narrative distance and perspective in Conrad's greatest fiction, and the moral and human commitment which this control serves. Put another way: I am fascinated by the productive interaction between an extreme flexibility and mobility of narrative on the one hand, and a rootedness of *moral and human* commitment on the other. This interests me partly because I see it as so central to Conrad's achievement, but also because it reminds us of what is perhaps *the* central problem of modernist fiction: how is the modern novelist to prevent a multi-perspectival view of the world (or even a view of 'the world' as inescapably constituted by and divided between multiple perspectives upon it) from degenerating into relativism, solipsism, and (very soon after) triviality? In my previous book on Conrad I argued that although recognizably modernist in many ways and prone to those solipsistic fears we associate with writers such as Pirandello, Joyce and Woolf, Conrad is essentially a materialist rather than an idealist, possessed of an unshakeable belief in the existence of a world independent of its perception by human beings.<sup>1</sup> I still believe this to be the case, and feel that it is one of the factors which determined that although Conrad was arguably the first great modernist novelist in the English language, his



major fiction avoids many of the blind alleys of subsequent modernist (not to mention post-modernist) writing.

This is not all that original an observation. Ian Watt expressed a comparable opinion when, talking of the ways in which Conrad is both more contemporary and more old-fashioned than his modern peers, he explained

Old-fashioned because Conrad's movement towards the ageless solidarities of human experience was much commoner among the Romantics and Victorians. But the first half of his life had forced Conrad to see that his problematic dependence on others was a necessary condition for the very existence of the individual self; and so during the second half of his life his imagination was impelled, in many different ways, to confront a more contemporary question, and one which was not to be of any particular concern to the other great figures of modern literature: 'Alienation, of course; but how do we get out of it?'<sup>2</sup>

The alienation with which Conrad engaged in his fiction forced certain techniques upon him. If he were fully to explore a world in which the experience of alienation was endemic, his fiction would have to be possessed of a maximal flexibility of narrative perspective. The isolated and hidden centres of consciousness, experience, and power of this world would have to be persuaded to give up their secrets to a narrative that could pass where no non-fictional consciousness could freely enter. But unless his narrative maintained some fixed reference points – moral, evaluative, human – this supreme narrative mobility would be to no avail, would have no justifying goal, would be lost in experiential space.

Now in one sense what I have said so far, although it clearly reflects very important advances in the theory of narrative that have been attained during the past decade or so, does not chime with a broadly based consensus amongst many of those theorists of narrative who have been influenced by Structuralist ideas. I talk of Conrad, rather than of his narrators, 'narrative voices', dominant ideologies, or whatever. Did not such theorists as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault long ago announce the death of the author and conclude that the ceremony of the funeral was over?

Nevertheless, I start not just with Conrad's fiction, but with Conrad and (and in) his fiction. For what I have to say of technique and commitment in Conrad's works has a polemical relevance to developments in modern narrative theory. This theory has been of enormous value to our understanding of fiction through its painstaking and detailed isolation of productive technical distinctions. But in its tendency to limit itself to such work and, indeed, to deny the worth of more traditional moral approaches to literature which insist upon the human situation and responsibilities of reader and writer – including what Conrad calls 'the conception of the

whole' (and he means the writer's conception) – it risks enslaving its undoubted insights to a variety of more or less trivial ends. This is not to suggest that I recognize no discontinuities between an author's everyday beliefs, attitudes and commitments, and those beliefs, attitudes and commitments which crystallize artistically in the creative moment; clearly there are such discontinuities – and not least so far as Conrad is concerned. But these discontinuities are not absolute. They involve processes of mediation, transformations of vision, which join the human being's and the writer's insights and ideologies. We should trust the tale rather than the teller, but narrative transformations of extra-literary visions serve as links between tale and teller.

No modern critic of the novel can fail to be radically indebted to the work of those modern narrative theorists who have established not just a detailed vocabulary for the isolation and investigation of significant narrative detail, but also that set of fundamental insights which lies behind this vocabulary. To this work I am happy to acknowledge a substantial debt. And yet the insights of which I speak have themselves, I believe, to be complemented by another 'conception of the whole'. In his essay, 'Structure and History in Narrative Perspective: The Problem of Point of View Reconsidered',<sup>3</sup> Robert Weimann insists that the question of the novelist's relationship with his or her work (and, by implication, with the world that the work engages with), and the narrator's relationship with the story told, cannot be divorced from each other. He concludes that

In the act of telling his story, the teller of the tale is faced, not simply with a series of technical problems and not only with the rhetorical task of communication, but with a world full of struggle and change where the writer, in order to transmute his story into art, has constantly to reassess his relations to society as both a social and an aesthetic act. In the process of doing this, he will find that his own experience as an artist in history is so related to the social whole that the flexibility (which involves the precariousness) of this relationship itself is the basis on which representation and evaluation are integrated through point of view.<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me that at his greatest Conrad is always able, as Weimann puts it, to reassess his relations to society as both a social and an aesthetic act – and a key word here is *relations*. In his finest fiction, however impeccably skilled Conrad's manipulation of narrative perspective, he never forgets that a perspective is a relationship, *on* something or somebody *from* a particular human consciousness and situation. But not all of Conrad's fiction attains this level of achievement, and in subsequent chapters I will try to show how the loss of his moral or ideological anchorage is artistically disastrous to Conrad, however skilled his manipulation of narrative perspective may be. Weimann argues that although the modern novelist is

unable to attain to the 'wholeness' available to earlier novelists, he or she can yet achieve an element of integrity through the linking of representation and evaluation. This seems to me to be one of the essential sources of Conrad's artistic and aesthetic integrity, and how it is achieved without unartistic intrusiveness is worthy of investigation.

Given the somewhat all-embracing nature of my comments so far, the topic of my first chapter might appear somewhat limited. To focus in on one particular element in Conrad's armoury of narrative techniques, and in such detail and at such great length, may on first sight appear perverse. But represented speech and thought is not just a technique of minor significance in Conrad's fiction (or in the novel in general); it is a crucially important means whereby narrative flexibility is not only enormously refined and extended, but also linked to the author's evaluative and moral commitments. By following Conrad's developing use of represented speech and thought from *Almayer's Folly* through to *Chance*, I hope to be able to illustrate the way in which a technique which is central to his artistic achievement is useless when detached from an intellectually active moral consciousness. I will argue, moreover, that essential technical decisions concerning the use of represented speech and thought have their moral and ideological side; to put it crudely, to determine what the narrative knows and in what ways it knows what it knows, the author has to engage with the question of what the narrative – and, thus, indirectly, the author – believes and is committed to.

In three chapters I suggest that artistic failure or, at least, incomplete success, in Conrad's fiction is typically related to a failure on precisely this point: a failure to determine what values the narrative espouses or underwrites. And although such failures are not *mechanically* related to problems in Conrad's own system of beliefs and moral commitments, as I argue in my second, third and fourth chapters (on Conrad and social class, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, and *Chance*) there certainly is a relationship between Conrad's own hesitations and uncertainties, and artistic flaws in his fiction.

Hesitations and uncertainties are common to us all, of course, and in the case of many of the greatest artists they fuel the creative act. In a famous comment in one of his letters Keats defined what he called *negative capability* – the quality he believed went to form 'a Man of Achievement' – as the capability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. The writer who has no doubts is hardly worth reading. But the hesitations and uncertainties that I see harming some of Conrad's works of fiction are moral and intellectual hesitations and doubts that are disfiguring, and in the chapters in question I will attempt to show why this seems to me to be so. A couple of preliminary answers are possible. Firstly, that a writer's choice of subject

presupposes some sort of commitment to certain human values. It is not that the writer has to know all the answers, but that he or she should have some commitment to why the question or questions are important. And secondly, that where legitimate doubts and hesitations exist, then the narrative has either to *dramatize* them as I argue they are dramatized in *Heart of Darkness* but not in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, or acknowledge their existence and incorporate them into the artistic vision of the work as Conrad does in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* but not in *The Rescue* or *Chance*. The discovery of Marlow clearly plays a crucial rôle here, but there are other factors to consider in addition. In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *The Rescue* and *Chance*, Conrad's failures to resolve (among other things) political and moral problems relating to race, class and gender, are disabling because the problems concerned require either a commitment from the author, or an artistic acknowledgement and dramatization of his inability to attain such a commitment. In the absence of such a 'conception of the whole', technical flexibility in the manipulation of artistic perspective becomes less a virtue and more akin to moral or intellectual vacillation.

In the three great works concerned with imperialism the story is quite different. 'An Outpost of Progress', *Heart of Darkness* and *Nostromo* weld an assured human and moral commitment on to a mature flexibility of technical perspective. Indeed, the flexibility owes much to this commitment, for it is this which tells the narrative where to go, what to look for, and how to judge what is found.

*Typhoon*, as I suggest in my chapter on this work, again shows Conrad almost self-consciously manipulating his narrative so as to obtain maximal flexibility of perspective. His adaptation of epistolary techniques in this work is powerfully linked to an investigation into the rôle of the imagination as enabling and disabling force. The ability to manipulate narrative perspective is thus linked to the imaginative act itself, that act of putting ourselves into the position of another person which is at the root of all moral discrimination and decision.

My chapter on *Under Western Eyes* may seem to concern itself with a somewhat abstruse element within the work. But Conrad's portrayal of non-linguistic, non-intellectual forms of human expression and communication is such as to remind us that imaginative sympathy with others has more than one route that can be followed. There is a comment in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* which is relevant to my interest in Conrad's concern with bodily communication in *Under Western Eyes*: 'let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and colour'. We recognize the humanity of others, and express aspects of ourselves for them, in bodily and physical as well as linguistic and intellectual ways. These are also ways of obtaining a perspective on people and events,

familiar to us all but too often forgotten. Conrad is not so much concerned with shibboleths of caste and colour in *Under Western Eyes*, but he is concerned with political oppression, and the moral dilemmas which are attendant upon political action, especially in a society that imposes secrecy on its members.

The very title of this work – arguably Conrad's last novel to achieve full artistic greatness – focuses our attention on to the issue of perspective, both human and narrative. What we see is related to where we are looking from. And in its concern with the paradox that to escape from alienation we must make moral choices which require the sort of many-sided perspective on events which we can rarely achieve precisely because of our alienation, the novel forces us to see the relevance of Razumov's experiences to ourselves. Like Razumov, we live in a world in which other people are sometimes reduced to a collection of disembodied parts, and in which our own thoughts and opinions do not match our experience of the world. To escape from an intolerable situation we must have the imaginative flexibility to interpret a world in which important truths are given to us only in the form of incomplete clues. But it is not enough to learn techniques of interpretation unless we have an unalienated ideal to which these techniques are subservient – as Razumov discovers. We need 'a conception of the whole' which is moral rather than purely technical.

In *A Personal Record* Conrad admitted that

[W]hat is interesting to a writer is the possession of an inward certitude that literary criticism will never die, for man (so variously defined) is, before everything else, a critical animal. (APR, p. 96)

Our critical impulse drives us, like Razumov, to perfect better and better techniques of interpretation. But unless we have learned to put these techniques at the disposal of a determining moral intelligence, we will never exploit their potential for human betterment. Razumov learns this in the course of *Under Western Eyes*, and his discovery reflects a comparable discovery made by his creator at the level of his artistic creativity.

In my chapter on 'The Tale' I see this relatively neglected work of Conrad's to be concerned with related issues, but with a difference. What are the moral implications of our discovery that our powers of imaginative penetration are (as they necessarily are) limited? What if the writer of fiction puts his or her reader into a situation where the limits of imaginative perception can be vicariously experienced? What moral and intellectual conclusions can be drawn? Whereas in *Under Western Eyes* the reader habitually observes Razumov from a position of privileged knowledge, in 'The Tale' the narrator's ignorance of certain key matters parallels our own. Decoding here is less delayed than permanently

postponed, and this act of postponement leaves the reader in a position familiar to every human being. Thus although 'The Tale' is undoubtedly a minor work in the canon of Conrad's fiction, and one with shortcomings familiar in other of his works which are recognizably melodramatic to a greater or lesser extent, in the history of Conrad's artistic grappling with the aesthetic transformations of his own doubts, contradictions and ignorance, the work has a summarizing and concluding importance which, I hope, justifies its closer study.

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- 1 Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-consciousness*, London, Arnold, 1979, p. 15.
- 2 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Chatto, 1980.
- 3 In Robert Weimann, *Structure and Society in Literary History*, Charlottesville, UP of Virginia, 1976.
- 4 Weimann, p. 237.

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# 1

## Seeing and Believing: Represented Speech and Thought in Conrad's Fiction

### Introductory: what is represented speech and thought?

Tracing the development of Conrad's use of a particular narrative technique through his most productive years as a writer of fiction may seem a somewhat dull technical exercise. But a study of this particular narrative technique is unusually revealing. For in choosing how to represent the speech, thought, consciousness of his or her characters, a novelist simultaneously makes crucial choices regarding the attitude that the narrative takes to them. And at the same time, the novelist reveals something of his or her attitudes to the story told, something of his or her own values and commitments. All such choices, like the choices a film director makes concerning camera placing and angle, allow a novelist to include some things and to exclude others; they have a determining effect upon the mood and tone of the story in question, and they *situate* the reader in a particular way, not just with regard to technical perspective, but also with regard to moral and human viewpoint. A novelist's decision concerning what the reader knows and how he or she knows it inevitably has a bearing on a range of issues: the relationship between narrative and story,<sup>1</sup> the relationship between writer and reader, the relationship between writer and work, and the relationship between the writer and the world which inspires and receives his or her creative work.

But the technique I have referred to as represented speech and thought – more economically, Free Indirect Discourse<sup>2</sup> – is especially revelatory of an author's choices and commitments. It provides the writer of fiction with enormous narrative flexibility and mobility. With its help the narrative can not only move freely *to* any point of action or experience, but also *from* any one point in the work's implied value-system to another. Gérard Genette has familiarized us with the important distinction between perspective and voice, between 'who sees' and 'who speaks'. The distinction is not identical to that between technical and ideological perspective, but it has strong points of similarity. So that a study of an author's use of Free Indirect Discourse (henceforth FID) not only helps us to recognize what he or she is interested in revealing, but also from what standpoint – technical and evaluative – he or she wishes the reader to experience this revelation.



## 2 Joseph Conrad

FID is found neither in drama nor in non-narrative poetry. Conrad could have learned its use from any one of a whole range of novelists he is known to have read, but given the technique's apparently independent appearance in a number of different literatures no direct influence needs to be posited; it seems that it is one which emerges naturally in prose narrative. Conrad's use of the technique varies in range and extent very considerably from work to work. *Heart of Darkness* has hardly any examples of its use, while *The End of the Tether* has repeated and extensive ones. But although examples can be found throughout Conrad's writing career, one can observe Conrad developing and perfecting his use of the technique as he matures as a writer.

Let us start with the following passage:

'Kaspar! Makan!'

The well-known shrill voice startled Almayer from his dream of splendid future into the unpleasant realities of the present hour. An unpleasant voice too. He had heard it for many years, and with every year he liked it less. No matter; there would be an end to all this soon. (AF, p. 3)

The initial few lines of *Almayer's Folly*, Conrad's first published work, also represent the first published example in his fiction of FID. We can note that the opening lines of the novel move from Direct Speech, through what is clearly a statement from an extra-mimetic<sup>3</sup> narrative perspective, to sentences which give us Almayer's own thought processes, but in a rather special form. 'An unpleasant voice too. He had heard it for many years, and with every year he liked it less'. These two sentences *could* be read as continuing the detached statements of an extra-mimetic (or even omniscient) narrator. But the final sentence quoted above exhibits the classic features of FID, and reacts back on the two sentences preceding it, making it clear that they too belong to this characteristic form of narrative.

'No matter; there would be an end to all this soon'. Dorrit Cohn, in her book *Transparent Minds*, suggests that FID 'may be most succinctly defined as the technique for rendering a character's thought in their own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration'.<sup>4</sup> We know that the above sentence does not come from the narrator – at least, we can be quite sure of this upon rereading the novel – because the narrator knows very well that there will *not* be an end to 'all this' soon; it is Almayer's mistaken assumption that this is the case. But even upon initial reading of the novel most readers will respond to certain signs that tell them that they are reading FID. What are these signs? Firstly, the truncated form of the sentence such as 'An unpleasant voice too', which we take as typical of spoken English and thus – by implication – of a character's mode of thinking. Such truncation is not normally