

## FROM NARRATOR TO NARRATEE AND FROM AUTHOR TO READER: CONRAD AND HIS AUDIENCE

**Jakob Lothe**

Oslo University

Conrad was acutely aware of his audience. He knew that as readers we often misread and misunderstand; he was also possessed of the knowledge that, seen from his perspective as a writer, the narrative communication between author and reader is unstable and fragile. Moreover, Conrad of course also knew, and accepted, that readers read differently, and that there is no such thing as a “master reading.”

In this essay I want to argue that, partly because of his recognition of the difficulties and challenges pertaining to written and oral communication, partly because of the intrinsic complexity of what he wanted to say, Conrad sought to develop narrative strategies in ways which could enhance the possibility of meaningful communicative contact. By “meaningful” I mean a form of reading that responds, however imperfectly and incompletely, to the fictional work’s “textual intention” (Chatman 1990, 104; cf. Lothe 2000, 19), that is the intention which the reader can extrapolate from the verbal discourse (the story as the author presents it). Seen thus, textual intention approaches the intention of the implied author – the image of the author in the text. Even though we cannot ascertain the textual intention of, say, *Heart of Darkness*, we can arguably identify and discuss several of its constituent elements – not least those engendered and formed by the text’s narrative devices and structural characteristics.

One premise for my argument, then, is that although we read differently, there are ways in which narrative, and certainly Conradian narrative, manipulates our reading and understanding of the verbal discourse. At the same time, Conradian narrative includes interesting examples of fictional texts, or passages of texts, which are understood very differently by different readers. In this essay I want, first, to consider how Conrad uses narrative to shape our reading of three of his most important fictional texts. Second, I will comment on the ways in which, in the case of *Heart of Darkness* in particular, elements of narrative seem to distort or complicate textual intention – or perhaps rather make readers disagree about the work’s textual intention. My critical

strategy is text-oriented and selective in that I consider just a few, though arguably very important, passages from *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, and *Nostromo*. I will pay particular attention to the relationship between author, narrator, narratee, implied reader (or authorial audience), and actual or historical reader.

Turning to *Heart of Darkness* while bearing my introductory remarks in mind, I start by asking a seemingly simple question: how can two distinguished black novelists read the same text by Conrad so differently? The readers I am thinking of are Chinua Achebe, born in Nigeria in 1930 and one of the most highly regarded of African writers in English, and the younger writer Caryl Phillips, born in the West Indies in 1958 and brought up in Leeds. In a remarkable interview with Achebe, made by Phillips and published in *The Guardian* in 2003, it becomes clear that these two authors – similar as they are as regards both profession, sex, and ethnic affiliation – read *Heart of Darkness* in very different ways. In actual fact, their divergent readings of the same text turn out to be a main purpose of the interview: an admirer of Conrad, Phillips meets Achebe to defend the creator of *Heart of Darkness*, the author famously described by Achebe as “a bloody racist” in a lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, on 18 February 1977 (Achebe 2006, 343). It soon emerges, however, that Achebe has not changed his mind: one of his first statements in the interview is that

The man would appear to be obsessed with “that” word.

Nigger.

Achebe nods.

He has an admiration of the white skin. It is the whiteness that he likes, and he is obsessed with the physicality of the negro.

For Achebe, the word “nigger” is right at the centre of *Heart of Darkness*; indeed, it is as though this very word infiltrates the emptiness or vacuity towards which, in his classic essay on Conrad’s novella, Tzvetan Todorov finds that its narrative gravitates (Todorov 1978, 161–173). Even though I distance myself from Achebe’s forceful indictment, my main concern here is not disagreement. Rather, what intrigues me is why, and how, two readers approaching *Heart of Darkness* from similar positions can reach widely diverging interpretative results. One reason, and this point blends into my main argument, may be that Phillips, emerging as the more patient of these two readers, is less interested in the novella’s condensed “message” and more in what Edward W. Said has called its “presentation” – a narrative presentation which includes the shaping of the reader’s response. The following passage from the interview indicates how Phillips reads *Heart of Darkness*:

There are three remarkable journeys in *Heart of Darkness*. First, Marlow’s actual journey to Kurtz’s inner station. Second, the larger journey that Marlow takes us on from civilised Europe, back to the beginning of creation when nature reigned, and then back to civilised Europe. And finally, the journey that Kurtz undergoes as he sinks down through the many levels of the self to a place where he discovers unlawful and repressed ambiguities of civilisation.

In all three journeys, Conrad's restless narrative circles back on itself as though trapped in the complexity of the situation. The overarching question is, what happens when one group of people, supposedly more human than another group, attempts to impose themselves upon their "inferiors"? (3)

In contrast to Achebe, the distinguished novelist for whom Phillips has great respect (calling him "the father of African literature in the English language and undoubtedly one of the most important writers of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century"), Phillips focuses on Marlow. Going further, he highlights Marlow's journeys – including the ways in which they irresistibly blend into that of Kurtz. Thus he highlights what Cedric Watts, coining a useful phrase, has called the novella's tentacular effect: as readers we are pulled into the narrative, and this process – which Achebe resists but to which Phillips responds much more positively – underlies and shapes the narrative's gradual formation of our response as readers. Even though Phillips does not make this point explicitly, it seems to be implicit in his argument; indeed it forms a premise for his persuasive and thought-provoking comment that "Conrad's restless narrative circles back on itself."

I will briefly discuss four passages in which, in the restless narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad, working as a writer of fiction, uses the interplay of narrator and narratee as a means of shaping the relationship between implied author and authorial audience. The novella begins thus:

The *Nellie*, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth. (103)

...

And this also – said Marlow suddenly – has been one of the dark places of the earth. (105)

As David Gorman has suggested, the "distinguishability of narrator from author" is one of the "possible identifying criteria (or signposts) for fiction" (Gorman 2005, 167). In combination with other fictional markers such as extensive use of dialogue, detemporalized use of verb tenses and paratextual markers, using a distinguishable narrator is one of the ways in which an author can create statements which are "intentionally untrue", that is fictional. Seen thus, *Heart of Darkness* is clearly a work of fiction. As a fictional text, Conrad's novella presents history, and the historical reality of imperialism, indirectly. One consequence of this indirect presentation is that the

narrative cannot be falsified in the way a historical account can; a related, and in one sense paradoxical, consequence is that the higher level of generality on which the fiction operates enhances the work's lasting relevance as a thoughtful and thought-provoking observation on historical events and processes. One important effect of the text's fictional status is that we need to distinguish between Conrad as author of the fiction and his two main narrators, the frame narrator and Marlow. To make this perhaps obvious point is not to argue that a narrator in a fictional work cannot represent his or her author's views, and in some important ways Marlow does so. And yet he needs to be more clearly distinguished from Conrad than Achebe seems to be willing to do.

As regards the frame narrator who is speaking in the first paragraph of *Heart of Darkness*, there is a striking sense in which his introductory function is linked to his combined roles of narratee and reader. His conventionality is striking. We note, for example, that he refers to London not only as the "biggest" town in the world – something which was true at the turn of the twentieth century, but also as the "greatest, town on earth" – something which also seemed true for most of those who lived in Britain at the time. Since such a view was representative not only of the group of sailors who become Marlow's narratees aboard the *Nellie*, Conrad makes a connection, right from the novella's opening paragraph, between the attitudes and conventionally accepted values of the frame narrator, the narratees, and the implied reader. By "implied reader" I mean the abstract notion of a reader responding to all the text's interpretative signals. My use of this concept is inspired by Wolfgang Iser's *Der implizite Leser*, and also by his accompanying volume *Der Akt des Lesens*. The abstract notion of implied reader resembles, and in one sense corresponds to, that of implied author. Since no such reader exists, and since our conception of an implied reader inevitably is coloured by our historically situated readings, the term's critical usefulness is sometimes contested. One possible way of looking at the implied reader is to say that while the implied author is an image of the author in the text, the implied reader is an image of the reader extractable from the interpretative signals and pointers which the text provides. Seen thus, the implied reader is closely related to James Phelan's concept of "authorial audience ... the author's ideal reader" (Phelan 2007, 4).

Relating these theoretical observations to *Heart of Darkness*, we note that the way in which Conrad presents the narrative situation on the *Nellie* initiates a process of listening and reading in which the attitudes, and gradually also the responses, of the narratees and the authorial audience are brought closer to each other. This facet of the novella's tentacular effect depends, as do various other narrative and thematic aspects of the text, on the productive combination of connection and contrast between the frame narrator's introduction and Marlow's opening remark: "'And this also,' said Marlow suddenly, 'has been one of the dark places of the earth'" (105). As critics have noted, this narrative variation is one of the most effective in Conrad's fiction overall. Marlow's comment exposes the frame narrator's relative naïvety and limited insight, thus prefiguring the complex, sombre implications of the tale he is about to

tell. Significantly, he goes on to refer to the Romans not just as conquerors but also as sedentary travellers, measuring the darkness of Britain against the brightness of imperial Rome. Moreover, not just referring to the darkness which the Romans encountered in Britain, Marlow's generalized statement also includes a proleptic reference to the narrative he is just starting, thus establishing a link between two vastly different geographical areas and two eras separated by nineteen hundred years. Suggesting a symmetrical structure suspended in time, and revolving round three centres of power (Rome, London, and the sepulchral city), Marlow's remark evokes a complex blend of travels north, south, up-river, and return. Already starting to shape a rhetoric designed to impress and persuade, it also signals his tendency to generalize from individual experience. As we sympathize with such an inclination, this characteristic feature of Marlow's narration becomes another subtle invitation to the authorial audience.

Employing a narrator is a distancing device, and Conrad here accentuates this distancing process by employing two narrators rather than one. Moreover, the use of a narrator, and in this case two very different ones, is one of the ways in which the novella is generically differentiated not just from the two non-fictional texts Conrad wrote in the Congo in 1890 – “Up-river Book” and “The Congo Diary”, both impeccably edited by Zdzisław Najder – but also from a large number of travel narratives from the second half of the nineteenth century. Exploiting the frame narrator's conventionality and ordinariness in order to make Marlow's story more engrossing, Conrad also suggests that his main narrator's understanding of the events he describes is, and indeed has to be, inadequate and partial. This, I argue, is also an interpretative signal. And yet Marlow's process of disillusionment, spiralling downwards towards a centre assuming the form of a blank, emptiness or vacuity, constitutes a painful learning process. Prompted by Marlow's trip to the Congo, this process of learning makes him see imperialism – and especially its negative consequences – in a new light. It is part of the textual intention of *Heart of Darkness* that once the reader has reached the end of the narrative, he or she is inclined (as authorial audience) to share Marlow's insight.

My second example illustrates Conrad's presentation of this painful insight – a kind of insight whose unpleasant consequences and implications we tend to resist or suppress:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (118)

Just before this passage, Marlow observes: “it seemed to me I had stepped into the gloomy circle of some Inferno” (118). Like Dante in the “Inferno” part of *Divina Commedia* (1321), Marlow has arrived in a hell distinguished by utter despair and unspeakable suffering. And yet, again like Dante, and like the reader, as a traveller Marlow can *move through* this hell, a hell on earth made possible by white Europeans exploiting the Blacks as slaves and working them to death (as did, about fifty years later, the Nazis in a concentration and extermination camp such as Auschwitz). That Marlow does very little in order to help the dying Blacks is of course morally dubious. But at least he is shocked by what he sees, and both he and Conrad have the courage to report the brutal acts with which they were confronted.

As Zdzisław Najder shows in *Conrad in Perspective*, the word “perspective” is imbued with different dimensions of meaning – both generally and when used about Conrad’s life and work. In narrative theory, perspective identifies the narrative agent that *sees*, rather than the one that *speaks*. The essential point here, first made by Gérard Genette in his still invaluable *Narrative Discourse*, is that although these two aspects of narrative often coalesce, they do not always or necessarily do so. To Genette’s insight I add that of Mieke Bal, who in the second edition of *Narratology* links perspective not just to seeing but also to perception (Bal 1997, 143) – including a character’s experience of being looked at and perhaps of looking back. Returning to our passage, we note that the predominant perspective here is double: looking at the dying Blacks, Marlow has a strong impression of a returning gaze, a gaze signifying not just suffering but also a silent protest and accusation. Magnified through fiction, this accusation is prompted by, and rooted in, a specific historical reality: that of slavery. As a result of this perspectival variation, not only the narratees’ position but also that of the authorial audience approximate to Marlow’s. And all positions are characterized by embarrassment, by a sense of failure, by a partial, inadequate yet painful, recognition of being implicated in evildoing on a colossal scale. There is a sense in which Marlow’s position here approximates to that of the bystander as defined and discussed by Arne Johan Vetlesen in *Evil and Human Agency*. Stressing that “*not acting is still acting*,” Vetlesen notes that “the failure to act when confronted with such action [i.e. genocide] is a failure that carries a message both to the agent and the sufferer: the action may proceed” (Vetlesen 2005, 237, original emphasis). Although Marlow senses that he ought to have done something, he finds that there is nothing he can do apart from offering one man “one of my good Swede’s ship’s biscuits I had in my pocket” (118); the effect is a strong embarrassment and a peculiarly unidentifiable sense of shame.

Even though Conrad presents Marlow’s narrative as an oral one, anchoring it in a narrative situation and making the narratees respond, briefly and at irregular intervals, to Marlow’s story, at the centre of the narrative there is a text written by the man Marlow is telling about:

All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had entrusted him with the making of a report, for its future guidance. And he had written it too. I've seen it. I've read it. It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. ... There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes!' (154–155)

Much has been written of this remarkable passage, drawing attention to, for example, the effective manner in which the last sentence undercuts the official rhetoric of European imperialist activity by exposing its inherent brutality and its systematic use of violence. The point I would like to make in support of my argument is that Marlow is here not just a narrator but also a *reader* – and his response as reader significantly influences the responses of the narratees and the authorial audience. I stress two elements of Marlow's reading of Kurtz's report. First, he experiences an enormous contrast between the two layers of text, with the accompanying realization that the last, added, textual layer is closer to truth than the first. If he is carried away, and at least partly convinced, by the report's elegant discourse and rhetorical effectiveness, he is genuinely shocked by the added "note." Experience is a key word here: Conrad not only presents Kurtz's added note as a shocking experience to Marlow but links this experience to that of the reader who is reading the same sentence as Marlow does. Here as in my other examples, not least that of Marlow's opening remark, there is a close connection between narrative form and the formation of the reader's experience: "Narrative form...is experienced through the temporal process of reading and responding to narrative" (Phelan 2007, 3). Second, we note the distancing effect of the irony which informs Marlow's narration here, most notably perhaps in the phrase "moving appeal." This function of irony is complex, and so are its effects on the reader. For Marlow, the ironic description may serve as a kind of defence mechanism, yet it can also reveal a failure to understand. As in the scene considered above, Marlow is bewildered, finding it exceedingly difficult to put his experience into words. As authorial audience we are invited to link these two textual segments to each other: in one distressing sense the dying Blacks with whom Marlow is suddenly confronted are also being exterminated.

My last comment on *Heart of Darkness* is prompted by the novella's concluding paragraph:

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (186–187)

With a view to the narrative's gradual formation of the reader's response, it is significant that the novella's ending both resembles and differs from its beginning. One significant point of resemblance concerns the word "offing," defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "The part of the sea at a distance from the shore beyond anchorage." The *OED* actually cites this particular sentence, that is a sentence from the concluding paragraph of a fictional text, as an illustrative example of nautical use of the word "offing." This is doubtless correct, yet I would suggest that – partly because of its positioning in the paragraph, partly because of the way in which it is linked to the verb "lead" – the word's figural meaning is also activated – not at the expense of, but as an addition to, the nautical meaning. Figuratively, "in the offing" means "nearby, at hand, imminent, likely to happen in the near future." Thus the spatial dimension of the nautical "offing" is semantically and thematically enriched by the temporal facet of its figural meaning. What is "in the offing" is "an immense darkness" absorbing not only Marlow, the narrator and his narratees but also, I would suggest, the reader. The story has become the darkness which Marlow is unable to impart to Kurtz's Intended, but which he has now managed to tell his narratees and the authorial audience.

At this point London has become part of the darkness, and even the Director, perhaps the most sceptical of Marlow's narratees, has become absorbed in the tale to the extent of losing his sense of time. I agree with Achebe that the meaning of "darkness," which ends the narrative by repeating the key word of its title, is essentially negative. And yet the thrust of Marlow's narrative, influencing and eventually including his narratees' response, is to link darkness to white men's violent actions, and to their systematic and repeated lies even to their most ardent supporters.

In the last part of this essay I want strengthen my argument by identifying and briefly discussing the interpretatively formative connection between narrators, narratees, and authorial audiences in the two major novels which Conrad produced just after having written *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo*. As Conrad's presentation of narrative is at its most sophisticated here, I focus on two particularly interesting passages in each novel. The first one from *Lord Jim* reads thus:

And later on, many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him at length, in detail and audibly.

Perhaps it would be after dinner, on a verandah draped in motionless foliage and crowned with flowers, in the deep dusk speckled by fiery cigar-ends. The elongated bulk of each cane-chair harboured a silent listener. Now and then a small red glow would move abruptly, and expanding light up the fingers of a languid hand, part of a face in profound repose, or flash a crimson gleam into a pair of pensive eyes overshadowed by a fragment of an unruffled forehead: and with the very first word uttered Marlow's body, extended at rest in the seat, would become very still, as though his spirit had winged its way into way back into the lapse of time and were speaking through his lips from the past. (24)

As in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow here seems effortlessly to assume the role of the traditional storyteller, imparting the story of Jim to his audience on the verandah.



Although on closer inspection we can see that this narrative community is presented as vulnerable, curiously fractured, I want to stress its forceful presence in the narrative situations, and thus also in the narrative discourse, of *Lord Jim*. Though fragile and anachronistic – or perhaps rather, to extend my allusion to Walter Benjamin’s classic essay “The Storyteller,” belated – this narrative situation and storytelling community on the verandah provide an oblique, fictionalized illustration of the human need not only to tell stories but also to listen to them.

Even though the Marlow of *Lord Jim* needs to be distinguished from the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, there is a striking similarity between this narrative situation and that established at the beginning of the novella. In some ways the two groups of narratees resemble each other more strikingly than the two Marlows do. In the narrative situation on the verandah as well as in that of the *Nellie*, two characteristic features of Marlow’s narratees are, first, that they are silent, and second, that they are patient. Both of these qualities contribute to, and signal, Conrad’s careful positioning of his authorial audience. In *Lord Jim*, however, the element of repetition is even more important than in *Heart of Darkness*. Revealing the narrative’s hold on the narratees, it connects the repetitive telling to Marlow’s sustained focus on Jim. When some critics claimed that the novel’s main narrative situation is too long-drawn-out to be credible, Conrad showed some irritation, defending his narrative strategy (“Author’s Note,” 5) and indirectly highlighting the mechanics of repetitive narration.

The second quotation from *Lord Jim* differs from the first in two significant ways:

With these words Marlow had ended his narrative, and his audience had broken up forthwith, under his abstract, pensive gaze. Men drifted off the verandah in pairs or alone without loss of time, without offering a remark, as if the last image of that incomplete story, its incompleteness itself, and the very tone of the speaker, had made discussion vain and comment impossible. Each of them seemed to carry away his own impression, to carry it away with him like a secret; but there was only one man of all these listeners who was ever to hear the last word of the story. It came to him at home, more than two years later, and it came contained in a thick packet addressed in Marlow’s upright and angular handwriting.

The privileged man opened the packet, looked in, then, laying it down, went to the window. His rooms were in the highest flat of a lofty building, and his glance could travel afar beyond the clear panes of glass, as though he were looking out of the lantern of a lighthouse. (200)

First, we note the transition from a repetitive oral narrative to a singulative written one. The last part of the story is written by Marlow in isolation. As a narrator who is not the member of a narrative community, he is here in a position similar to that of Benjamin’s modern writer. Second, although the privileged reader was a member of the group of narratees on the verandah, he is now alone. As he is just one reader, in one sense he would seem to be further removed from the authorial audience than the group addressed by Marlow earlier on in the narrative. And yet his role as the recipient of Marlow’s letter is significant. Since he is privileged we are too: we are manoeu-

vred into a position of an attentive authorial audience, even though our situation as actual or historical readers is very different from that of the privileged reader.

Combining the oral narratives about Jim with a written one enables Conrad to create a more diversified authorial audience in *Lord Jim*. While the group of narratees on the verandah is patient and interested, the privileged reader reveals an involvement in Jim's case which is possessed of a distinctly existential dimension, and which thus approximates to Marlow's attitude. After having manipulated his authorial audience into a position in which we sympathize and perhaps even identify with the attitude to the story shown by the narratees on the verandah, Conrad asks us to become privileged readers. As authorial audience we respond positively to the confidence signalled by this kind of invitation. Thus we strengthen our commitment to the story, and to Marlow's narration of it, in order to share the privileged reader's experience of reading Marlow's account of Jim's adventures in Patusan.

In *Heart of Darkness* as in *Lord Jim*, Conrad shapes the response and understanding of his authorial audience in many ways. Although several of these techniques have not been identified in this essay, I hope to have shown that one effective manner in which Conrad manipulates the reader is by linking our response to Marlow's story to the narratees' response to the same story. That Conrad is closely related to and yet not identical with Marlow is a point, and an issue, which becomes particularly conspicuous in *Heart of Darkness*, and to which I will return in the conclusion. One significant aspect of the relationship between author and reader in *Lord Jim* is that, as we have seen, the privileged reader is both very different from and yet similar to the group of narratees on the verandah – and Conrad wants us to sympathize and partly identify with both these facets of the privileged reader's attitude to Jim's story as Marlow tells it.

The relation between Marlow and one or more narratees addressed within the fictional universe presupposes Conrad's use of a first-person narrative in which the narrator is also a character who can communicate with other characters (who can also function as narratees). In order to show how Conrad can manipulate his authorial audience in third-person narratives as well, I want to close by commenting on two textual passages from *Nostramo*. In this complex novel – “the most deeply meditated of the longer novels” (xv), as he put it in his “Author's Note” – the author's principal narrative instrument is a third-person narrator who is not part of the plot as a character on the diegetic level of action, and who therefore would appear to be further removed both from the narratees (who in third-person narratives tend to be implied rather than explicitly addressed) and from the authorial audience. And yet the third-person narrator in *Nostramo* is also a powerful instrument when it comes to addressing and shaping the authorial audience, not least because of his extraordinary mobility and constantly changing perspective. A third-person narrator need not be inhuman; on the contrary, we are repeatedly struck by the narrator's human care and interest in the condition of workers. The narrator's ideological and ethical positioning resembles that of the sensitive and intelligent Mrs Gould, one of the novel's most intriguing

characters. As readers we feel convergent with these ideas, which unsurprisingly are less susceptible to the third-person narrator's infiltrating and sometimes scathing irony than those of many other characters in the novel.

Moreover, at significant crossroads of the complex plot of *Nostromo* the third-person narrator, a flexible narrative instrument in the service of Conrad as author, can temporarily move closer to the reader. Two textual examples illustrate different facets of this narrative variation. The first is from the beginning of chapter 8 of Part I:

Those of us whom business or curiosity took to Sulaco in these years before the first advent of the railway can remember the steadying effect of the San Tomé mine upon the life of that remote province. The outward appearances had not changed then as they have changed since, as I am told, with cable cars running along the street of the Constitution, and carriage roads far into the country, to Rincón and other villages, where the foreign merchants and the Ricos generally have their modern villas, and vast railway goods yard by the harbour, which has a quay-side, a long range of warehouses, and quite serious, organised labour troubles of its own. (95)

Even though the "us" and "I" in this passage appear in order to disappear, the personal pronouns are important in documenting that the narrator has actually visited Costaguana. This kind of fictional documentation is closely related to, and significantly increases, the narrator's authority and reliability. Furthermore, it brings him closer to the narratee – and thus by implication to the reader as well.

Conrad's work is distinguished by an original kind of, and need for, authenticity which is partly fictional, partly historical and cultural. One aspect of Conradian authenticity concerns the narrator's and implied author's need for relevant knowledge of the issues and topics which are to be presented as narrative fiction. In contrast to his friend Cunninghame Graham, who had travelled extensively in South America, Conrad's knowledge of this continent was slight. Writing *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad could base the fiction on his visit to the Congo in 1890, and he could impart knowledge gained during that trip to Marlow as first-person narrator. Writing *Lord Jim*, he profited from his many voyages to the East. Conversely, the use of a traveller as third-person narrator in *Nostromo* required extensive reading and research in order to give the narrator the knowledge which the flesh-and-blood author in this case did not have. As Cedric Watts has shown in his fine study of *Nostromo*, Conrad drew on a variety of sources: information from Cunninghame Graham; the *Mémoires de Garibaldi*, the Italian patriot who had gained fame in South America as a military commander defending Montevideo against the Argentinians; Ramón Páez's *Wild Scenes in South America* (1863), G.F. Masterman's *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay* (1869), and several more. Strikingly, as Watts notes, Conrad's reading was primarily historical. However, Conrad intuitively read what he felt he needed in order to produce the novel. This is another way of saying that, when he started composing *Nostromo*, his basis for writing the novel was already strong because he could use, change, and mould into fiction parts of what he had read. Moreover, this knowledge was unavoidably, and very productively, blended with various aspects of Conrad's past experience

including all three major phases of his life: as a child in Poland (a country also subjected to imperialist exploitation), as a sailor, and as a writer. There is a link, oblique yet significant, between Conrad's reading before writing *Nostromo* and his shaping and manipulation of the authorial audience in the course of the narrative. One important constituent element of this connection is the narrative's insistent invitation to the authorial audience: the narrative discourse repeatedly asks us to trust the third-person narrator's impressions, observations, and value judgements. One significant consequence of this kind of invitation is that as authorial audience we link the third-person narrator's sceptical attitude, including his attitudinal distance from the events presented, to the attitude of the implied author.

Yet although the novel's pervasive scepticism is inseparable from the third-person narrator, it is also expressed in other ways, not least by characters such as Decoud, Mrs Gould and Dr Monygham. Consider this example:

His favourite sister, the handsome, slightly arbitrary and resolute angel, ruling the father and mother Decoud in the first-floor apartments of a very fine Parisian house, was the recipient of Martin Decoud's confidences as to his thoughts, actions, purposes, doubts, and even failures.

...

Prepare our little circle in Paris for the birth of another South American Republic. One more or less, what does it matter? (223)

This is the beginning of Decoud's long letter to his sister, who lives in exile in Paris and, thinks Decoud, understands him better than perhaps any other human being. This letter is the most significant narrative variation in the novel. I have emphasized the importance of the third-person narrator's mobility and changing perspective. Here Conrad makes his narrator add a personal voice and perspective: he makes one of his main characters a first-person narrator by incorporating a letter, a narrative in its own right, into the novel's overall narrative texture.

Just as Conrad's privileging of Decoud's letter suggests a curious affinity between this character and his creator, it also privileges Decoud's sister as narratee. As a narratee living in a European metropolis, Decoud's sister is in a situation closer to that of the authorial audience. Like Decoud and his sister, Conrad well knew what it meant to be an exile. Exile involves travel, distance and loss, but as Decoud's letter shows it can also further personal, social, and moral (or ethical) commitment. This blend of sceptical detachment and moral involvement is central to the thematics of *Nostromo*.

Concluding, I make three points. First, although historical readers' responses to, and interpretations of, the same fictional text unavoidably differ, we are obliged to consider (i.e. not overlook or ignore) the interpretative signals which the narrative discourse provides. This kind of obligation, which is a constituent element of the reading of fiction, is possessed of an ethical dimension. As J. Hillis Miller has observed, there is "a necessary ethical moment in [the] act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor impersonal, but properly and indepen-

dently ethical” (Miller 1987, 1). Although (and in one sense because) we are cognizant of this ethical moment, however, our response to the text’s interpretative signals may make us critical of its overall ethical stance – that is, as expressed through the work’s textual intention. In the case of Achebe’s reading, or misreading, of *Heart of Darkness*, the negative descriptions of Blacks, and of Africa, in certain passages of the novella seem to prompt an adverse response, and an understandable indignation, which make him overlook or marginalise other structural and thematic elements, including those identified and briefly discussed here, which work in the opposite direction. Racism needs to be historicized in order to become operative as a critical concept but, unlike Phillips, Achebe seems unwilling to do so. While in no way arguing that there is no racism in *Heart of Darkness*, it seems to me that Achebe’s ethical response is partly a consequence of his failure, or refusal, to respond to the ethical dimension observable not only in Marlow’s doubts about, and critique of, the imperialist system, but also in the narrative presentation of this forceful critique.

This first concluding point blends into my second: manipulating the reader into a position approximating to that of the frame narrator as narratee, Conrad makes the implied audience respond in a way that resembles, yet also moves beyond, the frame narrator’s understanding of the story he transmits. This tentacular effect is striking in *Heart of Darkness*, but it also plays a key role in *Lord Jim*. If Marlow is shocked by his experiences in the Congo, the frame narrator and his fellow narratees are also shaken by his tale – a narration whose rhetorical effect on Marlow’s audience is further enhanced both by his preamble and by his accompanying comments and reflections. The authorial audience is shaken as well. In *Heart of Darkness* as in *Lord Jim*, our experience of narrative form is closely associated with the narratives’ progression. If Kurt’s final words (“The horror! The horror!” (178)) make us experience a painful ethical moment, so does Jim’s jump, and perhaps even more his attempts to explain it.

Finally, all three Conrad texts discussed here illustrate a productive interplay of textual dynamics and readerly dynamics: responding to the progression of each of these narratives, the reader is induced to reconsider, modify, and extend his or her understanding of the events, characters, and thematic issues. In *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, Conrad achieves this kind of interplay not least by furthering an attitudinal alliance or affinity between his narratees’ response to Marlow’s narrative and the authorial audience’s response to the same narrative (here also including the narratees’ response). In the third-person narrative of *Nostramo*, such an alliance is less obvious, but a comparable one becomes apparent in our tendency to share the third-person narrator’s value judgments and our inclination to sympathize with his human care. Moreover, the examples we have considered illustrate how Conrad here too innovatively uses variants of narrative to manipulate and shape our response and experience as readers.

---

**WORKS CITED**

- Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1977). Rpt. in the Norton Critical Edition of *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Paul Armstrong. New York: Norton, 2006.
- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Second ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. London: Fontana, 1979.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Cedric Watts. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim*. Ed. Thomas Moser. New York: Norton, 1996.
- . *Nostramo*. London: Dent, 1974.
- . *Congo Diary and Other Uncollected Pieces*. Ed. Zdzisław Najder. New York: Doubleday, 1978.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Gorman, David. "Theories of Fiction." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Fiction*. Ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1972.
- . *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1976. (English translation: *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.)
- Lothe, Jakob. *Narrative in Fiction and Film: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; rpt. 2005.
- . "Cumulative Intertextuality in *Heart of Darkness*: Virgil, Dante, and Goethe's *Faust*." *Conrad at the Millennium: Modernism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism*. Ed. Gail Fincham and Attie de Lange. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- Lothe, Jakob, Jeremy Hawthorn and James Phelan, eds. *Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.
- Najder, Zdzisław. *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- . *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progression, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
- Phillips, Caryl. "Out of Africa." Interview with Chinua Achebe. *The Guardian*, 22 February 2003.
- Said, Edward W. "Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative." *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. "Connaissance du vide: *Cœur des ténèbres*." *Les Genres du discours*. Paris: Seuil, 1978.

---

Vetlesen, Arne Johan. *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Watts, Cedric. *Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Critical and Contextual Discussion*. Milan: Mursia, 1977.

———. *Joseph Conrad: "Nostromo."* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990.

