

A CRITICAL STUDY OF
THE NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS
LORD JIM AND CHANCE
IN THE LIGHT OF
CONRAD'S NOTES AND PREFACES

By

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS:

The first part of the thesis is devoted to a consideration of the Notes and Prefaces, particularly as they reveal the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic.

The second, third and fourth parts consist of an examination of The Nigger of the Narcissus, Lord Jim, and Chance in the light of the Notes and Prefaces.

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TEXTUAL NOTE

All references to Conrad's works are to Dent's Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1946-1955). References are identified by the volume and page numbers of this edition and have been inserted within parentheses in the body of the thesis. The following list includes only those works discussed in the text.

- I Almayer's Folly * Tales of Unrest
- III The Nigger of the Narcissus * Typhoon and Other Stories
- IV Lord Jim
- V Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories
- VII Nostromo
- VIII The Mirror of the Sea * A Personal Record
- IX The Secret Agent
- X A Set of Six
- XI Under Western Eyes
- XIII Chance
- XIV Victory
- XV Within The Tides * The Shadow Line
- XVIII Notes on Life and Letters

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS

The details of publication are given below for those works to which I frequently refer to in the course of the thesis. For the sake of convenience, subsequent references to these will be made in the abbreviated form indicated on the left.

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Baines | Jocelyn Baines. <u>Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography</u> . Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1960. |
| Guerard | Albert J. Guerard. <u>Conrad The Novelist</u> . Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965. |
| Karl | Frederick Karl. <u>A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad</u> . New York: Noonday Press, 1960. |
| Leavis | F.R. Leavis. <u>The Great Tradition</u> . London: Chatto and Windus, 1948. |
| L.L., I or II | G. Jean-Aubry. <u>Joseph Conrad, Life and Letters</u> . New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1927. |
| Newhouse | Neville H. Newhouse. <u>Joseph Conrad</u> . London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1966. |
| Zabel | Morton Dauwen Zabel. <u>The Portable Conrad</u> . New York: Viking, 1947. |

INTRODUCTION

Conrad's Notes and Prefaces to the collected edition of his works shed considerable light on his general considerations of the aim and function of the novelist. The Notes are an important source of background information about the sources for many of his characters and tales. They are also an important source in interpreting his fiction since they illuminate both the man and his preoccupations, and his "way of conceiving and dramatizing experience."¹ Yet critics of Conrad have not made much use of them. The general tendency has been to disregard them as valuable interpretive tools. This tendency is closely associated with the view of Conrad as an achievement-and-decline novelist. Because the Notes and Prefaces were written during the period of his so-called decline they have been for the most part ignored. The Notes and Prefaces also have the misfortune of being contemporaneous with the Collected Prefaces of Henry James, and inevitably they are compared with James's Prefaces and found lacking. One of the very great dangers of such a comparison is that often the unique characteristics of the individual works are lost sight of or just simply forgotten. For my part, I find it extremely difficult to believe that Conrad would have taken the trouble to provide each volume of his collected works

¹ Karl, p.21.

with its own Note or Preface and not reveal what he intended, what he was striving for, or what the principles were by which he worked. It is my hope that this thesis will show that Conrad's works may be more usefully viewed in the light of the major principles of his aesthetic as it is revealed in the Notes and Prefaces.

I have undertaken two tasks: to examine the Notes and Prefaces and to consider three of Conrad's works (The Nigger of the Narcissus, Lord Jim and Chance) in the light of the Notes and Prefaces. For the purpose of this thesis I have limited my consideration of the Notes and Prefaces to a discussion of the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic as revealed there. Chapter one of this thesis is mainly a consideration of the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic as revealed in the Notes and Prefaces. A secondary interest in this chapter is my attempt to account for the present position of low esteem in which the Notes and Prefaces are held by most critics of Conrad. Chapter two begins with a consideration of the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, followed by a discussion of the novel in the light of its own preface and the Notes and Prefaces in general. Chapter three demonstrates not only the relevance of the particular Author's Note to Lord Jim, but also demonstrates that several other Notes and Prefaces have a bearing on the meaning of the novel.

Chapter four attempts briefly to account for the misunderstanding of Chance and to show that the Author's Note to the novel provides valuable clues to the nature of the difficulties in the novel.

CHAPTER ONE

The first artists, in any line, are doubtless not those whose general ideas about their art are most often on their lips -- those who most abound in precept, apology, and formula and can best tell us the reasons and the philosophy of things. We know the first usually by their energetic practice, the constancy with which they apply their principles, and the serenity with which they leave us to hunt for their secret in the illustration, the concrete example. None the less it often happens that a valid artist utters his mystery, flashes upon us for a moment the light by which he works, shows us the rule by which he holds it just that he should be measured. This accident is happiest, I think, when it is soonest over; the shortest explanations of the products of genius are the best; and there is many a creator of living figures whose friends, however full of faith in his inspiration, will do well to pray for him when he sallies forth into the dim wilderness of theory. The doctrine is apt to be so much less inspired than the work, the work is often so much more intelligent than the doctrine.

HENRY JAMES

Can a serious student of Conrad learn anything from the Notes and Prefaces, and if so, do they offer him anything more than autobiographical tidbits or background information about the real-life sources for many of Conrad's characters and tales? While it must be admitted that for the most part Conrad does confine the Notes and Prefaces to discussions of the real-life sources for many of his characters

and tales, and that the Notes and Prefaces have very little to offer in the way of precept, it is my contention that they contain the essence of Conrad's aesthetic principles, in the light of which it is possible to read his fiction not only with increased awareness but also with a greater measure of delight.

The present position of low esteem in which the Notes and Prefaces are held by many critics can be traced, either directly or indirectly, to one of two reasons. First, as John Palmer points out in his book Joseph Conrad's Fiction: A Study in Literary Growth, "it is fashionable among achievement-and-decline critics to reject Conrad's...prefaces as clues to his art".¹ Second, the Notes and Prefaces fail to compare favorably with the Collected Prefaces of Henry James.

Frederick Karl's position is representative of the general attitude towards the Notes and Prefaces. As an achievement-and-decline critic, it is not surprising that he should maintain that

as Conrad's novels declined in power, his critical comments -- as evidenced by the Notes -- also manifested a loss of serious intent. The debility that marked his last ten years of creative work -- carried over into the Author's Notes written during the same period.²

Consequently, Karl concludes that "the Notes prove, upon

¹ John A. Palmer, Joseph Conrad's Fiction: A Study in Literary Growth (New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), p.264.

² Karl, p.23.

examination in their context, to be among Conrad's lesser accomplishments".³ Karl's low opinion of the Notes and Prefaces, it seems to me, is inextricably bound up with his overall view of Conrad as an achievement-and-decline novelist.⁴ The achievement-and-decline theory, however, enjoys nothing like a critical consensus of opinion and has as a matter of fact recently been the object of a great deal of critical inquiry. But whether the achievement-and-decline theory is true or false does not really matter. What matters is that critics often disregard the Notes and Prefaces completely, dismissing them as "docile", and fail to discern that they shed considerable light on the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic.⁵

The second reason for the low opinion of the Notes and Prefaces is to be found in their failure to compare favorably with the Collected Prefaces of Henry James. Donald C. Yelton, commenting on the "author's notes" and "familiar prefaces", in his Introduction to Mimesis and Metaphor says:

Though not barren of significant hints for the critic or practitioner, they are far from constituting -- as the collected prefaces to the New York edition of Henry James's novels have been taken to constitute -- an "art of the novel".

³ Ibid., pp.20-21.

⁴ See Palmer, Joseph Conrad's Fiction, pp.260-268, for a summary of the achievement-and-decline controversy.

⁵ I use the term "aesthetic" quite loosely in this thesis to mean Conrad's general considerations about life and art, and not in the limited, particularized sense in which it is most frequently used.

⁶ Donald C. Yelton, Mimesis and Metaphor (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967), p.13.

This type of comparison seems to me to be grossly unfair. Very rarely is it taken into account that the Notes and Prefaces differ in intention, content and scope from the Prefaces of James. Interestingly enough, Frederick Karl, unlike many other critics, demonstrates that he is well aware of the differences between the Notes and Prefaces of Conrad and the Prefaces of James. Yet, paradoxically, he appears reluctant to forgive Conrad for doing what Karl readily admits Conrad was incapable of doing anyway -- writing prefaces like those of James. This process of comparison seems to me to be analagous to a person comparing and evaluating two similar yet distinct colours, maroon and red, for example, and then turning around and damning the one on the grounds that it is not the other. Almost inevitably the Notes and Prefaces are compared to the Collected Prefaces of James and almost always they suffer by the comparison. They suffer largely on account of the fact, as I have already pointed out, that they differ in intention, content and scope from the Prefaces of James. They also suffer because there is an obvious difference in the critical abilities and the critical sophistication of Conrad and James. Even though James is by far the better critic of the two this does not mean, as many critics take it to mean, that Conrad should simply be dismissed as negligible. Even if his criticism leads "back only to himself, to his own way of conceiving and dramatizing experience",⁷ it is valuable

⁷ Karl, p.21.

because it spells out the principles by which Conrad worked, what he intended, what effect he was striving for, and what choices he made.

It is only too readily apparent from even a cursory reading of the Notes and Prefaces that Conrad's attitude towards them differs considerably from James's attitude towards his Collected Prefaces; and consequently, they ought to be read in the light of the spirit in which they were written. The question immediately arises: How do we know in what spirit they were written? The answer to this question is easily arrived at simply by focussing attention on certain of Conrad's own remarks. In the Author's Note to The Shorter Tales, he reveals not only his attitude towards the Notes and Prefaces, but also his conception of their function, when he says:

The deep, complex (and at times even contradictory) feelings which make up the very essence of an author's attitude to his own creation are real enough, yet they may be, often are, but shapes of cherished illusions. Frail plants, you will admit, and fit only for the shade of solitary thought. Precious -- perhaps? Yes. But by their very nature precious to only one man, to him in whose mind -- or is it the heart? -- they are rooted.

That consideration would seem to me conclusive against anyone writing any preface whatever, if it were not for my ineradicable suspicion that in this world, which some philosophers have defined merely as a series of "vain appearances", our very illusions must have a practical meaning. Are they not as characteristic of an individual as his opinions, for instance, or the features of his face? In fact being less controllable they must be even more dangerously revelatory. This is an alarming consideration. But whether

because of a strain of native impudence, acquired callousness, or inborn trust in the goodness of human nature, it has not prevented me during the last few years from writing a good many revelatory prefaces...here I am again volunteering yet one more of these sincere confessions.

In another Author's Note Conrad defines the Note as "a place for personal remarks" (VIII, iii). In addition, in a letter to Richard Curle dated July 14, 1923, Conrad upbraids him for summarizing the prefaces because

The summarizing of Prefaces, though you do it extremely well, has got this disadvantage, that it doesn't give their atmosphere, simply because those pages are an intensely personal expression much more so than all the rest of my writing, with the exception of the Personal Record, perhaps.

What all of this implies is what any conscientious reading of the Notes and Prefaces will confirm: that they are familiar, almost conversational, in tone and are primarily concerned with firmly rooting in reality the "frail plants" of Conrad's labour, as well as affording him a place "to explain that there was no perverse intention, no secret scorn for the natural sensibilities of mankind at the bottom of his impulse" (IX, viii).

It is also quite apparent from the Notes and Prefaces that Conrad and James differed considerably with regard to their critical abilities. One of the great dangers of comparative study is that it often loses sight of the unique characteristics of each author as critic. What is especially worthy of note in

8 Walter F. Wright, ed., Joseph Conrad on Fiction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p.231.
All further references to this preface will be abbreviated S.T. and the page references given will be those in Wright's book.
9 L.L., II, p.317.

this respect is how far short of the mark critical evaluations of the sort which follow fall:

Conrad's Notes...show...that as a self-critic he was not of James's stature.¹⁰

If we judge by these Notes alone, Conrad is surely the most disappointing of major authors as self-critics.¹¹

But nowhere does Conrad claim that the Notes and Prefaces are examples par excellence of the writer as self-critic. On the contrary, Conrad demonstrates that he was only too well aware of his lack of critical sophistication. This recognition on his part is conveyed clearly in the following, particularly revealing, passage:

More skill would have made them [his stories] more real and the whole composition more interesting. But here we are approaching the veiled region of artistic values which it would be improper and indeed dangerous for me to enter. (V, viii)

Self-revelatory statements like the preceding one underline the vast difference which exists between the Notes and Prefaces of Conrad and the Prefaces of James. While it is true that the Collected Prefaces of James constitute an "art of the novel" and the Notes and Prefaces of Conrad cannot be said to do so, nevertheless, the Notes and Prefaces are worthy of consideration because not only do they shed considerable light on the nature of the correlation between Conrad's biography and psychology and his fiction, but they also call attention to several key

¹⁰ Karl, p.21.

¹¹ Ibid., p.39.

elements of the craft of fiction, such as, form, point of view, mood, tone and sentence construction.

In the Notes and Prefaces, as elsewhere in his writings, Conrad clearly rejects the intellectual and the critical and, instead, favors the emotional and the intuitive. One of the reasons for Conrad's always suspicious and often downright antagonistic attitude towards the intellectual and the critical rests in his own somewhat anti-aesthetic position. As he says in the Author's Note to Tales of Unrest:

One does one's work first and theorizes about it afterwards. It is a very amusing and egotistical occupation of no use whatever to anyone and just as likely as not to lead to false conclusions. (I, v)

Another reason for his attitude can be found in his sense of always being an outsider to "the veiled region of artistic values" (V, viii), a feeling which is rooted in his distrust of the sophisticated, of the complicated, of knowledge outside the usual bounds of human understanding. Yet another reason for his attitude has its roots in the great difficulties he experienced in writing. In a letter to Edward Noble, dated October 28, 1895, Conrad writes:

It took me 3 years to finish Folly. There was not a day I did not think of it. Not a day. And after all I consider it honestly a miserable failure. Every critic but two overrated the book. It took me a year to tear the Outcast out of myself and upon my word of honour, -- I look on it (now it's finished) with bitter disappointment. 12

What I have said so far may seem to indicate that Conrad neither could nor would attempt to formulate a personal aesthetic for himself. But while this may appear to be the case it most definitely is not so. Indeed it is my hope that by focussing my attention on the Notes and Prefaces I will be able to show that Conrad did have a personal aesthetic and that his aesthetic had a marked influence on his fiction. It is my contention that the Notes and Prefaces are a valuable source in interpreting Conrad's fiction, that by revealing his preoccupations they point out the components of his aesthetic.

Conrad's aesthetic, as it appears in the Notes and Prefaces, may be said to be founded upon four broad principles. First of all, there is his sincere, if naive, belief in the solidarity of all mankind. This belief can be traced, either directly or indirectly, to his Polish background and his life at sea, both of which are extremely important formative influences in the creation of his aesthetic. Strictly speaking, this is not so much a principle of his aesthetic, but rather, the most important moral and artistic principle in Conrad's system of values. Secondly, there is the crucial distinction which Conrad makes between two kinds of experience. Closely allied to this distinction is the question of imagination and invention.

Thirdly, there is Conrad's often reiterated defence of the intuitive and the emotional as the basis of all art. An important corollary to this is his belief in art as communication and art as empathy. And finally, there is his belief in the importance of the "purely artistic" considerations of the art of fiction.

In the Notes and Prefaces Conrad provides the reader with two very important pieces of biographical information, information which goes a long way towards answering not only the question "What formed Conrad's character?", but also the question, which is of supreme importance to this thesis, "What formed Conrad's aesthetic?" The single, most important, formative influence is undoubtedly the sea. In the Author's Note to The Mirror of the Sea Conrad says:

this book...is the best tribute my piety can offer to the ultimate shapers of my character, convictions, and, in a sense, destiny -- to the imperishable sea, to the ships that are no more, and to the simple men who have had their day. (VIII, viii)

He speaks of his experience at sea as "that sort of experience which teaches a man slowly to see and feel" (VIII, vi). The words "see" and "feel" are the very foundation stones of Conrad's aesthetic as he reveals it in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus. A Spanish writer, Lilia d'Onofrio sees a definite "relationship between Conrad's sea experience and the rhythmic ebb and flow of his fiction:

The sea had nourished Conrad's unconscious with memories

and impressions; there is therefore in his stories something of the changing tonality and incessant mutations of the ocean's condition, comparable to the human soul; it, like the ocean, is accustomed to announce agitated passions with surface placidity.¹³

However, while it must be admitted that the sea plays an important role in the formation of Conrad's character and aesthetic, it would be quite wrong to see him as merely a writer of sea tales. In fact, in a letter to Richard Curle Conrad objects to his being designated as a " 'Spinner of sea yarns --master mariner --seaman writer ' ", saying: "After all, I may have been a seaman, but I am a writer of prose....In the body of my work barely one tenth is what may be called sea stuff."¹⁴ Or as he writes in The Author's

Note to The Shorter Tales:

Though I have been often classed as a writer of the sea I have always felt that I had no speciality in that or any other specific subject. It is true that I have found a full text of life on the sea....Sea life had been my life. It had been my own self-sufficient, self-satisfying possession....

As a matter of fact I have written of the sea very little, if the pages were counted. It has been the scene, but very seldom the aim, of my endeavour. It is too late after all these years to try to keep back the truth; so I will confess here that when I launched my first paper boats in the days of my literary childhood, I aimed at an element as restless, as dangerous, as changeable as the sea, and even more vast -- the unappeasable ocean of human life. (S.T. p. 234)

Obviously then, the most significant thing about Conrad's "twenty years" at sea is not, as might be expected, the

¹³ Karl, pp. 122-123.

¹⁴ L.L. II, p.316.

important role the sea per se plays in his fiction. Instead the salient features of his sea experience, with respect to his aesthetic, are the important role the ideals, such as solidarity, loyalty, and fellowship, associated with the sea play in Conrad's fiction. The sailor's "turn of mind composed of innocence and scepticism...with the addition of an unexpected insight into motives"¹⁵ also influenced Conrad's way of conceiving of experience.

Another equally significant influence in the formation of both Conrad's character and his aesthetic is his Polish background. In the Author's Note to A Personal Record, Conrad presents the reader with the fundamental lessons he learned in childhood. As his birthright Conrad inherited "the Polish temperament with its tradition of self-government, its chivalrous view of moral restraints, and an exaggerated respect for individual rights " (VIII,vii). Furthermore,

an impartial view of humanity in all its degrees of splendor and misery together with a special regard for the rights of the underprivileged of this earth, not on any mystic ground but on the ground of simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services, was characteristic of the mental and moral atmosphere of the house which sheltered my hazardous childhood: matters of deep conviction both lasting and consistent, and removed as far as possible from that humanitarianism that seems to be merely a matter of crazy nerves or a morbid conscience. (VIII, vii)

Diana Neill in her book A Short History of the English Novel finds that

¹⁵ Chance, p. 33.

Growing up in a world that could offer neither happiness nor content, Conrad early in life came to learn that death was often the least hardship men had to bear. From his father he derived an austere and aristocratic code of honor -- unswerving loyalty to truth and trust. All else was vain and must be endured with quiet stoicism. Early contact with suffering awakened in Conrad a strong sense of compassion and a deep understanding of the temptations that beset men under the impact of misfortune. ¹⁶

What all of this reveals is that there are numerous conflicting elements that went towards shaping Conrad's character. On the one hand, there is his insistence on impartiality, on fellowship, on compassion; and on the other, there is his austere code of honor, his unswerving loyalty to truth and trust, and his kinship with the outsider. Not only Conrad's character but his aesthetic as well is the product of numerous serious psychic divisions. These divisions manifest themselves in his prose as polar tensions between the individual and society, between acquiescence and protest, between skepticism and stoicism. Conrad adhered simultaneously to the antithetical principles of individualism and community, land values and sea-values. There exists in Conrad's fiction a sharp conflict between the author's kinship with the individualist on the ~~one~~ side, and his belief "in the solidarity of all mankind in simple ideas and sincere emotions" (XIII,xi). On the moral

¹⁶ Diana Neill. *A Short History of the English Novel* (New York: Collier Books, 1964), p.258.

level this division manifests itself as a conflict between "respect for individual rights" and respect for "the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct."¹⁷ Conrad's art depends for much of its effect on the complex interplay of these various antithetical attitudes.

People and events from either his early life or his life at sea provide the sources for many of his stories and characters. For example, in the Author's Note to Nostromo he says "But mainly Nostromo is what he is because I received the inspiration for him in my early days from a Mediterranean sailor (VII,xx)." Again, in the Author's Note to The Shorter Tales Conrad writes: "my past had, by the very force of my work, become one of the sources of what I may call, for want of a better word, my inspiration---of the inner force which sets the pen in motion, (S.T. p.234). Conrad's artistic skill lies in his ability to select from his vast store of experiences and people, actions and characters that can be molded to shape something which has a life of its own: something that has "that glimpse of truth". What critics often fail to discern, but what Conrad himself realized only too well, is that, as he says in the Author's Note to Within the Tides:

the mere fact of dealing with matters outside of the general run of everyday experience laid me

¹⁷ Lord Jim, p.50.

under the obligation of a more scrupulous fidelity to the truth of my own sensations. The problem was to make unfamiliar things credible. To do that I had to create for them, to reproduce for them, to envelop them in their proper atmosphere of actuality. This was the hardest task of all and the most important, in view of that conscientious rendering of truth in thought and in fact which has been always my aim. (XV,vi).

Conrad's past experience not only provides him with his inspiration, but also, by virtue of its uncommonness, is the source of his innovative and excellent method. From the preceding discussion it is abundantly clear that Conrad's Polish background and his sea experiences played an important role in the formation of his aesthetic.

The second principle of Conrad's aesthetic is the distinction between two kinds or types of experience. Distinguishing between kinds and uses of experience in the Author's Note to the volume entitled Youth Conrad says:

More ambitious in its scope and longer in the telling, Heart of Darkness is quite as authentic in fundamentals as Youth. It is, obviously, written in another mood, I won't characterize the mood precisely, but anybody can see that it is anything but the mood of wistful regret, of reminiscent tenderness.

One more remark may be added. Youth is a feat of memory. It is a record of experience; but that experience, in its facts, in its inwardness and in its outward colouring, begins and ends in myself. Heart of Darkness is experience, too; but it is experience pushed a little (and only very little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate, I believe, purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers. There it was no longer a matter of sincere colouring. It was like

another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck. (V,vii).

Again, in the Author's Note to The Shorter Tales, he says:

Finally, let me say that with the exception of Youth none of these stories is a record of experience in the absolute sense of the word. As I have said before in another preface,¹⁸ they are all authentic because they are the product of twenty years of life -- my own life. Deliberate invention had little to do with their existence -- if they do exist. In each there lurks more than one intention. The facts gleaned from hearsay or experience in the various parts of the globe were but opportunities offered to the writer. What he has done with them is matter for a verdict which must be left to the individual consciences of the readers. (S.T. p.236).

For Conrad, then, there are two kinds of experience. First of all there is experience "in the absolute sense of the word", that is to say, individual, personal experience. Secondly, there is experience in the sense of knowledge of life, or what Conrad himself refers to as "general knowledge, fortified by earnest meditation" (XI,vii).

Closely related to this distinction between two kinds of experience, and of particular importance in Conrad's aesthetic, is the crucial distinction he makes between two kinds or levels of truth, or more precisely, between "truth" and "invention". What exactly does Conrad mean by truth? Conrad uses the term only in its broadest sense

18 See the Author's Note to Typhoon, III.

to mean "plausible" "authentic", or "credible". He does not hesitate to sacrifice the facts "for the perfectly legitimate ... purpose of bringing... home to the minds and bosoms of the readers"(V,vii), what I shall call, for want of a better term, artistic truth. Conrad's art is not concerned with the facts per se, but with "what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential -- their one illuminating and convincing quality -- the very truth of their existence " (III,vii). The facts gleaned from hearsay and experience are merely the raw materials, the stuff from which he creates artistic truth. Conrad's real interest lies not in "events but... their effect upon the persons in the tale "(III,vii); not in the consequences but in "the motives of any overt act "(IX,viii).

Furthermore, Conrad makes a sharp distinction between what he calls "truth" and what he calls "invention". In the Author's Note to Tales of Unrest, he says, about "An Outpost of Progress", that "as for the story itself it is true enough in its essentials. The sustained invention of a really telling lie demands a talent I do not possess "(I,vii). Similarly, in the Author's Note to Nostromo, he writes: "To invent a circumstantial account of the robbery did not appeal to me, because my talents not running that way I did not think that the game was worth the candle "(VII,xvii). Yet, in the Author's Note to A Set of Six, Conrad frankly admits, about "The Duel", that not only did he "invent"

the two officers, but he also "invented" the pretext for the duel as well and that he had "no qualms of conscience about this piece of work" (X,viii). At first glance there may seem to be an inconsistency between Conrad's professed belief that "truth alone is the justification of ... fiction" and his abhorrence of "invention", and what he candidly admits to in the Author's Note to A Set of Six. This however is not the case. First of all, Conrad makes the point that "given the characters of the two officers" the pretext for the duel is "sufficiently convincing" (X,viii). In other words, the pretext, in the context of the story, is credible; it has the illusion at least of truth. Secondly, while the facts of the story are not true, the story is nonetheless true in essence. His aim, he tells us in the Author's Note, was "to capture ... The Spirit of the Epoch -- [the Napoleonic period] never purely militaristic in the long clash of arms, youthful, almost childlike in its exaltation of sentiment -- naively heroic in its faith (X,ix)". "The testimony of some French readers who volunteered the opinion that in those hundred pages or so [he] had managed to render 'wonderfully' the spirit of the whole epoch" (X,ix), can be taken as proof that Conrad, in "The Duel", actually did produce the effect of actuality, did see into the heart of the matter. Finally, and closely related to the other reasons, is the inadvertent distinction Conrad makes between justifiable and nonjustifiable invention,

Invention is justifiable only if it is cloaked in the illusion of credibility, only if it contributes to "the perfectly legitimate" task "of bringing home to the minds and bosoms of the readers" (V,vii), the general truth of the human condition.

Not surprisingly, a very close relationship exists between the second and third principles of Conrad's aesthetic, between his recognition of general truths and meaningful experiences and his attempt to communicate his vision. The urge to communicate his feelings in his work is the legitimate aim of any novelist and is an especially important element in Conrad's aesthetic. In the Author's Note to The Mirror of the Sea Conrad confesses that after he left the sea and was moved to write "it was with the ineradicable hope, that accompanies one through solitude as well as through a crowd, of ultimately, some day, at some moment, making myself understood" (VIII,vii). The primary motivation behind his writing is his desire to "convey the inner truth of almost a lifetime" (VIII,vi). Conrad's predilection for the inner truth is a key concern in his writings and his aesthetic as well. "Art itself", says Conrad in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, "may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." (III,vii).

The artist's task is to "reveal the substance of its truth -- disclose its inspiring secret; the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment" (III,x).

Closely related to the idea of art as communication, and yet another important element in Conrad's aesthetic, is the idea of art as expression, especially self-expression. Conrad would have been in almost complete agreement with D.H. Lawrence's dictum: "Art for my sake". Conrad himself says in the Author's Note to The Shorter Tales that he is "an artist for whom self-expression must, by definition, be the principal object, if not the only raison d'être, of his existence" (S.T. p.232). Surely, we must concur with Zabel's evaluation of this aspect of Conrad's aesthetic:

So we come to know him in his books: not as a man who merely tells a tale but as a poet in fiction. The man who suffers and the mind which creates may be, ideally, separate and apart. But after their ordeal is finished, they merge once more. The mind has created more than the book. It has created the man who wrote the book, in the only sense in which we can genuinely know him. It is not the Conrad who left Poland, sailed seas, saw strange men and places, who finally concerns us. It is the man who used those experiences as an artist, and who re-created himself in his mastery of them....When he comes to us as Singleton, Jim, Decoud, Razumov, or Heyst, we know a man who has escaped the confines of his single person and perpetuated his mind and emotion in the human spirit. ¹⁹

Writing acted as a kind of physic for Conrad as it has done for many other writers, both novelists and poets. Conrad's

¹⁹ Zabel, pp. 45-46.

fiction embodies in an articulate structure of narrative and symbol the polar elements in his personality. Moreover, besides its function as self-expression and as physis writing also has a social function for Conrad. It unites the members of the social group by virtue of the fact that it awakens "in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world "(III,x). Conrad maintains in the Author's Note to Typhoon that

in everything I have written there is always one invariable intention, and that is to capture the reader's attention, by securing his interest and enlisting his sympathies for the matter at hand, whatever it may be, within the limits of the visible world and within the boundaries of human emotions. (III,vii-viii).

In this way Conrad is able, not only to communicate his intuitions, emotions and experiences, but also to bring his readers to participate in his "belief in the solidarity of all mankind in simple ideas and in sincere emotions "(XIII, xi).

Any discussion of Conrad's aesthetic must come to the realization, sooner or later, that belief in the intuitive and the emotional, rather than in the intellectual, as the basis of art lies at the heart of Conrad's aesthetic. "Thinking" Conrad says "is the greatest enemy of perfection. The habit of profound reflection, I am compelled to say, is the most pernicious of all the habits

formed by civilized man" (XIV, x-xi). On another occasion he writes: "it is better for mankind to be impressionable than reflective." ²⁰ Again and again, in the Author's Notes and Prefaces Conrad propounds his belief in the intuitive and the emotional as the basis of art. Perhaps the best and most concise expression of this is to be found in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus where he writes:

Fiction -- if it at all aspires to be art -- appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. (III, ix)

Conrad's belief in the intuitive and the emotional as the basis of art goes a long way towards explaining the lack of a concisely formulated and well articulated aesthetic in his critical writings. This lack comes as no surprise at all if we take into account Conrad's belief that "things that 'just happen' in one's work seem impressive and valuable because they spring from sources profounder than logic of a deliberate theory suggested by acquired learning, let us say, or by lessons drawn from analysed practice" (S.T., p.232). Another reason for this

20 See Volume XI, A Familiar Preface, p.xi.

lack, and one that is closely allied to Conrad's belief in the intuitive, is his recognition that "the changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories "(III, viii). In short, when we know that there exists an unbridgeable gap between intention and action, between theory and practice, why bother with well formulated theories? This in no wise invalidates my claim that Conrad's aesthetic can be found in the Notes and Prefaces; it means only that the Notes and Prefaces have very little to offer in the way of definite precepts.

Conrad's belief in the intuitive tells us a great deal about his method of composition. The importance which he attaches to the intuitive and the emotional as the basis of his art is crucial to a full understanding of the way in which he worked. In the fourth chapter of his book, Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist, J. D. Gordon concludes that

The study of Conrad's habits of composition substantiates his claim that he wrote first and theorized later... He felt his way towards the plot of his stories and towards the best presentation of his material. 21

The Author's Notes and Prefaces testify to the correctness of Gordon's conclusions. In the Author's Note to Under Western Eyes, for example, Conrad confesses:

It was only after I had finished writing the first part that the whole story revealed itself to me in

21 J. D. Gordon. Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Novelist. (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 173.

its tragic character and in the march of its events as unavoidable and sufficiently ample in its outline to give free play to my creative instinct and to the dramatic possibilities of the subject.

The course of action need not be explained. It has suggested itself more as a matter of feeling than as a matter of thinking. (XI, vii)

Perhaps the Author's Note to The Secret Agent offers the best example of Conrad's intuitive method of composition, or what Neville H. Newhouse prefers to call "the mental processes of artistic creation "²² :

... all of a sudden I felt myself stimulated. And then ensued in my mind what a student of chemistry would best understand from the analogy of the addition of the tiniest little drop of the right kind, precipitating the process of crystalization in a test-tube containing some colourless solution.

It was at first for me a mental change, disturbing a quieted-down imagination, in which strange forms, sharp in outline but imperfectly apprehended, appeared and claimed attention as crystals will do by their bizarre and unexpected shapes.... Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.

Irresistibly the town became the background for the ensuing period of deep and tentative meditations. Endless vistas opened before me in various directions. It would take years to find the right way! It seemed to take years!... Slowly the dawning conviction of Mrs. Verloc's maternal passion grew up to a flame between me and that background, tingeing it with its secret ardour and receiving from it in exchange some of its own sombre colouring. At last the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete from the days of her childhood to the end, unproportioned as yet, with everything still on the first plan, as it were; but ready now to be dealt with. It was a matter of about three days. (IX, xi-xii)

A careful reading of this passage reveals an apparent discrepancy. The opposition between a "vision" presenting itself and an "ensuing period of deep and tentative meditations", and the opposition between a "dawning conviction" and a "story...unproportioned as yet "lends credence to Morton Zabel's contention that

The act of creation in Conrad apparently took place between two contradictory impulses -- the one instinctive, casual, tentative, unmethodical, and yet intensely and passionately absorbed; the other analytical, cautious, scrupulously calculating, with checkings and delayings of actions, regressions of impulse, retracing and testing of motives, and with a complicated exercise of the mode of averted suspense which the Renaissance rhetoricians called cupatio.²³

Furthermore, the apparent contradiction is just that-apparent. It is analagous to the apparent discrepancy presented by Keats's axiom "that if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."²⁴ The discrepancy vanishes once it is realized that both Keats and Conrad are talking only about the original creative impulse and not the finished art work when they speak about the intuitive and emotional as the basis of art. We have only to turn to the Author's Note to The Shorter Tales to find conclusive evidence that this is indeed what Conrad in fact meant.

To begin with, I may venture to affirm that, however spontaneous the initial impulse, not one of the

²³ Zabel, p.34.

²⁴ David Perkins, ed. English Romantic Writers. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), p. 1212.

stories from which those included in this volume have been selected was achieved without much conscious thought...(S.T. p. 231)

In the final analysis Conrad is perhaps one of the greatest intuitive writers in the English language. This is not to say that he did not understand the implications of what he was lead to do by his intuition. One need look no further than the Author's Note to Typhoon to discredit the charge that Conrad did not know what he was doing.

...it was but a bit of a sea yarn after all. I felt that to bring out its deeper significance which was quite apparent to me, something other, something more required: a leading motive that would harmonize all these violent noises, and a point of view that would put all that elemental fury into its proper place. (III)

Even Ford Madox Ford admits that while he [Ford]²⁵ "probably knew more about words...Conrad certainly had an infinitely greater hold over the archetectonics of the novel..."

This brings me to a consideration of the fourth and final principle of Conrad's aesthetic-what he himself termed the "purely artistic aspect of the art". Unfortunately the Notes and Prefaces have very little to offer in the way of precepts concerning technique. Nonetheless, they do suggest criteria by which to judge Conrad's craftsmanship. As we have already seen they provide valuable information about Conrad's method of composition, about the sources for many of his

²⁵ Ford Madox Ford. Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance. (Boston.: Little & Brown, 1924), pp. 168-169.

characters and tales, and about the formative influences in his life. One of the most prominent features of Conrad's craftsmanship is his belief in the magical power of words and his subsequent search for the mot juste. In "A Familiar Preface" to A Personal Record Conrad states his belief that

He who wants to persuade should put his trust not in the right argument, but in the right word. The power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense....Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world. (VIII,xi)

Ford Madox Ford recalls one of Conrad's painstaking searches for the mot juste. Conrad wrote, describing the Judea in the story "Youth", that the ship "crawled on, do or die, in the serene weather. The sky was a miracle of purity, a miracle of azure."²⁶ He then spent the whole day trying to justify the use of the word "azure" instead of the word "blue."

Not surprisingly, concern for the mot juste leads naturally enough to concern for sentence structure. As Conrad says in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus:

...the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must...strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music -- which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity,

²⁶ "Youth", p.47.

to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (III,ix)

Every line of Conrad's fiction reflects his "care for the shape and ring of sentences." However, even though he is generally recognized as a veritable master of the English language, he can nonetheless be faulted for displaying at least one not so commendable tendency in his writing, that of trying to express that which can hardly be expressed by mere words. Speaking about Conrad's Heart of Darkness F. R. Leavis criticizes his

adjectival and worse than supererogatory insistence on "unspeakable rites," "inconceivable mystery," and so on. If it were only, as it largely is in Heart of Darkness, a matter of an occasional phrase it would still be regrettable as tending to cheapen the tone. But the actual cheapening is little short of disastrous. 27

Lest we judge him too harshly we should recall Conrad's own frank admission that "to render a crucial point of feelings in terms of human speech is really an impossible task. Written words can only form a sort of translation "(XV,viii). What is remarkable is not that Conrad fails of complete success at an all but impossible task, but that he comes so close to completely succeeding. The reason for this can be found in part at least in Conrad's letter to Edward Noble

27 F.R. Leavis. The Great Tradition. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 198.

dated 28 Oct. '95 where he writes:

... and you must treat events only as illustrative of human sensation, -- as the outward sign of inward feelings, -- which alone are truly pathetic and interesting ... imagination ... should be used to create human souls: to disclose human hearts, -- and not to create events that are properly speaking accidents only. To accomplish it you must cultivate your poetic faculty, -- you must give yourself every sensation, every thought, every image, -- mercilessly, without reserve and without remorse: you must search the darkest corners of your heart, the most remote recesses of your brain, -- you must search them for²⁸ the image, for the glamour, for the right expression.

The use of simile and metaphor and the poetic use of imagery are prominent features of Conrad's style. Examples abound on almost every page of his writing. Analogy provides Conrad with the means of rendering "a crucial point of feelings in terms of human speech."

Yet another important "purely artistic" element in Conrad's aesthetic can be found in the Author's Note to the volume entitled Within the Tides, where he distinguishes between "people...disclosing themselves" and people being "made to give themselves away" (XV,viii). It is Conrad's belief that the writer's function is to show rather than to tell, or more precisely, it is to make the reader see. "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see" (III,x). Besides the distinction

between telling and showing, the passage quoted above reveals Conrad's belief that he creates people and not characters. As he says elsewhere, "Of course, there is something more than mere ideas in those stories. I modestly hope that there are human beings in them, and also the articulate appeal of their humanity " (S.T. p.235). In the preface to Almayer's Folly Conrad reveals the type of people the reader can expect to find in his writings.

I am speaking here of men and women -- not of the charming and graceful phantoms that move about in our mud and smoke and are softly luminous with the radiance of all our virtues; that are possessed of all refinements, of all sensibilities, of all wisdom -- but, being only phantoms possess no heart... I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live. (I,viii).

Essentially, Conrad's greatest skill lies in his ability to create flesh-and-blood characters, who are so near to being just ordinary mortals, to being just "one of us", that we cannot help but see ourselves reflected in them.

I have argued in this chapter that the paramount interest of the Notes and Prefaces is the remarkable light they throw on Conrad's aesthetic. It seems to me that in the foregoing pages I have shown that the Notes and Prefaces contain more than autobiographical tidbits and background information about the real-life sources for many of Conrad's characters and tales; that, in fact, they are an important source in interpreting Conrad's fiction. The four major

principles of Conrad's aesthetic outlined in this chapter will serve as the basis for the analysis which follows of three of Conrad's works: The Nigger of the Narcissus, Lord Jim, and Chance.

CHAPTER TWO

"Death destroys a man, but the idea of death saves him."

E. M. FORSTER

"It is the book by which, not as a novelist perhaps, but as an artist striving for the utmost sincerity of expression, I am willing to stand or fall",¹ Conrad wrote of The Nigger of the Narcissus in a short foreword addressed to his "readers in America". Since its publication in 1897 praise for the novel has been anything but niggardly. Neville Newhouse, for example, calls it Conrad's "first undisputed masterpiece"² and Frederick Karl claims that "it stands with Victory and The Secret Agent as one of his almost perfectly measured novels".³ Unfortunately, much of what has been written about The Nigger of the Narcissus has tried to simplify its complexity and ambiguity, either by "oversubtilizing and overintellectualizing it"⁴ or by focussing attention on only a part and then claiming that the part is the key to the complexities and ambiguities of the whole. Often the critic

1 The Foreword to The Nigger of the Narcissus, the Canterbury edition of Conrad's Complete Works (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1924), p.ix.

2 Newhouse, p.40.

3 Karl, p.109.

4 Guerard, p.102.

is tempted to isolate one of the main themes in a novel and then insist that it is the unifying principle of the whole book. The most popular of these simplifying or reductionist approaches employed by critics of The Nigger of the Narcissus is what Ian Watt has disparagingly referred to as the "reductio ad symbolum"⁵ approach. This approach almost completely convinces the reader that the only possible reading of The Nigger of the Narcissus is the one which gives a place of prominence to the novel's pattern of images and symbols. This approach is undeniably right in stressing the importance of symbolism as an interpretive tool, but it is only one of many interpretive tools. While it must be admitted that symbolism is an important thread in the whole tapestry that constitutes the novel, it should be kept in mind that it is only a thread and not the whole tapestry. What is needed is clearly an "expansionist" rather than a "reductionist" reading of The Nigger of the Narcissus, a reading which recognizes that the book is full of complexities and ambiguities, many of which can never be fully explained or completely understood, and a reading which, above all, does not neglect the obvious touchstones which Conrad has provided in the Preface.

Before discussing the actual text of the novel, I would like to devote a few words to the Preface, undoubtedly

⁵ Ian Watt, "Conrad Criticism and The Nigger of the Narcissus". Published originally in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XII, 1958, pp. 257-283.

the most famous and most widely quoted of all Conrad's Notes and Prefaces. The preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus is, in the critics' various terms, "Conrad's most explicit general statement about the art of the novelist"; ⁶ "the best expression of Conrad's aspirations as an artist"; ⁷ "his artistic manifesto". ⁸

Conrad begins the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus with a definition of art as

a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter, and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential -- their one illuminating and convincing quality -- the very truth of their existence. (p.vii)

A glance at this definition reveals two major features of Conrad's art: his single vision and his belief in truth. The importance of the single vision is underscored in Conrad's writings by the important role played by perspective and point of view. The above passage also points out an important distinction which is essential for a basic understanding of Conrad: the distinction between truth and essential truth, and the distinction between truth and facts. Conrad believed that it was the novelist's function to show what he

⁶ Newhouse, p.44.

⁷ Wilfred S. Dowden, The Imaged Style (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1970), p.48.

⁸ Douglas Brown, "From Heart of Darkness to Nostromo: An Approach to Conrad", The Modern Age (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1961), p.120.

called the "fundamental", the "enduring", the "essential" truth about "the rescued fragment" of life.

Next Conrad makes a distinction between the thinker, the scientist, and the artist. He attempts to set up something like a scale of merit, with the artist at the top and scientists and thinkers at the bottom. The thinker and the scientist appeal "to our common sense, to our intelligence" but unfortunately "the changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories." The artist, on the other hand, deals not with facts and ideas; instead, he "descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife...he finds the terms of his appeal...His appeal...is to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition -- and, therefore, more permanently enduring" (pp.vii-viii). Conrad's antagonism towards the intellectual is perfectly obvious from the positions he has assigned to thinkers and scientists, as opposed to artists, in his scale of merit. Associated with his distrust of the intellectual is his belief in the ~~intuitive~~ and the emotional as the basis of art. As he writes in the Preface:

All art...appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim, when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses...It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music -- which is the art of arts. (p.ix)

This aim, Conrad feels, can be achieved

only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage. (p.ix)

While it is undeniable that Conrad believes that the intuitive and the emotional, and not the intellectual, is the basis of art, this in no way invalidates his serious concern with, and full awareness of, the demands of craftsmanship. Indeed, Conrad is a consummate craftsman who believes wholeheartedly that it is only by means of "unswerving devotion" to form and language that a novelist can hope to achieve anything distinctive or worthwhile. He goes on in the Preface to say that

his answer to those who in the fulness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed, must run thus: My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see. That -- and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your ~~des~~erts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm -- all you demand -- and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. (pp.ix-x)

The above, particularly felicitous, passage clearly conveys the idea that for Conrad the novel was more than simply a form of edification or a source of amusement; it was a work of art. When he says that his task is to make the reader

see, he means it to be taken quite literally. A glance at any of his tales will show an enormous number of visual images. The constant repetition of the words "form" and "colour", "light" and "shadows", not to mention words that are their equivalents, throughout the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus places the emphasis on the sense of sight rather than on any of the other senses. Consequently, visual imagery is an important feature of Conrad's art.

The novelist's task, as Conrad conceived of it, is to snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life...and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth -- disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment. (p.x)

For Conrad the "passing phase" is representative of the human situation, is a source of imaginative significance. It holds an "inspiring secret" apart from its factual, surface or everyday meaning. Consequently,

fiction--if it at all aspires to be art---must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. (p.ix)

And if the novelist is "deserving and fortunate", he

may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision...shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, the visible world. (p.x)

The above passage hints that for Conrad art performs an important social function: it generates a feeling of brotherhood. Furthermore, the repétition of the term "solidarity", not only in the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, but in his other writings, both fictional and critical, leaves little room for doubt as to the significance of the role the idea of solidarity plays in his moral and artistic beliefs. However, any attentive reader of the novel has probably come to the realization that Conrad's professed belief in "the solidarity of all mankind" is not as wholehearted as it at first appears. But more about this later.

Conrad was quick to see, as he demonstrates in the Preface, that a genuine artist

cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft. The enduring part of them -- the truth which each one only imperfectly veils -- should abide with him as the most precious of his possessions, but they all -- Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism...all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him -- even on the very threshold of the temple -- to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work.

(pp.x-xi)

The artist's aim, Conrad concludes, is

to arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile -- such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a few to achieve. But...when it is accomplished -- behold! -- all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh,

a smile -- and the return to eternal rest.
(p. xii)

How this is to be done, what it means in terms of the structure of the work, for example, Conrad doesn't say. When it comes to actually analysing the precise nature of the novelist's method, Conrad says very little. The Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus, not unlike the other Notes and Prefaces, offers little in the way of precept, but then it was never intended to do so. It "is simply an avowal of endeavour" (p.ix). The most important thing an examination of the Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus in any detail does is to make the reader aware of Conrad's general considerations about the art of the novelist. The two central ideas of his doctrine are: first, that art makes its appeal through the senses; and second, that it must reveal the inner truth of "the rescued fragment". Mindful of D. H. Lawrence's warning never to trust the artist but to trust the tale, I now propose to turn to an examination of The Nigger of the Narcissus in the light of its own preface and the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic.

The Nigger of the Narcissus, like all great works of art, is both particular and general, both individual and universal; it suggests much more than can possibly be understood or explained. The successful blending of the personal

and the universal and the multiplicity of suggestions the book evokes is undoubtedly its greatest artistic achievement. Because The Nigger of the Narcissus is based on Conrad's own personal experiences it is highly personalized and individualistic, two features which impart to the story a strong sense of verisimilitude. It is unmistakably "the product of twenty years of life...and...perfectly authentic" (III, vi). Jean-Aubry writes that Conrad told him that "most of the personages I have portrayed actually belonged to the crew of the real Narcissus, including the admirable Singleton (whose real name was Sullivan), Archie, Belfast, and Donkin. I got the two Scandinavians from associations with another ship. All of this...was quite present before my mind when I wrote this book." ⁹ That Conrad is speaking from personal experience and from the viewpoint of an experienced sailor is obvious from the very beginning of the book. A glance at his description of the preparations undertaken to get the ship ready for sea, together with his descriptions of the interior of the forecastle, the sailors within, and the tone and idiom of their conversations, in the opening pages of the book, testify to the fact that Conrad is speaking from his own personal experience of ships and sailors. "The sea story," says Guerard,

is beyond praise; there is no need to defend the amount of space and emphasis Conrad gives it. The

⁹ L.L., I, p.77.

long third chapter on the storm is one of the summits of Conrad, and the pages on the righting of the ship one of the summits of English prose. This is, as few others, a real ship.¹⁰

Like The Shadow Line, The Nigger of the Narcissus "is personal experience seen in perspective with the eye of the mind" (XV, vii). However the personal nature of the experience accounts for only one half of the novel's strength and appeal. The other half is dependent on the fact, as Conrad tells Aubry:

I do not write history, but fiction, and I am therefore entitled to choose as I please what is most suitable in regard to characters and particulars to help me in the general impression I wish to produce.¹¹

While The Nigger of the Narcissus represents specific facts and circumstances, and while it gives the impression of holding the mirror up to nature, it also presents Conrad's own vision of life, his sense of values and emphases. "It is experience pushed a little (and only a little) beyond the actual facts of the case for the perfectly legitimate... purpose" (V, vii) of revealing " what is enduring and essential ...the very truth of ...existence" (III, vii). As Conrad says in an essay entitled "Books":

In truth every novelist must begin by creating for himself a world, great or little, in which he can honestly believe. This world cannot be made otherwise than in his own image: it is fated to remain individual and a little mysterious and yet it must resemble something already familiar to the experience, the

¹⁰ Guerard, p.105.

¹¹ L.L., I, p.77.

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thoughts and sensations of his readers.

It is apparent from this passage, and the other comments about the novel already mentioned, that Conrad was well aware of a tension in the nature of the novel between the demands of "history" and the demands of "fiction". As we have already seen, his recounting of his own personal experience, both in a general sense and in terms of his own voyage on the *Narcissus*, satisfied the claims of history by virtue of their particularity in time as well as place. The question which remains to be answered is: How did he make the experience related in The Nigger of the Narcissus universal? How did Conrad satisfy the claims of fiction?

The claims of fiction were met by Conrad in two ways: first, by giving the reader direct signs that the situation described in the novel was meant to have a universal significance, and second, by giving some of the characters symbolic significance. That the special situation of the crew on board the *Narcissus* is meant to have cosmic significance emerges incontrovertibly, for example, from Conrad's analogy between the ship and "a small planet" (p.29). Speaking of the ship, Conrad writes:

The sun looked upon her all day, and every morning rose with a burning, round state of undying curiosity. She had her own future; she was alive with the lives

of those who trod her decks; like the earth which had given her up to the sea, she had an intolerable load of regrets and hopes. On her lived timid truth and audacious lies; and, like the earth, she was unconscious, fair to see--and condemned by men to a ignoble fate. (pp.29-30)

Similarly, in The Nigger of the Narcissus, Conrad has created characters who are obviously representative. Frederick Karl, just to cite one example, sees Singleton as "the active and life-giving principle of the ship", and Wait as "the death-force who plays on and with the crew's inarticulate confusion."¹³ While this is too great a simplification, Karl is right in pointing out the symbolic or representative function characters have in the novel. Singleton himself, is not so much a symbolical as an allegorical figure, by which I mean that there exists a one to one correspondence between his name and the thing he represents. His portrait is inherently limited by the concrete concept Conrad had in mind when he created him and when he changed his name from Sullivan to Singleton.

Paradoxically, in the foreword to the novel, Conrad says about James Wait: "he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship's collective psychology and the pivot of the action."¹⁴ Why does Conrad deny Wait? Why does he say Wait is nothing? The answer to these questions and many more is to be found in what may be called Conrad's divided self.

¹³ Karl, p.113.

¹⁴ The Foreword to The Nigger of the Narcissus, p.ix.

It seems to me that there exists in Conrad a marked discrepancy between his "manifest" intentions, and his "latent" intentions. This discrepancy is of special significance as far as this thesis is concerned, for I believe that it can be traced to the inherent discrepancy between Conrad's "belief in the solidarity of all mankind in simple ideas and in sincere emotions"(XII, xi) and his deep understanding of human nature, and particularly in his "respect for individual rights "(VIII, vii). Put another way, The Nigger of the Narcissus reflects the tension in Conrad between the demands of society and the demands of the individual, between the claims of community and of solidarity and the recognition of the supremacy of the self. This discrepancy can be seen in part by an examination of the general framework of the novel.

The framework of the plot is a journey--a journey from Bombay to London, from east to west, from relative innocence to frightful experience. In general, critics agree that the overall narrative structure of the novel makes explicit Conrad's intended theme, which is best summed up in the expression "solidarity". Paul Wiley, for example, finds that "the curve of the journey which begins in the darkness of the Bombay roadstead and ends...in a flood of sunlight¹⁵ conforms to a pattern of life fulfilled through toil. "

¹⁵ Paul Wiley, Conrad's Measure of Man (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), p. 45.

Apparently Wiley takes the basic imagistic pattern of light and darkness in the novel as the index of Conrad's intended meaning. His analysis implies that the narrative structure of the novel holds the key to Conrad's intended meaning, and even more significantly, it implies that The Nigger of the Narcissus is so constructed as to admit of only one possible reading -- a reading which sees the novel as a celebration of solidarity. But is this indeed the case? The difficulty with this approach, besides the fact that it is a gross oversimplification, is that it has given rise to distortions that a close reading of the text would have avoided. To accept at face value the contention that the light-darkness imagery which permeates the book substantiates the reading that the sunshine at the end of the novel is an affirmation of the value of solidarity is to dismiss as completely irrelevant Conrad's persistent references to the crew as "a dark knot of seamen" and a "dark group" (p.172).

Similarly, the story doesn't really end, as Guerard seems to think, with "the men clinging for a last moment to their solidarity."¹⁶ To read the novel this way is to forget that Charlie and Belfast had earlier "wandered off alone" (p.170).

¹⁶ Guerard, p. 103.

as does the un-named narrator at the end of the story.

Moreover, to accept as final the un-named narrator's parting declaration that

you were a good crowd. As good a crowd as ever
fisted with wild cries the beating canvass of a heavy
foresail; or tossing aloft, invisible in the night,
gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale (p.173)

is to forget not only the cowardly behavior of the crew at the height of the storm and their near mutiny afterwards, it is also to forget Captain Allistoun's evaluation:

Too big for your boots. Think yourselves damn good men. Knew half your work. Do half your duty. Think it too much....I tell you--your best is no better than bad. (p.134)

Obviously then both the framework of the plot and the basic imagistic, light-darkness pattern cast considerable doubt on the reading of The Nigger of the Narcissus which sees the novel as a celebration of solidarity. Indeed, what the narrative structure and the imagistic pattern have shown is that there exists in the novel a critical discrepancy between "manifest" and "latent" intention. Conrad's presentation of the malingerer Donkin and the dying nigger, James Wait, further exemplifies this discrepancy.

Conrad's persecution of Donkin is as relentless as it is unmerciful. This could be attributed to the fact that Donkin is the embodiment of all that Conrad, as a seaman, hated and despised.

He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice,

that dodges the work on dark nights; that, aloft, holds on frantically with both arms and legs, and swears at the wind, the sleet, the darkness; the man who curses the sea while others work. The man who is the last out and the first in when all hands are called. The man who can't do most things and won't do the rest. The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea.

(pp.10-11)

Conrad's treatment of Donkin is at once one of the weaknesses of the novel as it is one of its strengths. As an essentially negative character, Donkin does not of necessity have to be totally devoid of substance and dimension. Conrad's relentless attacks and his constant heavy-handed ridiculing of him make Donkin's flaws too readily apparent. Like Singleton's, Donkin's presentation is limited by the concrete concept behind it, as evidenced by the above passage, and as his name implies. However, unlike Singleton, Donkin is no pasteboard, allegorical figure. It is one of the triumphs of Conrad's art that he is able to create in Donkin both the universal malingerer and a flesh-and-blood individual. The former is achieved by direct authorial comment and is a characteristic fault in Conrad's early works. The latter is accomplished by showing rather than telling. One example, which to me seems to be particularly revealing, comes early in the novel. It reveals Donkin's character more succinctly and convincingly than Conrad's

earlier authorial give-away. Turning up on board the *Narcissus* without anything to call his own except the clothes he is wearing, Donkin is treated charitably by the crew. But like the biblical debtor who was forgiven his debt by his master and then demanded that those who owed him money pay their debts Donkin, immediately after his charitable treatment at the hands of the crew of the *Narcissus*, turns right around and by his remarks to the Russian Finn, displays his own lack of charity.¹⁷

Conrad's attitude towards and treatment of James Wait differs considerably from his attitude towards and treatment of Donkin. As his name suggests, Wait is a procrastinator, a malingerer, and in this respect he is not unlike Donkin. Why then the difference in attitude and treatment of Wait and Donkin? Unlike Donkin, Wait is a person of considerable stature. The description of him as he is seen upon his arrival aboard the *Narcissus* makes this very clear:

The nigger was calm, cool, towering, superb. The men had approached and stood behind him in a body. He overtopped the tallest by half a head. He said: "I belong to the ship." He enunciated distinctly, with soft precision. The deep, rolling tones of his voice filled the deck without effort. He was naturally scornful, unaffectedly condescending, as if from his height of six feet three he had surveyed all the vastness of human folly and had made up his mind not to be too hard on it. (p.18)

17 See p.13, The Nigger of the Narcissus .

Like most of Conrad's principal characters, James Wait is a solitary figure who believes himself to be superior to everybody else. His sense of his own self-sufficiency is revealed when after his rescue from his cabin during the storm he talks as if he had pulled himself out without the aid of anyone. Similarly, his sense of superiority is revealed in the scene where, as answer to Donkin's question,

"Ye've done this afore' aven'tchee?" Wait replies:

"Last ship--yes. I was out of sorts on the passage. See? It was easy. They paid me off in Calcutta, and the skipper made no bones about it either....I got my money all right. Laid up fifty-eight days! The fools! O Lord! The fools! Paid right off." (p.111)

His absolute isolation is succinctly summed up in the sentence: "He cared for no one" (p.149). His stature is further enlarged upon by his symbolic presentation which suggests more complex and richer meanings than are implicit in Conrad's more straightforward presentations of Singleton, Allistoun, and Donkin. As further evidence of his stature I merely point to the title itself, a title which was arrived at only after considerable thought.

Another reason for the difference in treatment of Wait and Donkin is to be found in the fact that as a dying man, and especially as "one lone black beggar amongst the lot of us" (p.127), James Wait, unlike Donkin, appeals primarily to Conrad's understanding and his sense of compassion rather than to his sense of judgment. It should be noted that in judging the case of Donkin Conrad uses as his criterion of judgment,

his vast store of personal experience as a sailor; while in judging Wait's case, he uses his own personal sense of isolation and his own foreignness. The fact that as a malingerer Wait violates Conrad's own belief in "fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services" (VIII, vii) does not rule out his claim to sympathy, especially since, either consciously or unconsciously, Conrad himself identifies with Wait. Conrad judges Wait's case on the broadest possible grounds, those of a lonely human being cut off from his racial background and on the verge of death. Furthermore, in the story of the dying nigger of the *Narcissus*, Conrad sees not only his own isolated position reflected, but the lot of everyman as well. In James Wait's duping of himself Conrad presents mankind's universal refusal, in spite of the fact of death, to acknowledge his own mortality. While everyone knows that death comes to everyman, in the heart of everybody there lurks a secret belief in his own immortality. At the outset of the novel Wait is presented "as an emissary from some spiritual chamber of horrors." ¹⁸ However, as the novel progresses he becomes more human and reveals that, just like the rest of us, he too is prey to the weaknesses of all mere mortals. In the final

¹⁸ Bernard C. Meyer in his book *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 120-123, maintains that James Wait, like "virtually every major character in Conrad's fiction... is a self portrait of the author himself."

¹⁹ Ian Watt, p.93.

analysis, the "infinite poignancy" of Wait's story and the reason for the vast discrepancy between Conrad's presentation of and attitude towards Donkin and Wait rests in

the articulate appeal of [Wait's] humanity so strangely constructed from...weakness and from strength and many other interesting contradictions which affect his conduct and in a certain sense are meant to give a colouring to the actual events of the tale, and even to the response which is expected from the reader.
(S.T. p. 235)

Before concluding, I would like to touch upon two features of Conrad's craftsmanship in The Nigger of the Narcissus: his technique of telling the story and his visual imagery. All good critics of Conrad have remarked, in their different ways, upon the waywardness of the point of view in the novel. Surely, however, we must conclude, as Ian Watt does, that

E.M.Forster was in the main right, when he insisted, in Aspects of the Novel, that "the whole intricate question...resolves itself...into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says."²⁰

Almost any page of the novel chosen at random offers an abundance of examples of Conrad's use of visual imagery, of metaphor and simile. Consider, for example, the following passage:

The ship tossed about, shaken furiously, like a toy in the hands of a lunatic. Just at sunset there was a rush to shorten sail before the menace of a

²⁰ Ibid., p.81.

sombre hail cloud. The hard gust of wind came brutal like the blow of a fist....Out of the abysmal darkness of the black cloud overhead white hail streamed on her, rattled on the rigging, leaped in handfuls off the yards, rebounded on the deck--round and gleaming in the murky turmoil like a shower of pearls. (p.53)

It is by means of such analogies that Conrad is able to "make you see". The analogies in the preceding passage make visual and concrete the nature of the enemy the sailors are fighting, and underscore the passionate, irrational nature of the storm.

The great weakness of The Nigger of the Narcissus lies in Conrad's failure to convincingly dramatize the positive values. There is an element of nostalgia, of mistiness in his treatment of the crew which is undermined by the facts of the story as it is presented to the reader. The presentation of Singleton and the elegiac ending are largely the result of Conrad's belief in "the solidarity of all mankind". In this case his private vision results in propaganda. The view of the complexity of human character and social change is largely owing to his "respect for individual rights".

The fact that The Nigger of the Narcissus is not a perfect book in no wise invalidates Neville Newhouse's claim that it is Conrad's "first undisputed masterpiece". According to Guerard:

The Nigger of the Narcissus is...a memorial to a masculine society and the successful seizing of a "passing phase of life from the remorseless rush of time." ...

But it is also a study in collective psychology; and also, frankly, a symbolic comment on man's nature and destiny; and also, less openly, a prose-poem carrying overtones of myth.²¹

Some of the most striking features of The Nigger of the Narcissus are the tension between the personal and the universal, between the claims of history and the claims of fiction, and between Conrad's manifest and latent intentions. These tensions await for their ultimate expression in Lord Jim. In Lord Jim the demands of community, of solidarity and the demands of the individual and the self arise once again, particularly in connection with Jim and his case, but in a context quite different^{fr}, and much more complex than that of The Nigger of the Narcissus.

²¹ Guerard, p.100.

CHAPTER THREE

Action now shrouds, nor shows the informing thought;
Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
Shifted a hair's-breadth shoots you dark for bright,
Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so
Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.

ROBERT BROWNING

Of all Conrad's works, Lord Jim is perhaps the most controversial, the most ambiguous, the most abused, and often the least understood and appreciated. My purpose in this chapter is twofold: first, to show by examples how the Author's Note to the novel in particular, and the Notes and Prefaces in general, can enhance our understanding and appreciation of it, and secondly, to demonstrate the importance of the four principles of Conrad's aesthetic as an interpretive tool.

In the Author's Note to Lord Jim Conrad provides us with valuable information about the origin and composition of the novel, as well as information, the importance of which cannot be overemphasized, about the novel's center of interest --the Jim of the title. By his own admission his "first thought was of a short story, concerned only with the

pilgrim ship episode "and it was only later that he realized "that the pilgrim ship episode was a good starting-point for a free and wandering tale; that it was an event, too, which could conceivably colour the whole "sentiment of existence" in a simple and sensitive character"(p.viii).

These admissions together with his own comment in a letter to Edward Garnett, where he tells him that he has put his "finger on the plague spot. The division of the novel into two parts", ¹ have encouraged the position, held by some early reviewers and by some modern critics, that Conrad "had been bolted away with...that the work starting as a short story had got beyond the writer's control "(p.vii). Among those critics who have emphasized the negative effects of the division into two parts, I find the position of F. R. Leavis particularly interesting. According to Leavis,

Lord Jim doesn't deserve the position of pre-eminence among Conrad's works often assigned it: it is hardly one of the most considerable. There is, in fact, much to be said in support of those reviewers who (Conrad tells us) "maintained that the work starting as a short story had got beyond the writer's control," so that what we have is neither a very considerable novel, in spite of its 420 pages, nor one of Conrad's best short stories. The presentment of Lord Jim in the first part of the book, the account of the inquiry and of the desertion of the Patna, the talk with the French lieutenant -- these are good Conrad. But the romance that follows, though plausibly offered as a continuation of Jim's case, has no inevitability as that; nor does it develop or enrich the central interest, which consequently, eked out to provide

the substance of a novel, comes to seem decidedly thin.²

I find this evaluation of the novel completely unsatisfactory. To begin with, it raises some serious doubts about the validity of Leavis's critical approach and the assumptions governing it. Essentially, his approach is to evaluate the quality of a particular work according to his own personal likes and dislikes, an approach which tells us more about the critic than the work, and which is open to suspicion on intrinsic grounds alone. The passage quoted above reveals a crucial assumption governing Leavis's approach: the assumption that he knows what constitutes good Conrad and what the central interest of the story is. Is the talk with the French lieutenant good Conrad? Isn't the story of gentleman Brown also good Conrad? Or what about Jim's death? And what exactly is the central interest of the story? To argue that the second part "has no inevitability" "as a continued exhibition of Jim's case" is to focus attention on Jim not as "a personality but a fact" (p.4); it is to deny Jim's appeal to both sides of us. It is to forget our first glimpse of Jim as a water-clerk, and a "very popular" water-clerk at that. And it is to forget the important point Conrad makes by first presenting Jim as a water-clerk; that is, that while "a water-clerk need not pass an examination in anything under the sun ... he must have Ability in the abstract and demonstrate it practically" (p.3). Doesn't Leavis's criticism that "the romance ... though plausibly

² F.R. Leavis, pp. 189-190.

offered as a continued exhibition of Jim's case has no inevitability as that "deny what we see from the very beginning to be an essential part of Jim's character? Leavis's criticism is marred by his failure to see the Jim who is "gentlemanly, steady, tractable, with a thorough knowledge of his duties" (p.10). The structural weakness that Leavis perceives is a weakness only because he takes "the pilgrim ship episode" to be the central interest of the novel and completely disregards Conrad's statement that "the pilgrim ship episode...was an event,...that could conceivably colour the whole [my italics] 'sentiment of existence' in a simple and sensitive character "(p.viii). While it cannot be denied that the novel is divided into two parts, we must surely concur with Guerard's view that "it would be pedantic to attach much significance to the fact that Lord Jim divides into parts";³ that "in a novel of great and subtle artistry this structural flaw is one of the few aesthetic facts easy to detect and isolate, hence easy to overemphasize."⁴

Conrad's description of Jim as a "simple and sensitive character" reveals a great deal about his conception of the kind of person Jim is supposed to be. Summing up his view of Jim, Conrad says:

³ Guerard, p. 167.

⁴ Ibid., p.169.

...perhaps, my Jim is not a type of wide commonness. But I can safely assure my readers that he is not the product of coldly perverted thinking. He's not a figure of Northern mists either. One sunny morning in the commonplace surroundings of an eastern roadstead, I saw his form pass by -- appealing -- significant -- under a cloud -- perfectly silent. Which is as it should be. It was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was 'one of us.' (p.1X)

Upon close examination this passage yields a number of valuable interpretive clues. First of all, there is the recognition that Jim is both individual and universal; he is "not a type of wide commonness", and yet he is "one of us". Secondly, there is the emphatic position given to the phrase "he was 'one of us'". By arranging the paragraph so that the phrase is in the emphatic position, Conrad calls attention to the novel's central theme: Jim's case is every-one's case. As Elizabeth Drew points out:

at its lowest it means a member of the white race among the coloured races of the East, but it also denotes the men of honor and sensibility in contrast to the baseness of the Patna's other officers and of Cornelius and Gentleman Brown. In its widest meaning it includes the whole human race; all guilty, all with secret knowledge of tarnished ideals and acts of moral if not physical cowardice.⁵

The salient feature of Jim's presentation lies in the fact that he is "one of us". By making Jim "one of us" so that we cannot help but see ourselves mirrored in him Conrad is able "to capture the reader's attention, by securing his

⁵ Elizabeth Drew. The Novel: A Modern Guide to Fifteen English Masterpieces. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), pp. 159-160.

interest and enlisting his sympathies" (III, vii). Thirdly, there is Conrad's avowal that "Jim ... is not the product of perverted thinking" (p.ix). As Marlow says:

Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds, knocking at the back-door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy! (p.43).

Thus Marlow affirms Conrad's belief in the intuitive and the emotional and not the intellectual as the basis of art.

Fourthly, the above passage points out the most prominent imagistic pattern in the novel: the opposition of light and dark, mist and sunshine, daylight and dark. Jim is a "form" and an ambiguous form at that. As Marlow says:

I don't pretend I understood him. The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog -- bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country. They fed one's curiosity without satisfying it; they were no good for purposes of orientation. Upon the whole he was misleading. That's how I summed him up to myself after he left me late in the evening. (p.76)

Finally, the preceding passage reveals that sympathy and not judgment is at the crux of Conrad's presentation of Jim. As Conrad flatly states "it was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable to seek fit words for his meaning" (p.ix). Not Jim but the meaning Conrad, Marlow and the reader attach to Jim's case is the important feature of the novel. As Dorothy Van Ghent points out; "Jim's case is not an absolute but a relative; it has a being only in relation to what men's

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minds can make of it."

In the Author's Note to Lord Jim most of the major principles of Conrad's aesthetic are given formal expression. When Conrad insists upon the credibility of the frame surrounding Marlow's narration it is because of his "propensity to justify" his actions. In part, the frame is an attempt to produce the illusion of actuality, to make the fairy tale elements of the story credible. Strictly speaking, Lord Jim is not "a record of experience in the absolute sense of the word" but "the nature of the knowledge, suggestions or hints" (XV,v) in it can be traced to Conrad's twenty years of experience as a seaman and certain facts gleaned from hearsay and newspapers. However, while sources ⁷ can be found for many of the characters and incidents in the novel, Conrad's presentation often goes "beyond the actual facts ... for the perfectly legitimate ... purpose of bringing it home to the minds and bosoms of the readers" (V,vii). When Conrad says that "no Latin temperament would have perceived anything morbid in the acute

6 Dorothy Van Ghent. The English Novel: Form and Function. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1953), p. 287.

7 Jocelyn Baines, Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1960), pp. 252-255, gives a brief summary of sources for Lord Jim. J.D. Gordon, Joseph Conrad, The Making of a Novelist (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941, pp. 169-172, shows how Conrad gave to Jim some of his own experience and habits.

consciousness of lost honour "(p.ix) he is not only defending the credibility of his presentation of Jim's character and psychology, he is also dealing with a matter of "calm and deep conviction "(VIII, vii), a matter which has its roots in his Polish background. Moreover, Conrad's examination of the problem of "what life may be worth ... when the honour is gone" (p.148), explains the significance of many of the so-called digressions in the novel. It also points out something significant about the various characters: that they are ranked according to their consciousness of honor or the loss of honor and according to their sensibilities or lack of them.

Conrad's statement that "it was for me, with all the sympathy of which I was capable, to seek fit words for his meaning. He was 'one of us'" (p.ix) reveals several important elements of his aesthetic. In the phrase "to seek fit words for his meaning" he touches upon one of the more "purely artistic" considerations of this aesthetic, the search for the mot juste. While the original inspiration for Jim is emotional and intuitive, based on a glimpse of Jim's form--"appealing -- significant -- under a cloud -- perfectly silent--"his presentation is dependent on Conrad's finding "the fit words for his meaning". Moreover, Conrad's assumption that he knows Jim's meaning is based on the premise that art is an expression of the artist's inspiration, his sense of values. And the idea of necessity implied in the statement "it was for me [Conrad]" provides a clue to yet another important element of his aesthetic, his

belief that the function of art is to communicate, is to translate "passions into speech."

Before turning to a more detailed examination of the novel itself, I would like to pause for a brief consideration of some other Notes and Prefaces in the hope that they can shed some light on the text. It is my contention that the critic of Conrad is greatly aided in his attempt both to understand and appreciate him by a thorough knowledge of the Notes and Prefaces as a whole. So far in this chapter I have briefly considered the particular relevance of the Author's Note to Lord Jim with regard to Conrad's aesthetic. It is but a short step from this to underscoring the value certain of Conrad's comments in other Notes and Prefaces have as interpretive tools. One of the most striking features of Lord Jim is the use of Marlow. Anyone who would understand Lord Jim must understand the role and significance of Marlow. Unfortunately Conrad makes no mention of him in the Author's Note, but in the Author's Note to the volume entitled Youth Conrad makes the following remark:

'Youth' ... marks the first appearance in the world of the man Marlow, with whom my relations have grown very intimate in the course of years ... He was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a 'personator', a familiar spirit, a whispering 'daemon.' ... For all his assertiveness in matters of opinion he is not an intrusive person. He haunts my hours of solitude, when in silence, we lay our heads together in great comfort and harmony. ... I don't think that either of us would care much to survive the other... A most discreet, understanding man... (V,v-vi)

This passage is particularly interesting, chiefly for two reasons. First, it provides us with the essence of Marlow's character: "his assertiveness in matters of opinion", his discretion, and above all his "understanding". Secondly, it points out the close kinship which exists between Marlow and Conrad so that when Marlow speaks he often echoes Conrad. Marlow's comment, for example, that there are "a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently" (p.43) echoes Conrad's declaration in the Author's Note to Chance where he speaks of his "belief in the solidarity of all mankind in simple ideas and sincere emotions" (XIII,xi). This tells us very little about the actual role and function of Marlow in Conrad's fiction. In order to understand Marlow's function we must first of all determine his role. Essentially Marlow's role is that of "intermediary voice" or "inner narrator". His function is very similar to that of the old language teacher in Under Western Eyes, for which reason Conrad's comments in the Author's Note to that story are also applicable to Marlow's case in Lord Jim. Speaking about the old teacher of languages, Conrad says:

He was useful to me and therefore I think that he must be useful to the reader both in the way of comment and by the part he plays in the development of the story. In my desire to produce the effect of actuality it seemed to me indispensable to have an eye-witness of the transactions in Geneva. I needed also a sympathetic friend for Miss Haldin, who otherwise would have been too much alone and unsupported to be perfectly credible. She would

have had no one to whom she could give a glimpse of her simple emotions. (XI, ix).

Like the old teacher of languages, Marlow is both commentator and character. He comments on "the aspect, the character, and the fate" (XI, viii) of the characters, while at the same time, since he himself is also a character in the novel, he imparts to the story being told a sense of authenticity and produces "the effect of actuality". Moreover, like the old teacher of languages, Marlow functions both as "an eye-witness" and as "a sympathetic friend". Strictly speaking, Marlow is an eye-witness to the inquiry and very little else that pertains to Jim's case but "many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him at length, in detail and audibly "(p.33). Lord Jim is an account of one such instance.

The book is divided into two parts, according to view point: chapters one to four which are related from the inside, from Jim's view point, comprise the first part; and chapters five to forty five, which are related from the outside, from Marlow's view point, constitute the second part. The epigraph: "It is certain my conviction gains infinitely, the moment another soul will believe in it "which Conrad affixed below the title of Lord Jim, together with his comments in the Author's Note to the novel, underscores the importance of Marlow as "a sympathetic friend". Marlow's first appearance in the novel further emphasizes this aspect of his function:

Jim's eyes, wandering in the intervals of his answers, rested upon a white man who sat apart from the others, with his face worn and clouded, but with quiet eyes that glanced straight, interested and clear...The glance directed at him was not the fascinated state of the others. It was an act of intelligent volition... (pp. 32-33)

Were it not for Marlow in his function as sympathetic friend and understanding man, Jim's case would never have gotten beyond "the superficial how" to "the fundamental why" (p.56).

The following comment made by Conrad in the second Author's Note to Victory is another instance of the Notes and Prefaces proving their value as interpretive tools.

Writing about Heyst, Conrad says:

Heyst...had lost the habit of asserting himself. I don't mean the courage of self-assertion, either moral or physical, but the mere way of it, the trick of the thing, the readiness of mind and the turn of the hand that come without reflection and lead the man to excellence in life, in art, in crime, in virtue... (XIV,x)

The comment is not only relevant to Victory but is particularly relevant to Lord Jim as well. Jim, like Heyst and unlike Stein or Gentleman Brown lacks "the readiness of mind and the turn of the hand that comes without reflection". Accordingly, Jim must be labelled a failure only in the most conventional, the most superficial terms. While it cannot be denied that Conrad approves of the behavior of such dullards as Singleton in The Nigger of the Narcissus and the Malayan helmsmen and the French lieutenant in Lord Jim; all of them are much less impressive characters in their unthinking, automaton-like performance of their duties than Jim is in his dereliction

of his. Jim's very imperfection defines the terms of his appeal. It is the price he pays "for the devil⁸ish and divine privilege of thought" .

One final example must suffice to illustrate the importance of the Notes and Prefaces as an interpretive tool. Conrad's comment in the Note to Chance that "it is only for their intentions that men can be held responsible. The ultimate effects of whatever they do are far beyond their control..." (XI,xii) touches upon one of the central issues Conrad raises in Lord Jim: the problem of the maddening gulf between intention and action. The contrast between these two keeps both the character and the novel in a state of constant tension. A great deal of the tension in Lord Jim can be attributed to the existence of two conflicting views of the question of responsibility. On the other hand, there is the view that a man is responsible for his actions; on the other, that a man's actions are preordained and consequently he cannot be held responsible for them. The attitude that a man is responsible for his actions is epitomized by the inquiry which dominates the early part of the novel. It is significant that Jim alone accepts responsibility for his action as demonstrated by the fact that he is the only one who chooses to stand and face the inquiry. However, during the course

8 Morton Dauwen Zabel, ed., The Portable Conrad (New York: The Viking Press, 1947), p.731.

of the story the idea of responsibility is increasingly undermined by the idea of destiny. At a point in the story immediately preceding Jim's trip to Patusan Marlow makes the following remark: "A clean slate did he say? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock "(p.186). Jim's case depends for much of its effect on the absence of any clear cut boundary between his character and his fate. His final actions in Patusan are as much a result of his character as of his destiny.

Commenting on Conrad's Notes on Life and Letters

E.M.Forster, as quoted by F.R.Leavis in The Great Tradition, says:

What is so elusive about him is that he is always promising to make some general philosophic statement about the universe, and then refraining with a gruff disclaimer... These essays do suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapour rather than a jewel; and that we needn't try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this direction, nothing to write. No creed, in fact. Only opinions, and the right to throw them overboard when facts make them look absurd. Opinions held under the semblance of eternity, girt with the sea, crowned with the stars, and therefore easily mistaken for a creed.⁹

Many critics, accepting Forster's evaluation of Conrad at face

9 The Great Tradition, p.173.

value, have gone on to criticize his vision of things. Conrad's vision of things is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the Author's Note to The Mirror of the Sea where he says: "our world...seems to be mostly composed of riddles" (VIII,vii). Significantly, Marlow's last view of Jim sees Jim as standing at "the heart of a vast enigma...a tiny white speck, that seemed to catch all the light left in a darkened world "(p.336). To paraphrase Lionel Trilling, as great as the problem of Jim is, Conrad's book is not about Jim alone: it is about all of human life. The question that immediately arises is: what, according to Conrad, is life all about? Conrad's answer in Lord Jim is that, in the end, illusion is the only truth, illusion is man's strongest need, the most important function of his imagination. Illusion is "the best part of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality"(p.12). In answer to the question "how to be?" Stein replies "'To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream --and so-- ewiq--usque ad finem..." (p.215).

Not surprisingly, a number of critics have found Conrad's answer unsatisfactory. What these critics often fail to perceive is that Conrad's "vision of things...is indissolubly allied to the style in which it is expressed" (XIII,xii). Many of the difficulties and problems can be avoided by close and careful readings of the text. The most difficult feature of the novel is that it is full of antitheses which, although they give structure to the novel,

tend to no definite solutions or realistic syntheses.

Essentially, Lord Jim exists as a tension between two contradictory modes of experience, between contradictory ways of seeing and consequently contradictory ways of knowing. In the novel Conrad explores two different modes of experience, two different attitudes towards existence, by setting them together so that each emphasizes the peculiar characteristics of the other. As we have seen, the novel divides neatly into two parts: the first part concerns the Patna incident, and the second Jim's adventures in Patusan. On first reading, the two parts seem to co-exist independent of each other but on subsequent readings they blend into one another. Jim's case takes on meaning and definition from what happens in Patusan as well as what happened on the Patna. Only by including Jim's Patusan adventures could Conrad hope to show how "the pilgrim ship episode... could conceivably colour the whole 'sentiment of existence' in a simple and sensitive character"(p.viii); only by means of the systematic juxtaposition of Patna and Patusan could he explore the seemingly dual but actually inseparable worlds of action and being, good and evil.

Lord Jim cannot be completely exonerated from the charge that the material in the second part of the novel was either "imagined less well "or was" intrinsically less interesting".¹⁰ Ultimately the reason for this is to be found in

¹⁰ Guerard, p.168.

the failure of Conrad to convincingly dramatize the positive. The problem is akin to the problem Milton encountered in his attempt to describe God the Father convincingly in Paradise Lost. In The Nigger of the Narcissus Conrad employed a eulogy and cardboard cut-out characters, Singleton being the prime example, to praise his few simple notions. In Lord Jim, the weakness lies in the fact that Jim, the man of action, in spite of Conrad's best efforts, is not nearly as convincing or even as credible as the earlier introspective, highly imaginative Jim. Marlow inadvertently puts his finger on the nature of the difficulty when he says:

My last words about Jim shall be few. I affirm he had achieved greatness; but the thing would be dwarfed in the telling, or rather in the hearing. Frankly, it is not my words that I mistrust but your minds. (p.225)

Here Marlow points out the inherent weakness in the latter part of the novel: the paradox, as William Blake expressed it in his poem, "The Human Abstract", that

Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody Poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we.

As I have already said, Lord Jim exists as a tension between two irreconcilable antitheses. A brief consideration of these antitheses may help to elucidate the major elements of this tension. First of all, there is the important distinction which exists between appearance and reality. Speaking of Jim, Marlow says that he

would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes -- and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe. There are depths of horror in that thought. He looked as genuine as a new sovereign, but there was some infernal alloy in his metal. (p.45)

Another important antithesis in the novel is between thought and action. On the one hand, there is Jim's conviction that "when all men flinched, then -- he felt sure -- he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and seas" (p.9); and on the other, there is his fatal jump from the Patna, leaving hundreds of innocent people who had put their safety in his hands, to die a most horrible death. Yet another antithesis is between Jim's view of the Patna episode, aptly summed up in his terse comment " 'I had jumped'... 'It seems' " (p.111), and the view of simple men, like the French lieutenant, for example, who accept at face value Jim's act and who can say: "And so that poor young man ran away along with the rest" (p.145).

The most significant of these antitheses is to be found in the grouping of the characters in the novel. The majority of the characters in Lord Jim, like Singleton and Donkin in The Nigger of the Narcissus, lack complexity; they are simple men who accept things as they seem. They do not concern themselves with the "real" meanings of people or events, nor do they concern themselves with the apprehension of the "truth" about their fellow men or for that matter about themselves. They are content with "the superficial how" and do not bother themselves

with "the fundamental why" of any case. In Lord Jim these characters are used by Conrad to good effect. First, they bring a variety of different viewpoints to bear upon Jim and his case. Secondly, in sharp contrast to Jim's romanticism, these characters are by and large realists who "go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts" (p.143). And finally, even if they are unable to define what Jim is, they at least define what he is not.

One such realist, Chester, summing up Jim's case says:

' What's all the to-do about? A bit of ass's skin. That never yet made a man. You must see things exactly as they are -- if you don't you may just as well give in at once. You will never do anything in this world. Look at me. I made it a practice never to take anything to heart. (pp.161-162)

If we take Chester at his word we find that he is indeed a man who hasn't any illusions, but then neither is he an exemplary character. Realists like Chester permit Conrad to explore the gulf between realism and romanticism and, by showing the limitations of the realistic view of life, to show Jim's view of life to be at least more attractive if not better. The best example of Conrad's use of this double-edged device is to be found in chapter five where he juxtaposes Marlow's description of the captain of the *Patna* with his description of Jim. The following is Marlow's description of the captain:

He made me think of a trained baby elephant walking on hind-legs. He was extravagantly gorgeous too -- got up in a soiled sleeping-suit, bright green and

deep orange vertical stripes, with a pair of ragged straw slippers on his bare feet, and somebody's cast-off pith hat, very dirty and two sizes too small for him, tied up with a manilla rope-yarn on the top of his big head. (p.37)

In sharp contrast to the captain's description is this description of Jim:

[He] was an upstanding, broad-shouldered youth....He looked as unconcerned and unapproachable as only the young can look. There he stood, clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on....(p.40)

These juxtaposed descriptions of the captain and Jim demonstrates Jim's superiority to the captain. One obvious point about the two descriptions is Conrad's use of the two antithetical colours black and white. Here, as elsewhere, Conrad uses black primarily to symbolize evil and dirty deeds and he uses white to symbolize purity, goodness and cleanness. This colour symbolism reinforces the antithetical design of the novel. The contrast between realism and romanticism, between the captain and Jim, represents another important antithesis in the novel: the appeal, as Guerard calls it, to judgment and sympathy.

Summing up Jim's case Marlow says:

There were his fine sensibilities, his fine feelings, his fine longings -- a sort of sublimated, idealized selfishness. He was -- if you allow me to say so -- very fine; very fine -- and very unfortunate. A little coarser nature would not have borne the strain; it would have had to come to terms with itself -- with a sigh, with a grunt, or even with a guffaw; a still coarser one would have remained invulnerably ignorant and completely uninteresting. (p.177)

It is precisely because Jim doesn't have a coarser nature that he arouses the reader's interest and inevitably his sympathy. The basic moral principle underlying Lord Jim is judge not lest you be judged. When, as Conrad says, "this, our world...seems to be mostly composed of middles" (VIII, vii), it seems only natural to come to "the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (p.50). In the recognition that no man is good enough, that no man is without sin, and no man can therefore judge others from a standpoint of righteousness, lies the basis of the appeal to sympathy in Lord Jim.

The absence of a linear plot structure forces the reader to take an active role in the novel, as well as to identify with Jim. When, through the development of the story, the reader discovers the facts of Jim's case, it is already too late, because, consciously or unconsciously, the reader has already committed himself to a lenient view of Jim's case on the grounds that he is "one of us". Because the reader's initial response to Jim is on the emotional, intuitive level his first impressions are the impressions which last. Jim's case, as Marlow says, goes

beyond the competency of a court of inquiry: it was a subtle and momentous quarrel as to the true essence of life...a dispute impossible of decision if one had to be fair to all the phantoms in possession -- to the reputable that had its claims and to the disreputable that had its exigencies. (p.93)

If the blend of reputable and disreputable sometimes confuses us, like the pattern of light and darkness, and more particularly like the mist that envelops both Jim and the novel, it is perhaps no less than Conrad intended when he set out to "seek fit words for his [Jim's] meaning". There can be no final answers to the questions Jim's case provokes simply because the meaning of Jim's case is the meaning of existence. Conrad's desire to get to the heart of the matter makes Lord Jim one of the most searching artistic treatments of the problems and conflicts that are characteristic of the human condition.

CHAPTER FOUR

A truly great novel is a tale to the simple, a parable to the wise, and a direct revelation of reality to the man who has made it a part of his being.

-- MIDDLETON MURRY

When it was first published in 1912 Chance was accorded instant recognition and crowned with immediate commercial success. Since then, the novel has prompted considerable critical debate, and a great many of the critical responses it has elicited are at loggerheads with one another. Jocelyn Baines, for example, finds that

the characterization and the action are, in general, almost completely lacking in subtlety and the climax is crudely melodramatic, which makes Chance the least profound and least satisfying of Conrad's major novels.¹

Edward Crankshaw, on the other hand, has only the highest praise for the novel, claiming that

Chance is that rare thing, a work of fine spiritual significance and a technical tour de force. It deserves for itself the epithet "great" unqualified. The book itself is a great book, not merely the product of a great writer.²

¹ Baines, p.467.

² R.W. Stallman, ed., The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 298-299.

There are several obvious reasons for the present problematic relationship between Chance and its critics. The most obvious and often overlooked reason is to be found in the fact that, inevitably, the sensibilities of critics differ considerably. It should come as no surprise that critics with different views of life and art should arrive at different, even antagonistic, interpretations of a particular work. The generally accepted view that Conrad's career as a novelist can be understood in terms of an achievement-and-decline pattern also accounts, at least in part, for the problematic relationship. Yet another reason is to be found in the opposition between the relatively simplistic basic story and the complexity of the narrative method. What the critic makes of this opposition determines, in large measure, his attitude towards and evaluation of the novel.

Owing to this problematic relationship between Chance and its critics, I think that it is impossible to neglect the valuable clues which the Author's Note provides to the basic interpretative questions raised by the book. First of all, it accounts for the fact that the novel is divided against itself, to a certain extent, and, like the biblical house that is divided against itself, it cannot stand. Secondly, an obviously close connection exists between the split in the novel and the principal weakness of the book: the ostensibly slight subject which is given such an elaborate treatment. And finally, the Note points out that Chance, although not overtly didactic,

is inherently moralistic.

"Chance" is one of my novels that shortly after having been begun were laid aside for a few months. Starting impetuously like a sanguine oarsman setting forth in the early morning I came very soon to a fork in the stream and found it necessary to pause and reflect seriously upon the direction I would take...My sympathies being equally divided and the two forces being equal it is perfectly obvious that nothing but mere chance influenced my decision in the end...

At the crucial moment of my indecision Flora de Barral passed before me...(p.ix)

In this statement of Conrad can be found the source of much of the dissatisfaction with Chance. Instead of one, there are two centres of interest in the book, or, more correctly, there is no real centre of interest at all. While Conrad claims in the Author's Note that "it is Flora de Barral who is really responsible for this novel which relates, in fact, the story of her life" Chance suffers considerably from a lack of focus on the central character. In Lord Jim, for example, Jim is the ethical and emotional centre of everything. All the events and characters, no matter how insignificant they may appear on first reading, exist to reveal some facet of Jim's complex case. The various, so-called digressions there serve to show Jim from different angles or in a different light. In sharp contrast, the digressions in Chance serve to draw attention away from, rather than to, Flora's story. Moreover, Flora's history lacks the stature and the universal representativeness of Jim's case.

It may be objected that in the preceding chapter, in spite of Conrad's own frank admission, I argued that in

Lord Jim-another of Conrad's "novels that shortly after having been begun were laid aside for a few months"-the division of the book into two parts is at worst a small imperfection. Can't we give the same allowance to Chance? And if not, why not? The essential differences between Lord Jim and Chance should be immediately apparent. For one thing, in the Author's Note to Lord Jim, Conrad makes it perfectly clear that although "the few pages ... laid aside were not without their weight in the choice of subject...the whole was rewritten deliberately." (p.viii). This, however, is not the case with Chance. While it is not precisely clear at what point Chance becomes the story of Flora de Barral, it is clear that it was not until Conrad had written at least the first chapter. This chapter has at best only a tenuous relationship with Flora's story and the rest of the novel as a whole. "The first chapter," Guerard points out, "was written at least four years before the rest...It would seem to promise a retrospective novel of Powell's life, but Chance never develops into that."³ Another important distinction between Lord Jim and Chance lies in the different nature of the divisions in the two stories. While it cannot be denied that Lord Jim divides nicely into two parts, I do not believe that it can be convincingly argued that the two parts do not form a unified whole. Both parts are so inextricably bound up

³ Guerard, p.263.

with each other, that taken individually neither part is completely satisfactory. Chance, on the other hand, suffers not so much from a division into parts as a division into centres of interest. In the Patna and Patusan parts of Lord Jim -- even the names themselves betray the closeness which exists between the two parts -- Conrad is exploring both sides of the same coin. In Chance, he only glances at one side of two different coins. Jocelyn Baines verifies this contention in his critical biography of Conrad when he says: "the first section...really belonged to another story about a dynamite ship 'something like "Youth" -- but not at all like it' ".⁴ This is the part of Chance which is concerned with Powell, Captain Anthony and the Ferndale. Characteristically, Conrad attributes to Young Powell some of his own personal experiences--in this case, his own examination ordeal. Coming to the fork in the stream Conrad chose not to emphasize the story of young Powell and the dynamite ship, but chose instead to tell the story of Flora de Barral.

Flora, as Conrad depicts her, is a young woman who has been deprived of all her sense of worth as a human being by a series of traumatic experiences in her childhood and early youth. Because of the virtual failure of her parents'

⁴ Baines, p.459.

marriage, her father's business failure, disgrace, and subsequent imprisonment, her harsh treatment at the hands of her daemonical governess, her rejection by an old lady and a German woman, and her betrayal by Mrs Fyne, her closest friend, Flora reaches the inevitable conclusion that "Nobody would love me...Nobody could" (p.225). Nevertheless, when Captain Anthony declares his love for her she runs off and marries him. There results a simple misunderstanding between Flora and Anthony. Mrs. Fyne told Captain Anthony that Flora doesn't love him and produces as evidence a letter by Flora in which she says as much. However, she doesn't represent her true feelings in the letter, but writes only what she knows will anger Mrs. Fyne. Mrs. Fyne tells Anthony, that it would be "a shame to take advantage of a girl's distress" (p.251), and Anthony agrees, owing to his "intoxication with the pity and tenderness of his part" (p.261). This misunderstanding is soon set to rights and Flora and Anthony live quite happily together until he goes down with his ship after a collision with another ship, possibly the dynamite ship of the projected novel. The death of Captain Anthony and the intervention of Marlow paves the way for the projected marriage of Powell and Flora with which Chance ends.

This then is the "cigarette paper" version of Chance. On the surface at least there seems to be ample justification for sympathizing with the critic, against whom Conrad defends himself in the Author's Note, who attacked Chance

on the grounds that if Conrad "had selected another method of composition and taken a little more trouble the tale could have been told in about two hundred pages." (p.x).

The essence of this criticism is that Conrad's method of composition undermines the effectiveness of the novel, that the great weakness of the novel lies in the vast discrepancy between its thematic shallowness and its elaborate technique. Moreover, this criticism casts a disparaging light on the excellence of Conrad's craftsmanship.

Even the most superficial and cursory reading of Chance could not possibly fail to disclose that the structure of the novel involves an intricate interweaving of time sequences rather than a continuous chronological narrative. A single example will suffice to show this feature of the novel: the facts about Flora de Barral, her early family life, her father's business ventures and his subsequent failure and imprisonment, which are the first events to take place in chronological terms, are not related until chapters three and four. The question immediately arises: why didn't Conrad use a straightforward chronological plot structure? In part, the answer can be found in his own statement in the Author's Note where he says: "In doing this book my intention was to interest people in my vision of things which is indissolubly allied to the style in which it is expressed" (p.xii). In other words, Conrad used this particular method because it was natural for him to do so. This is the way he saw things and, by means of his style, he tried to communicate his vision to the reader.

The form of Chance mirrors Conrad's vision of things. Conrad could have told the story of Flora de Barral simply and from a single point of view, but to do so would have been to deny his avowed purpose which was "to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth manifold and one, underlying its every aspect" (III, vii).

A great many difficulties encountered by the critics of the novel can be attributed directly to their failure to ascertain what literary genre they are dealing with and to familiarize themselves with the conventions of that particular genre. I feel that this step is especially necessary when dealing with Chance since in this novel Conrad is dealing with a genre that is quite different from either The Migger of the Narcissus or Lord Jim. If, as Conrad claims in the Author's Note, "it is Flora de Barral who is really responsible for this novel which relates, in fact, the story of her life" (p.ix), then Marlow's comment that "the girl's [Flora] life had presented itself to me as a tragi-comical adventure" (p.310), clearly establishes the generic classification into which the novel falls. It is simply because many critics of Chance have failed to identify the novel as a tragi-comedy that there is such confusion about otherwise perfectly clear aspects of the novel. To cite just one example, Albert J. Guerard, who is generally a very fine critic of Conrad, finds fault with the ending of Chance: "the absurd final pages of Chance should simply be

subtracted and ignored."⁵ It is perfectly clear that Guerard has, for the moment at least, become unmindful of the very nature of comedy, has forgotten the central convention of the genre which is, as everyone knows, the happy ending. Chance is not a realistic novel; Conrad never intended it to be a realistic novel. It is quite possible not to like what it is; but the primary duty of a critic, it seems to me, is to see it as it is and not as something quite different. Many of the interpretive problems associated with the novel are the direct result of applying to Chance a kind of criticism it was never meant to satisfy.

One of the most common charges levelled against Chance is that the characterization is extremely crude. Jocelyn Baines, to cite just one of many critics, finds "the characterization... almost completely lacking in subtlety."⁶ This criticism will serve as a typical example of what I believe to be a serious misunderstanding of the nature of the novel. What Baines and numerous other critics of the novel fail to realize is that the basic story told in Chance is not a realistic story but a fairy tale. The basic story is, as nearly as possible, a pure melodrama or tragi-comedy. This aspect of Chance deserves more serious notice than it has received because not only does it define the limitations under which Conrad laboured but also defines the nature of Conrad's method in the novel.

⁵ Guerard, p.262.

⁶ Baines, p.467.

Because it is a tragi-comedy both the situation and the characterization are more or less "given". The basic story in Chance, that is, the story of Flora de Barral, has all the stock ingredients of a fairy tale: a handsome hero, a damsel in distress, and a wicked villain. The obvious danger is that in fulfilling their conventional roles the characters tend to seem to be merely shallow or foolish. One way in which Conrad tries to guard against this danger is to give to the situation and the characters a mythic significance. The titles of the two parts of the novel -- "The Damsel" and "The Knight" -- make it perfectly clear that Conrad sees Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony as archetypal characters. That Flora de Barral is seen as archetypal woman is indicated by comments such as the following: "Flora de Barral...was thoroughly feminine. She would be passive (and that does not mean inanimate) in the circumstances, where the mere fact of being a woman was enough to give her an occult and supreme significance. And she would be enduring, which is the essence of woman's visible, tangible power" (p.310). Similarly, Captain Anthony is described as "the prince of a fairy-tale" (p.288). As befits the prince in the fairy-tale, Captain Anthony had no training in the usual conventions, and we must remember that he had no experience whatever of women. He could only have an ideal conception of his position. An ideal is often but a flaming vision of reality" (p.262). Taken together, Flora and Captain

Anthony are, as Marlow says, "as untrammelled in a sense as the first man and the first woman" (p.210). Moreover, Conrad's characterization of Flora de Barral's father lends additional weight to this reading of Chance as a condensed version of the history of man. Marlow's explanation of the origin of De Barral's financial career insinuates an association between De Barral and the devil. As Marlow says: "Then one day as though a supernatural voice had whispered into his ear...he...went out into the street and began advertising "(p.78). De Barral's hatred of Captain Anthony is explicable on the grounds of the natural hatred of the bad for the good which is not only a commonplace element in the fairy-fale but a principal tenet of Christianity as well. Conrad has been faulted by some critics for being content to accept this primal antagonism as self-explanatory. What these critics often forget is that a naturally wicked villain and a naturally good hero or heroine are part and parcel of the tragi-comedy convention. The important point to remember is that by means of mythical associations, especially associations with the Edenic myth, the characters in Chance achieve a kind of universality.

This universality is reinforced by a vagueness of time. The fairy tale nature of the basic story of Chance is, in and by itself, a partial explanation of Conrad's use of non-chronological time. In addition, by destroying the distinction between yesterday, today and tomorrow, and by uniting, in the present of the reader, the past, the present

and the future, Conrad is able to transcend chronological time and to demonstrate the fallacy of chronological sequence -- a simplistic cause and effect view of human character. One of Conrad's greatest achievements in Chance is the way in which he humanizes the melodrama by means of his method. Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony are "The Damsel" and "The Knight" of the titles of the two parts of the novel, and their character as such is virtually fixed. Conrad, however, by means of his method does much to humanize them, to make them "infinitely minute" human beings as well as conventional characters in a melodrama.

Of the several techniques used in Chance to humanize the melodrama, the most effective is the use of multiple narrators. The events which make up the novel are related by three major narrators and several minor ones. The primary narrator is the anonymous "I" who is the recorder of the numerous conversations with Marlow which comprise the body of the text. Marlow himself is the second narrator and it is Marlow who has ferreted out and pieced together Flora's story as it appears in Chance. The events of Flora's life come to us filtered through Marlow's critical and analytical mind. The third narrator is Powell.

As a result of the use of multiple narrators there are passages in Chance which are several times removed from the reader. Marlow's relation of Powell's comment on Franklin's method of speaking provides an excellent analogy of the reader's position: "it was as though Mr. Franklin were thinking aloud, and putting him [Powell] into the delicate position of an unwilling

eavesdropper" (p.280). The objection raised by Henry James, as summarized by Ian Watt in Imagined Worlds, that "the narrative method of Chance...compromises the reader's sense of the reality of the events by drawing attention to the narrators rather than to the narrative"⁷ is based on the premise that Conrad only wanted to tell the story of Flora de Barral. This however may not be the case, in fact, it seems quite unlikely. Conrad's technique in Chance is the result of his seeing the novel as the story of Flora de Barral as interpreted by Marlow. It is only too apparent from a reading of the novel that the story itself is not Conrad's primary concern, but rather a secondary interest. Not the narrative but the narrators, especially Marlow, are the centre of interest in the novel. By means of the juxtaposition of the various narrators and their individual viewpoints together with a non-chronological presentation of the story Conrad is able to show different ways of looking at a familiar experience. When the various viewpoints are set beside each other, each criticizes the others but does not completely cancel them out. The ultimate result of the process is that we are left with a complicated overall view, a view which shows the broad outlines as

⁷ Ian Watt, "Conrad, James and Chance" in Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor, eds., Imagined Worlds (London: Methuen & Co., 1968), p.315.

well as the "minute" details.

Much of the critical attention given to Chance has been centred around the character and role of Marlow in the novel. Edward Crankshaw, speaking about Chance and Marlow's role in it, makes the following remarks:

Conrad desiring to write about Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony, wanting in his way to unveil his characters completely, yet denied by temperament the direct approach, having to deal in shades of apprehension and perception...needed in the story a character to talk round it. The qualifications required of such a commentator are neither common nor few: He must know, he must be experienced in life, he must perceive, he must understand, he must be sympathetic, and he must be interested in people for their own sakes...and the obvious man for the job is Marlow.³

"Marlow," says the narrator, "was patient and reflective. He had...the habit of pursuing general ideas in a peculiar manner, between jest and earnest" (p.23). "He's the sort," says Powell, "that's always chasing some notion or other round and round in his head just for the fun of the thing" (p.33). Marlow having "'gone about the seas prying into things considerably' (p.35)... 'appears to know something of every assôult that ever went afloat in a sailor's body'" (p.36). In addition, Marlow has "the inestimable advantage of understanding what is happening to others" (p.117). In this respect he is nicely contrasted with another of the narrators, Young Powell. As Marlow himself points out:

³ R.W. Stallman, pp. 296-299.

"all he could do was to look at the surface. The inwardness of what was passing before his eyes was hidden from him who had looked on, more imperceptibly than from me who at a distance of years was listening to his words "(p.426.) The conflicting ways of seeing in Chance tend to centre around the distinction between Powell's ability only to see the "surface" and Marlow's ability to see the "inwardness" of things, events and characters. Thus, the whole novel can be seen as a balance of sweet against sour, cynical against romantic. While actively exploiting some of the appeal of the tragi-comic, the novel contains within itself, in the person of Marlow, a critique of its very conventions. Marlow never allows the reader to view the story of Flora De Barral in the simple light of romance. He is essential to the novel both in his capacity as a character and as a commentator. As a character he functions to bridge the gap between the reader and the story, and as a commentator he serves to make an old story new and to humanize the melodrama. Marlow's cynicism serves as an ironic counter to the romanticism of the basic story and his insight into people and events contrasts sharply with Powell's lack of perceptiveness, or rather, his predilection for seeing only the surface. It is primarily through Marlow that Conrad is able to present different planes of reality in Chance. It is by subjecting the love story to the corrosive influence of Marlow's intellect that Conrad is able to fuse the romantic and the realistic and to give a

new meaning to the romantic.

This is not to deny that, to some extent, depending on the charity of the reader, Marlow undermines the total effect of the novel and the novel itself is, in some measure, a failure. The double function of Marlow, as character and commentator, leads Conrad into difficulties. Marlow, in his dramatic character, expresses his hatred of the gentler sex, in innumerable, tasteless tirades, such as the following:

As to honour --- you know--- it's a very fine mediaeval inheritance which women never get hold of...In addition they are devoid of decency. I mean masculine decency. Cautiousness too is foreign to them--the heavy reasonable cautiousness which is our glory. And if they had it they would make of it a thing of passion, so that its own mother--I mean the mother of cautiousness--wouldn't recognize it. Prudence with them is a matter of thrill like the rest of sublimary contrivances. 'Sensation at any cost,' is their secret device. All the virtues are not enough for them; they want also all the crimes for their own. And why? Because in such completeness there is power -- the kind of thrill they love most...". (p.63)

In Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim Marlow's analysis and commentary on the characters and events are generally quite perceptive, owing largely, I believe, to the fact that Kurtz and Jim are "potential" Marlows. Jim is to a very great extent a symbolic representation of Marlow's "invisible personality, an antagonistic and inseparable partner of his existence." ⁹ This is not the case in Chance. There is in

⁹ Lord Jim, p.93.

Chance a basic inconsistency between the misogynistic Marlow who functions as a character in the novel, and the sympathetic Marlow who is its controlling consciousness and its commenting interpreter.

Marlow's rhetoric at times causes the reader some embarrassment. Consider, for example, the following:

It was one of those dewy, clear, starry nights, oppressing our spirit, crushing our pride, by the brilliant evidence of the awful loneliness, of the hopeless obscure insignificance of our globe lost in the splendid revelation of a glittering, soulless universe. (p.30)

or

Coming up to the cottage we had a view of Mrs Fyne inside, still sitting in the strong light at the round table with folded arms...She was amazing in a sort of unsubtle way; crudely amazing -- I thought. Why crudely? I don't know. Perhaps because I saw her then in a crude light. I mean this materially in the light of an unshaded lamp. Our mental conclusions depend so much on momentary physical sensations -- don't they? (p.56).

Moreover, Marlow's status as a bachelor and a sailor, while it serves as an ironic counter to the basic story, also creates several problems for the reader. As the narrator observes:

profane men living in ships, like the holy men gathered together in monasteries, develop traits of profound resemblance. This must be because the service of the sea and the service of the temple are both detached from the vanities and errors of a world which follows no severe rule... A turn of mind composed of innocence and scepticism is common to them [seamen] all, with the addition of an unexpected insight into motives, as of disinterested lookers-on at a game. (pp.32-33)

In this passage the narrator points out several troublesome aspects of Marlow's presentation. First, the sceptical, cynical, superior character who is Marlow grates on the reader's sensibilities. His god-like position of a disinterested looker-on allows him the luxury "of being amused by the misfortunes of a fellow creature "(p.49), but only at the cost of humanity. When at the end he assists Powell in his wooing of Flora he regains some measure of his humanity, but only at the expense of his credibility. Secondly, Chance is only superficially a sea-tale and Marlow is only superficially a sailor. In short, Chance concerns itself mostly with land values as opposed to sea-values with the result that Marlow exists not as a sailor among sailors, but a sailor among landlubbers, and a man in a woman's world. The following passage sums up what is wrong with Marlow as he appears in Chance:

Marlow had retired from the sea in a sort of half-hearted fashion some years ago...From year to year he dwelt on land as a bird rests on the branch of a tree, so tense with the power of brusque flight into its true element that it is incomprehensible why it should sit still minute after minute. The sea is the sailor's true element, and Marlow, lingering on shore, was to me an object of incredulous commiseration like a bird, which, secretly, should have lost its faith in the virtue of flying. (pp. 33-34).

This internal clue explains in part some of the difficulties Marlow presents to the reader in Chance. As a sailor Marlow, in Chance, is out of his natural element; he has lost his faith

in the old sea-values, and his misogyny conflicts with his natural sympathy. In addition, it also serves as a partial explanation of the false start with which the novel gets under way.

Furthermore, while it is true that Marlow's character and comments produce a remarkable tension in the novel, they also work to create a sense of uneasiness on the reader's part. Readers and critics alike have found Marlow's intervention, which leads to the proposed marriage of Flora and Powell, a stumbling block. Why should Marlow, the misogynist, the unromantic, suddenly turn around and give his approval to the romantic by turning match-maker. The obvious explanation is that it is dramatically necessary, a tragi-comedy must have a happy ending, preferably a marriage since marriage is the traditional symbol of the means by which the world is renewed. Both the reader and the critic must be willing to accept the conventions with which Conrad is working. Another, and more important, reason is that Conrad himself had a predilection for the romantic, for the idealistic, and this in spite of the fact he was well aware of its faults and difficulties. While Chance criticizes the ideal of life that is romance, in the end it suggests that this ideal can survive only if it takes into account the rest of life. The tension between the romantic and the unromantic in the novel, while it makes the reader uneasy, greatly enhances its interest. The tension even extends to the possible judgments the reader can make on the final

action. The reader is placed in an uneasy position somewhere between condemnation and admiration. He cannot simply reject Powell and the romantic view of life he stands for; and yet he cannot completely accept it, for as Captain Anthony has already clearly shown, the romantic ideal is slightly absurd, is too narrow and confining, is in a word not realistic enough. Consequently, the only tenable position is the position adopted by Marlow. As Robert Penn Warren comments in his introduction to Nostromo:

the last wisdom is for man to realize that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth.¹⁰

Marlow's attitude towards the romantic at the end of Chance approximates Conrad's own attitude towards the romantic as expressed in the Author's Note to Within the Tides:

the romantic feeling of reality was in me an inborn faculty. This in itself may be a curse but when disciplined by a sense of personal responsibility and a recognition of the hard facts of existence shared with the rest of mankind becomes but a point of view from which the very shadows of life appear endowed with an internal glow. And such romanticism is not a sin. It is none the worse for the knowledge of truth. It only tries to make the best of it, hard as it may be; and in this hardness discovers a certain aspect of beauty.

When compared to The Nigger of the Narcissus or Lord Jim, Chance appears to be a definitely inferior novel.

¹⁰ Nostromo with Introduction by R.P. Warren (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p.xxiii.

Nonetheless, in its own right it is an extraordinary book. This paradox can be explained by the fact that like the other late works, Chance will always be judged according to two standards. The first is the standard set by Conrad himself in such earlier works as The Nigger of the Narcissus, Lord Jim, The Secret Agent, and Nostromo. The second standard is dependent on the recognition of the genre of the book. Chance must be recognized as a tragi-comedy and must be judged accordingly. This does not alter the fact that there are several good reasons for the ultimate failure of Chance, all of which are directly or indirectly related to Conrad's failure to adhere to his own aesthetic principles.

As Jocelyn Baines points out, "of all Conrad's novels Chance is perhaps the least dependent on a source in his experience or his reading."¹¹ While it is true that the basic story of Chance does deal with experience of the sort Conrad himself called "general knowledge, fortified by earnest meditation", it is equally true that this type of experience fails in its appeal to the intellect and emotions of the reader. Moreover, as the basic story is to a great extent a reiteration of an age-old fairy tale, the reader is already in possession of the basic facts of the story. Consequently, the attention of the reader is not held by the story but rather by the method. In Chance Conrad's theory of art as

¹¹ Baines, p.466.

communication is in conflict with his craftsmanship, or, put another way, it is in conflict with his theory of art as construction.

The active participation on the part of the reader required by Chance is an essential element of the book. Like Marlow the reader is both in the story and a spectator of it. But unlike Marlow, the reader is not able to identify with Powell, Captain Anthony, and the anonymous narrator, nor is he able to identify with Flora de Barral. The main reason for this is that in Chance idea has replaced emotion, sentiment has replaced sympathy. My feeling is that Chance is a failure ultimately because Conrad was trying to write a moral novel, and to write such a novel, a novelist must be detached and in complete control of his material. Conrad is not completely in control of his material in Chance. In the final analysis, I must concur with Guerard's evaluation of Chance:

There are times in Chance when the techniques of Lord Jim seem borrowed ~~for no~~ good reason...But... at least method realized the material, and makes meditation dramatic. Whatever, Conrad's failure to use all the dramatic advantages of his "system" and however seriously irony has been weakened by a new tenderness, Chance remains a serious and important novel. It is not major Conrad, but it is the work of a mind still capable of significant invention. ¹²

¹² Guerard, p.272.

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