A collection of essays on Joseph Conrad and narrative theory could take many
forms, each of which would involve trade-offs in the volume’s contributions to
Conrad studies and to narrative theory. The collection could focus on one of
Conrad’s narratives and treat it from multiple theoretical perspectives, giving
us something like “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Heart of Darkness.” The trade-
offs here of course would be between depth and breadth. Heart of Darkness
studies would be well served but Conrad studies less so. Students of narrative
theory would benefit from the survey of its possibilities in relation to a single
text, but that benefit would come at the expense of demonstrating the full
explanatory power of any one theory. Alternatively, the collection could focus
on a single theoretical perspective and apply it to a range of Conrad’s narra-
tives—something along the lines of What Feminist Narratology Can Do for
Conrad Studies and Vice Versa. Here the trade-offs would be flipped. The col-
lection would offer a broader contribution to Conrad studies and a narrower,
though deeper, contribution to narrative theory.

A third alternative would be for the collection to analyze a range of Con-
rad’s texts by means of a range of theories, and, in one respect, that is the
route taken by Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre. This collection
offers commentary on the following Conrad texts, with many appearing in
more than one essay: *An Outcast of the Islands*, “Amy Foster,” “Karain,” “Falk,” *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’, Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, Nostromo, Under Western Eyes,* and *A Personal Record.* And the collection draws on a broad range of narrative and critical theorists: Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Alan Palmer, Dorrit Cohn, Peter J. Rabinowitz, and Gérard Genette are all cited here. But this description of the collection stops too soon because it does not do justice to Conrad’s role in the enterprise. Conrad is not just the subject of theoretical analysis but also the major narrative theorist. In other words, the guiding assumptions of this collection are that Conrad’s practice as narrative artist consistently implies an engagement with issues identified by narrative theory, and that bringing out those engagements will offer substantial contributions to both Conrad studies and narrative theory.

*Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre* traces its origins to a symposium on Conrad and narrative theory at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo in September 2005. The symposium was organized by Jakob Lothe, who directed the CAS 2005–2006 research project “Narrative Theory and Analysis.” The authors of this volume’s essays all attended the symposium, and all of the essays (except Gail Fincham’s) had their first incarnations as papers delivered at the symposium. The authors revised those papers, first, in light of the spirited discussions they provoked, and then twice more, first, in response to a review by the co-editors, and, then again, in response to the review by the two readers for the OSU Press.

As these essays demonstrate, Conrad’s writing practice implies an engagement with issues of narrative theory in two ways. First, Conrad peppers his tales with comments on their status as narratives—on their mode of delivery, the situation of the telling, the response of listeners and readers, and other issues. Second, Conrad’s execution of his various narrative projects is remarkably detailed, insistent, and original. He often employs sharp disjunctions between fabula (the chronological sequence of events) and sjužet (the order of appearance of those events in the narrative text), disjunctions that go hand in hand with his use of innovative temporalities and plots. He often involves multiple agents in the narrative transmission. Such transmissions involve experiments with narrative frames and embedding as well as with audiences. Conrad also draws on the discourses of multiple levels of society that create the kind of heteroglossia that Mikhail Bakhtin regards as essential to the power of the novel as a genre. In addition, Conrad deploys the conventions of multiple genres, including such broad ones as fiction and history and such slightly narrower ones as sketch and tragedy. These inventive syntheses of genre as well as his experiments with temporality influence his use of different kinds
and degrees of narrative closure. And as any reader of Conrad knows, this list could be greatly extended.

In light of these considerations, the contributors to this volume look as much to Conrad’s practice as they do to narrative theory as they conduct their various analyses. Conrad’s practice as a writer provides a site both to apply and to test existing theory, to see what kind of mutual illumination the two subjects can generate. The specific issues that the contributors take up fall readily into the four groups named in our subtitle: voice, sequence, history, and genre. But before we introduce the specific projects of the individual essays, we would like to contextualize them by providing a short history of work on Conrad and narrative theory. Our goal is not to offer a comprehensive account of previous scholarship but rather to indicate the major trends, some especially influential studies, and the way our collection fits into this history.

For heuristic purposes, we distinguish between two main variants among previous studies of Conrad and narrative theory. First, there is a large body of Conrad criticism that, while not explicitly engaged with narrative theory, nevertheless incorporates observations about Conradian narrative—whether tied to the analyses of individual texts or generalizing about a range of texts—that are theoretically productive. Second, there is a smaller portion of Conrad studies that engages actively and explicitly with the findings of narrative theory and through that engagement seeks illumination of both Conrad and those findings. Broadly speaking, there are more examples of the second variant after about 1980, but the first is still predominant.

This distribution is not surprising, since narrative theory as a distinct and systematic area of inquiry is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that has become much more prominent after 1980. Had narrative theory existed as a well-known body of criticism at the turn of the twentieth century, many reviewers of Conrad’s fictions might have been a little less frustrated and dismissive. Here is a representative comment by an early reviewer of Nostromo: “The sequence of events has to be sought painfully through the mazes of irrelevancy with which the author tries to mislead us. . . . It shows signs of haste both in style and construction” (John Buchan, unsigned review in Spectator, November 19, 1904). In this context, one cannot but admire the critical insight of the reviewer who in the autumn of 1900 observed in the New York Tribune that in Lord Jim “what the author has to say is absorbing, but even more so is the way in which he says it” (Norton critical ed. 1996, 393).

One can draw a line from this observation to a passage in Dorothy Van Ghent’s 1953 discussion of Lord Jim in The English Novel: Form and Function. Considering Jim’s actions, including his desertion from the Patna, Van Ghent asks:
What, then, is the act? The question defines Conrad’s method in this book, his use of reflector within reflector, point of view within point of view, cross-chronological juxtapositions of events and impressions. Conrad’s technical “devices,” in this case, represent much more than the word “device” suggests: they represent extreme ethical scrupulosity, even anxiety; for the truth about a man is at once too immense and too delicate to sustain any failure of carefulness in the examiner. ([1953] 1961, 237; original emphasis)

Van Ghent goes on to stress Conrad’s need for Marlow as the main narrator in the novel: “Marlow has to exist. For Jim’s ‘case’ is not an absolute but a relative; it has a being only in relation to what men’s minds can make of it. And Marlow provides the necessary medium of an intelligent consciousness” (237; original emphasis).

These comments remain critically perceptive and persuasive—about Jim’s case, about Marlow’s importance, and about the interaction of technique and theme. Furthermore, they anticipate such recent developments in narrative theory as the interest in the relation between technique (“devices”) and ethics. In this respect, Van Ghent is an especially compelling example of what we called the first variant of studies of Conrad and narrative theory.

Albert Guerard, writing five years after Van Ghent, provides an example of a different kind. In Conrad the Novelist (1958), he identifies a series of paradoxes that can be abstracted from Conrad’s works and that establish some of the most original and important thematic tensions of his fiction. One such tension is “[a] declared fear of the corrosive and faith-destroying intellect—doubled by a profound and ironic skepticism” (57). Guerard considers “Conradian technique” as extremely important for the revelation of the thematic tensions, and he introduces the concept of a “Conradian voice.” Nevertheless, he is primarily concerned with Conrad’s thematics, and he offers no systematic discussion of Conrad’s narrative methods.

A third major example of the first variant is Ian Watt’s Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (1980), which not only offers a wide-ranging thematic and contextual discussion of the early Conrad but also presents thought-provoking close readings of The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, Heart of Darkness, and Lord Jim. These analyses all rely on Watt’s paying closer attention to Conrad’s narrative methods than had been customary in earlier Conrad criticism. For example, Watt coins the term “delayed decoding” (175) by which he means Conrad’s technique of giving information whose specific import is not revealed until later in the narrative. He may, for example, describe an effect but withhold its cause, or describe an action but withhold a significant element of its context.
A simple example, one in which the delay between initial information and the information necessary to complete the decoding is minimal, is Marlow’s exclamation in *Heart of Darkness*, “Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!” (149). Some of the points elaborated by Watt can be found in an earlier form in two important studies of the late 1970s: Cedric Watts’s *Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”: A Critical and Contextual Discussion* (1977) and Jacques Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* (1978). Part of the value of Ian Watts’s study resides in the way he synthesizes earlier Conrad criticism and then draws upon that synthesis in his own readings of the three key Conrad texts. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* remains a valuable study for scholars working in both of the critical variants we have discussed.

J. Hillis Miller and Edward Said both started writing about Conrad in the 1960s, and not surprisingly their early work falls into the first variant. When they returned to Conrad later in their careers, after the theory revolution (to which of course they were both significant contributors), their work falls into the second variant. Furthermore, their different theoretical commitments—to deconstruction and postcolonial studies respectively—demonstrate the more general point that constitutes one of the underlying assumptions of this book: Conrad’s narratives provide fertile ground for theorists with widely divergent interests. Miller’s *Poets of Reality* (1966) includes an influential thematic discussion of Conrad’s pervasive nihilism, one that regards Conrad’s narrative methods as an especially apt means of dramatizing this Weltanschauung. In this respect, the relation between theme and technique in Miller’s book is similar to their relation in Guerard’s. Miller does not return to Conrad until 1982, by which point he has become a committed deconstructionist. Unsurprisingly, his analysis of *Lord Jim* in *Fiction and Repetition* gives more attention to Conrad’s language and his technique than to his themes: “the textuality of a text, a ‘yarn’ spun by Conrad, is the meaning of its filaments as they are interwoven in ways hidden from an objectifying eye” (1982, 23). The novel does not unequivocally explain the *why* of Jim’s actions, because such textuality makes any determinate explanation impossible. In 1985, Miller wrote a similarly brilliant analysis of *Heart of Darkness* entitled “*Heart of Darkness Revisited.*” This analysis deconstructs the tropes in the frame narrator’s comment that for Marlow the meaning of a tale “was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (105). In recent years, however, Miller has toned down his claims about the indeterminacy of narrative texts. In a 2002 essay on *Heart of Darkness* published in *Conrad in Africa* (ed. Gail Fincham and Attie de Lange), Miller sharply disagrees with those who contend that Conrad’s
novel is racist and imperialist. He characteristically analyzes a variety of major tropes in the novel as a way of emphasizing its literariness and of arguing that such literariness is part and parcel of *Heart of Darkness*’s “powerful exemplary revelation of the ideology of capitalist imperialism, including its racism and sexism” (39). Miller’s essay on *Nostromo* in this collection continues in much the same vein. Resisting the idea that literary language and literary texts have univocal meanings, Miller nevertheless proposes that Conrad’s novel has sufficient determinacy to serve as an uncanny commentary on global capitalism and U.S. imperialism in the early twenty-first century.

Edward Said’s first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), is primarily a biographical study, but the long section on *Nostromo* in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) and the chapter titled “Conrad: The Presentation of Narrative” in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (1984) are thought-provoking, critically innovative explorations of Conradian techniques. Aided by his discussion of Conrad’s novel, *Beginnings* is also a significant contribution to narrative theory, specifically the problem of narrative beginnings. Similarly, Said’s 1984 essay considers the complicated relation of Conrad’s narrative technique to narrative issues and to historical and literary developments, noting that his fiction is “great for its presentation, not only for what it was representing” (90).

Peter Brooks is a third influential theorist of the 1980s who was drawn to Conrad’s fiction. His discussion of *Heart of Darkness* in *Reading for the Plot* (1984) is indebted both to the French narratologists and to Brooks’s own psychoanalytically based concept of plot. Referring to Todorov’s notion (in *Les Genres du discours* 1978, 169) that Conrad’s novella assumes the form of a journey toward an empty center, Brooks also focuses on the narrative’s own desire to reach its end as well as the many repetitions, delays, and deferrals that postpone that end.

Less obviously indebted to structuralist narrative theory and more illustrative of further work within the first variant are two 1980 studies. Werner Senn’s *Conrad’s Narrative Voice: Stylistic Aspects of His Fiction* demonstrates how closely matters of style are related to other elements of narrative in Conrad’s fiction. For example, Senn’s observation that Conrad’s “free indirect style forms an extraordinarily flexible instrument of narration which Conrad handles with increasing competence for a variety of purposes and effects” (173) shows that Senn is aware of the ways in which a single technique can have multiple effects depending upon its interaction with other components of a narrative. In this respect, Senn’s work echoes one of the critical premises underlying many of the essays in this book. William Bonney in *Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad’s Fiction* elaborates on Mark Schorer’s point in his classic 1948 essay “Technique as Discovery”: that “technique [not only] contains
intellectual and moral implications, but that it *discovering* them*’’ ([1948] 1967,
72; original emphases). Bonney argues that we need to investigate by the use of “contemporary theoretical criticism . . . Conrad’s serious manipulation of
traditional generic and characterological models” (ix). Bonney’s call for such
investigations is, in a sense, answered by Jakob Lothe’s essay on *Lord Jim*
in this volume.

Later in the 1980s, Lothe undertook the first systematic study of Con-
Genette’s *Narrative Discourse* as a primary theoretical basis but supplementing
this structuralist narrative theory with elements of deconstruction (with Hillis
Miller as the main exemplar) and rhetorical narrative theory (with Wayne
C. Booth as the main exemplar), Lothe explores various modes of Conradian
narrative. In a study which complements and parallels Lothe’s work, Jeremy
Hawthorn in *Joseph Conrad: Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment*
(1990) analyzes significant aspects of Conrad’s narrative technique (free indi-
rect discourse in particular), concluding that, for Conrad, narrative craftsman-
ship is never enough: only when a moral and ideological anchorage informs
his narrative strategies does he produce great fiction.

Since the 1980s, academic Conrad studies have become more diversified.
There is a steady flow of new books and articles, many of which deal with
issues of interest to narrative theory. For example, *The Cambridge Companion
Narrative,” and several of the Companion’s other essays also comment on the
narrative intricacies of Conrad’s short fiction and novels. This last point also
applies to many contributions to Conrad journals such as *Conradiana, The
Conradian, and L’Époque Conradienne,* and to several recent book-length
studies of Conrad. Characteristically, these studies tend to link the issue of
Conradian narrative to other critical concerns. Although it is impossible to
give a full picture, we briefly mention four examples of such studies, stressing
the following key words: modernism, imperialism, impressionism, and
space.

In *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (1990), Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan
relates Conrad’s work to the cultural crisis of the late nineteenth century. Her
discussion of Conrad as “a modernist at war with modernity” (5) leads Erdinast-
Vulcan to consider the thematic tensions of Conrad’s fiction. Highlighting
the narrative dimension of these tensions such as that between the virtues of
heroic societies and modern ones, she draws on Alasdair MacIntyre’s defini-
tion of man as “a story-telling animal” (1997, 216), noting that “we all con-
strue our sense of identity in terms of our role in the narrative we are part of”
(38). Thus, Erdinast-Vulcan’s study exemplifies the critical practice, appar-
ent from the mid-1980s and inspired not least by MacIntyre’s *After Virtue,* of
considering narrative not just as a set of technical tools (as some applications of French structuralism tended to do), but also as a means of communication and as a mode of being. There is a link between such an understanding of narrative and Erdinast-Vulcan’s discussion, in the present volume, of Conrad’s sophisticated literary treatment of historiographical issues in *Nostromo*.

In *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition* (1993), Andrea White draws on the work of Michel Foucault in her concern with how Conrad’s narratives respond to British travel writing and adventure tales of the nineteenth century. Where most of those narratives support the ideology of imperialism, Conrad provides a different, more sophisticated way of engaging with the imperialist project. White notes, for example, that “in suggesting that ‘civilization’ is exactly the term that needs redefinition, Marlow [in *Heart of Darkness*] challenges the very assumption of the discourse that other first-person narrators of adventure fiction had sought to stabilize; his narration unfolds its failure” (183).

White’s book exemplifies an approach to Conrad which, though mainly thematic and ideological in its critical orientation, incorporates a number of perceptive observations on narrative issues. In common with Christopher GoGwilt’s *The Invention of the West* (1995), it is thus illustrative of the first variant we have identified, but it also signals that the points of transition between the two variants become increasingly blurred. Subtitled *Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire*, GoGwilt’s study argues that the crisis of modernity observable in European culture toward the end of the nineteenth century is closely related to, and actually a catalyst for, the formation of the idea of the West (or Western culture). For GoGwilt, Conrad’s complex fictional representations, engendered and shaped by his innovative narrative methods, provide a particularly illustrative example of this transition: a late-Victorian ideological remapping whose effects or “aftertrimmings” are observable even today. There are interesting connections between GoGwilt’s sophisticated discussion and some of the key points which Christophe Robin and Hillis Miller make about *Nostromo* in their contributions to this volume.

Inspired by GoGwilt, John Peters argues that “Conrad particularly seems to question a certain popularized and monolithic view of western civilization that saw its methods and practices as originating from absolute truth” (2001, x). In *Conrad and Impressionism*, Peters uses the concept of impressionism to explore the interrelations among Conrad’s narrative techniques, his philosophical beliefs, and his politics. His analysis of the connection between impressionism and technique is notable for its attention to Conrad’s reader. Whereas “the ordered narration of pre-impressionist novels presents the world of a universal observer . . . the impressionist novel tries to represent the
immediate epistemological experience, so the reader almost becomes the one encountering phenomena, just as the characters do, but not in the after-the-fact reflection of traditional narrators” (24).

Activating elements of narrative theory in their critical investigations of Conrad, these studies by Erdinast-Vulcan, White, GoGwilt, and Peters illustrate the close connection between narrative theory and interpretation on the one hand, and between narrative theory and other critical concerns on the other. Several other studies do something similar. Notable among them is Zdzisław Najder’s *Conrad in Perspective* (1997), which uses the term “perspective” in ways that both connect with and diverge from its standard uses in narrative theory. A variation on this approach that gives an especially prominent place to narrative theory can be found in Brian Richardson’s analysis of what he calls the “posthumanist” dimension in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* in the important collection *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century* (2005). Richardson insightfully shows how Conrad effectively and innovatively employs “we” narration in the novella to create “an original—in fact, virtually unprecedented—form for presenting a collective consciousness” (213).

In sum, over the past fifty years Conrad and narrative theory have been very good for each other, and over the past fifteen or so the boundaries between our two heuristic variants have become more permeable. Many of the essays in this book exhibit a similar permeability, one that leads us to forgo such categorization of them in favor of a succinct presentation of their projects. We find it noteworthy that the eventual essays resulting from the Conrad symposium at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo have fallen into recognizable groups even as the collection as a whole considers a wide sweep of narrative issues and Conradian narratives.

**Voice**

Despite the misgivings of many of his early reviewers, as Zdzisław Najder points out in the opening essay in this volume, “for an artistically innovative and challenging writer [Conrad] has been over the years exceptionally popular” (23). We open this volume with three essays that address in different ways Conrad’s tantalizingly complex development of the resources of voice in his fiction. Conrad’s innovatory manipulation of voice is arguably at the heart of his seemingly paradoxical ability to engage and enthrall the common reader while challenging the theorist with the complexity of his narrative technique.

Najder calls for more attention to the ways in which “the personal voice in Conrad’s fiction” engages the reader, and his essay offers some insights that
may surprise even those of us who have lived with Conrad’s fiction for a long
time. It is unlikely that anyone will be taken aback by Najder’s assertion that
“one of the great strengths of Heart of Darkness lies in Marlow’s convincing
role as a narrator,” but many will be brought up short by his additional point
that “if we try to recapitulate what we know about him, we find that it does not
amount to much” (28). For Najder, Marlow “comes to life through the story
he tells and the way he tells it,” and is, in fact, “mainly his voice.” Turning his
attention to Lord Jim, Najder returns to the much-discussed contrast between
the authorial narrative of the first four chapters and the “personalized knowl-
edge” of Marlow and his interlocutors that the reader encounters subsequently
in the novel. His analysis invites further theoretical reflection on the dual roles
of homodiegetic narrators (as tellers and as characters), even as it leads him to
propose that Conrad’s use of personal narrators, his “impulse to be in contact,
to activate, to consort with the reader as a person,” is “an (if not the most)
important organizing principle of Conrad’s style and narrative techniques” (38).
Najder’s suggestion that Conrad’s use of the device of personalized narra-
tive is “analogous to Conrad’s use, notably in Lord Jim, of components belong-
ing to various literary genres” (25) makes interesting contact with Jakob Lothe’s
exploration, in the final essay in this volume, of Conrad’s ability to mine the
resources of a range of different genres and subgenres in the creation of the
same novel. Taken together, these hints open up the possibility of further work
tracing links between Conrad’s sophisticated development of the resources of
fictional voice, and his indebtedness to a range of generic models.

James Phelan’s essay starts with a different but nonetheless related Conra-
dian paradox, one that again involves the challenging nature of Conrad’s fic-
tion—“the relation between the novel’s artistic achievement and its difficulty”
(42). Phelan, like Najder, is very much concerned with how Conrad’s texts
work on the reader, and for him Lord Jim is a paradigm case of the stubborn
text. For Phelan a stubborn text is one whose recalcitrance to interpretation
is not designed fully to be overcome. His essay offers insights into both the
productive potential of such stubbornness, and into the tantalizing appeal of
Conrad’s novel. Phelan’s approach focuses on “narrative as a rhetorical action:
somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose—or
purposes—that something happened” (44). He directs attention to the double
progression of Lord Jim, a progression that involves on the one hand “Jim as
character” and on the other “Marlow as narrator who seeks to come to terms
with Jim’s story” (45). For Phelan, these textual dynamics relate to a progress-
ion experienced by the reader, who is forced to “puzzle through Marlow’s
puzzling over Jim.” Marlow’s refusal to “affirm” anything about Jim at the end
of his account thus passes the puzzling baton to the reader who, like Mar-
low’s listeners, must grapple on an individual basis with Jim’s (and Lord Jim’s)
recalcitrance. If Najder concludes that it is the reader “who has to contribute the essential component of evaluative order” (35), Phelan’s essay suggests rather that the reader’s task is, like that of Tantalus, never fully over, and that narrative stability is never finally and definitively established. There are novels that most readers feel they are done with at some point or another. 

*Lord Jim* is not one of them: it goes on working in and on us whether we read it once or many times.

If Marlow’s telling has always been recognized as crucial to the narrative achievement of *Lord Jim*, the telling of the unnamed “teacher of languages” in the later *Under Western Eyes* has met with far more carping responses from readers and critics. For Gail Fincham this negative assessment of the English language teacher bespeaks a failure fully to recognize his crucial role in the novel. For Fincham, “the narrator’s mediation is essential to the reader’s understanding of this novel of ideas” (60–61), and she focuses in particular on the way in which this mediation allows Conrad to explore “the Enlightenment triad rationality-sympathy-vision” through the telling of a character-narrator who is “torn between logophilia and logophobia, Westernizing rationality and Slavophile emotionality, between the irrational fervor of a lover and the control of a writer” (61). By enlisting Dorrit Cohn’s distinctions between psychonarration, narrated monologue, and quoted monologue, Fincham argues that modulations between these techniques focus the reader’s attention on to the pressure points between our reason, our sympathy, and our clear-sightedness as these engage with the narrator’s account of Razumov’s troubled history. She is thus able to present a convincing case for the indispensability of the teacher of languages to the novel, and for the extreme sophistication of the interlocking narrative functions that he performs for Conrad.

It will be noted that if these three initial essays are grouped under the rubric of “Voice,” they all share an alert and fascinated concern with Conrad’s reader(s). To this extent they all testify, albeit in very different ways, to what one might dub “the rhetorical turn” in narrative theory in recent years. In his “Author’s Note” to *Typhoon and Other Stories*, Conrad insisted: “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.” A more rhetorical, less exclusively textual narratology is well placed to trace the course of this invariable intention.

**Sequence**

The bemused responses of early reviewers of many of Conrad’s novels (but perhaps most of all *Nostromo*) were generally related to their failure to map
a straightforward chronological progression from event to event. Why would Conrad run the risk of having readers regard his fractured chronologies as (to cite one early reviewer of *Nostromo*) “mazes of irrelevancy”? What positive benefits does Conrad gain from his frequent use of interrupted, incomplete, repeated, or reversed chronologies?

Jeremy Hawthorn suggests that a good place to begin seeking an answer is Conrad’s second novel, *An Outcast of the Islands*. This novel, Hawthorn contends, exposes the varied limitations of conventional metaphors that invite us to see a life as a road, a journey, a sentence, or a straightforward narrative. The novel conducts this exposure, in part, by showing how differently these familiar metaphors transpose the temporal progression of a life into spatial progression. If the opening paragraph of the novel displays the character Willems’s self-deceiving sense of “the flowing tale of his life” as fatally flawed, the novel’s presentation of Willems’s life as anything but a flowing tale implicitly criticizes those “flowing tales” that depict human life in terms of a straightforward unilinear progression. The vantage point of a culture well versed in the nonlinear complexities of surfing the web makes modern readers perhaps more aware of the contrasting linearity of the traditional novel. What is striking about Conrad’s fiction is the way in which it regularly highlights and exploits a tension between this textual linearity and the nonlinear lives and experiences his sequentially numbered pages trace. Hawthorn’s attention to Conrad’s early meditation on narrative sequence provides a nice complement to Phelan’s rhetorical approach to progression. In a sense, Hawthorn’s essay shows how Conrad’s narrative discourse and his plotting of Willems’s life come together to offer another theoretical perspective on narrative progressions.

Susan Jones shifts our attention from narrative sequence to character movement, though her analysis is also rich in insights about the overall trajectory of *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, her discussion nicely complements other important recent essays on the novel such as Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan’s “Some Millennial Footnotes on *Heart of Darkness*” and Paul Armstrong’s “Reading, Race, and Representing Others.” Jones notes that while the “literal and metaphorical resonances of Conrad’s focus on travel throughout his fiction” have become a critical commonplace, the way in which the author focuses attention on more local movements that complement “the geographical movements of the narrative with a sense of the physicality of characters’ intimate actions (and non-actions)” (100) has been neglected. Jones takes *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s “most famous exposition of the journey metaphor” (101), as a test case, and she suggests ways in which descriptions of such local and individual movements and stillnesses function as “part of a complex relationship between physical and narrative movement that contributes in significant
ways to the author’s predominantly skeptical mediation of the story” (101). By focusing on a number of “image schemata” that help us to understand how prelinguistic experience is given metaphorical expression in language, Jones relates “the frequency of references to looking toward, stepping back, or giving in,” in Heart of Darkness to the way in which physical action is used by both the frame narrator and Marlow to “metaphorize the metaphysical or philosophical register of their narration in terms of physical action” (103).

Jones’s discussion of the way in which “[a]gainst an ongoing rhythm of passages accompanying Marlow’s slow perceptual dawning, Conrad posits a series of sudden interruptions, freeze-frame images, gestures that catch the reader by surprise” (109) connects both to the concern with the reader manifested by the first three essays in this volume, and also to Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s concern with the “Conradian flash of insight.” Asked to name modernist novelists for whom such “flashes of insight” play a crucial and innovative role, many would choose either James Joyce (“the epiphany”) or Virginia Woolf (“the moment of being”). But as Paccaud-Huguet demonstrates, Conrad’s concern with those “rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash” (Lord Jim, 87–88) precedes both Joyce’s and Woolf’s interest in such events. As Paccaud-Huguet reminds us, Virginia Woolf acknowledged this fact, drawing attention to the ability that Conrad’s Marlow possessed to open his eyes suddenly, look at an object, and “flash bright” for the reader the thing observed against its mysterious background. These interruptions to narrative progression, Paccaud-Huguet argues, suspend both sense and chronology, and are essential to Conrad’s unceasing attempts to make the reader see.

Both Jones’s and Paccaud-Huguet’s essays prompt further reflections, albeit from different angles, along the lines suggested by Phelan and Hawthorn. More specifically Jones and Paccaud-Huguet emphasize the way in which narrative sequence and progression in Conrad’s texts are continually threatened, complemented, and qualified by the nonchronological, the nonsequential, the out-of-time. If the essays that follow under the rubric of “History” insist, correctly, on the ways in which Conradian narrative is of its time, this insistence must be set against the frequent occasions when both Conrad’s characters and his readers are taken out of time in and through moments of vision that suspend, however temporarily, sequence, chronology, and linearity.

History

In the next essay in the volume, Allan Simmons is also concerned with what Conrad, in his “Preface” to The Nigger of the “Narcissus”, calls the “moment
of vision.” For Simmons, however, this moment of vision is not out-of-time (or history), but “has a direct bearing upon the theme of community in the novella” (147). It is, moreover “formulated in terms of a progression in which sensory perception leads, by way of affective conviction, to mental insight” (147). Here progression and vision are not so much in total opposition but more locked in dialectical tension. Similarly, Simmons fastens on the creative tension between the linear progression of the “Narcissus” toward home and the cyclical nature of seaboard life. The additional move Simmons makes is to link this tension to Conrad’s political engagements.

If “the personal is political,” as the feminist movement has taught us, then the fiction of Joyce, Woolf, and Lawrence can now be conceded to be political. But Conrad has never been thought of as anything other than a political writer, one concerned with the fields of international and domestic politics more conventionally understood in his fictional and his nonfictional writings alike. For Simmons, Conrad’s *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* “offers a maritime myth of national identity” that relies upon particular narrative techniques—especially those involving symmetrical patterning—to construct “a sense of national self-fashioning, focused on the sea” (147). Tracing the voyage of the *Narcissus* as it sails “home” to an England that is not, actually, where many of its characters were born and raised, allows Conrad both to celebrate the British Merchant Marine and also to define the nature of the national identity that unites its crew in spite of their differences, while refusing to efface these differences (of generation, class, nation, and race).

Conrad’s interest in linearity and its discontents underlies the three essays on Conrad’s longest—and many would argue his finest—novel, *Nostromo*. Unsurprisingly, these three essays, like Simmons’s, also address the relationships among narrative, history, and politics. For J. Hillis Miller, *Nostromo*’s “narrative complications . . . oppose what it suggests is false linear historical narration to another much more complex way to recover through narration ‘things as they really were’” (161). But not just “were”: as Miller reminds us, “certain works of English literature from the beginning of the twentieth century have an uncanny resonance with the global situation today” (161), and he detects such prophetic qualities in Conrad’s depiction of the collaboration between Charles Gould and the American financier Holroyd. More importantly, Miller’s essay traces the manner in which Conrad’s novel uses an alternative way of narrating history to explore “the relation of the individual to the community, or lack of it, in this novel, in the context of an intervention by one stage of global capitalism” (162). Miller concludes his analysis by meditating on the ways in which such generic designations as “parable” and “allegory” do and do not capture the essence of Conrad’s alternative mode of narrating history.
Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan agrees with Miller that “[t]here is no ‘us’ in Sulaco,” and her essay urges her readers to consider ways in which this lack is mirrored in the blindness of historians of various shades and hues. Her essay argues that *Nostromo’s* series of historian figures displays Conrad’s concern with the relation of historiography and history, a concern that is “triangulated” through the introduction of another set of terms: “fiction, myth, legend, story.” If the arguments of Hayden White have forced modern readers to ponder the implications of the fact that both the historian and the novelist produce narratives, Erdinast-Vulcan confirms that these implications were already being pondered and worked through by Conrad in *Nostromo*, which is regarded as both a great achievement and a failure. For Erdinast-Vulcan the result of this working through is the insight that far from being their opposite, myth is, rather, “the suppressed underbelly of historiography and of history itself” (186). Erdinast-Vulcan too hits a note sounded in different ways by Phelan, Hawthorn, Jones, Paccaud-Huguet, and Simmons by arguing that “[a]gainst the supposed linearity of historical progression and its underlying teleology, the regime of legend and myth seems to engender a cyclical conception of human life” (185). For her, though, it is not just circularity but also stasis and sameness that challenge linearity in *Nostromo*: “mythicity—the desire of sameness, self-identity, and totality—is the real curse, or the nightmare of history” (187).

Christophe Robin agrees that the beginning of *Nostromo* “is organized around a shift from the mythic time of the incipit to the historical temporality of the following chapters,” but in a claim that chimes in with Erdinast-Vulcan’s comments he suggests that “the historical discourses of the characters aim at turning history into a myth” (201). Like Erdinast-Vulcan, Robin sees *Nostromo* as a novel that questions the ways in which we represent and understand the past and the passage of time. More specifically, Robin takes us back once again to the reader to argue that Conrad uses the reader’s sense of “a confusing and at times confused narrative temporality” to “question our own relation to time” (197). Thus, what for contemporary reviewers was seen as a defect (“it is often difficult to say when or where we are,” a contemporary reviewer of this novel petulantly complained) is recognized by Robin as a crucial and deliberate aspect of Conrad’s narrative technique. If Erdinast-Vulcan declares that *Nostromo* is not a postmodernist novel, Robin argues that “in Derridean fashion, it deconstructs time and temporality and seems to disrupt narrative frames and identities” (196). He suggests, further, that “by blurring the epistemological frontier between fictional and historical narratives,” Conrad implicitly casts “doubt on the validity of historical discourse” (199). But after the deconstruction there is the reconstruction: in *Nostromo*, Robin argues, “Conrad reinstates through narrativity a truly human and humanized
temporality that harbors the other, an other which ultimately resists the totalizing pretension of imperial time to open onto ethical time” (211). A child of structuralism, early narratology was far from immune from the antihumanism of the 1970s and 1980s, but Robin’s essay demonstrates that narrative analysis can avail itself of many of the tools of structuralist narratology without committing itself to a thoroughgoing antihumanism. His essay, like Phelan’s, productively links narratological study of Conrad’s fiction to ethical criticism, but Robin draws more on the tradition of poststructuralist theory than Phelan’s rhetorical model does.

Genre

Conrad was not just a novelist whose narrative techniques were creative and innovative; he was a writer whose innovations redrew the borders between different genres and thus transformed generic conventions.

J. H. Stape’s contribution shows how Conrad sought to give the essays that comprised A Personal Record coherence by adapting the conventions of autobiography and epic, while attempting to satisfy both the demand that he reveal himself and his own desire that he do no such thing. One of Conrad’s moves, Stape suggests, is to establish a heritage that is less familial (as the genre of autobiography would require) and more literary. Another is to lay claim to a maritime parentage. Elsewhere, as Stape puts it, the self-imposed task of talking about himself is deflected by talking about others. It is striking how much the Joseph Conrad described by J. H. Stape resembles the Charles Marlow described by Zdzisław Najder: both are men to whom the reader feels close, but both are men who deny the reader that final openness of naked intimacy. For us, both men are real because of their public voices, not because of their willingness to display their innermost privacies.

In the final essay in the volume, Jakob Lothe argues that the formation of the narrative discourse of Lord Jim is inseparable from Conrad’s enrichment of this particular novel—and the novel as a genre—by his creative importation of elements taken from a range of other fictional subgenres such as “the sketch, the tale, the fragment, the episode, the legend, the letter, the romance, and the parable” (236). For Lothe, Conrad’s modernism is in part constituted by his generic experimentations and innovations: Lord Jim is a major modernist novel not least because it includes elements borrowed from a range of sources and incorporated in the text in ways that are “novel” and that thus become part of the generic resources of “the novel.” Moreover, as Lothe shows, although many critics have recognized that Conrad’s fiction straddles a
number of boundaries (in Thomas Moser’s terminology, for example, “adventure story” and “complexly wrought ‘art novel’”), this recognition has often stopped short of the understanding that this straddling does not mean that a novel such as Lord Jim is half traditional and half modernist, but rather that its essential modernism is inseparable from its combination of generic elements.

As should already be clear, this collection of essays seeks to present the reader with a considerable variety of approaches to Conradian narrative. Yet although the approaches vary, they share a common premise and a common aim: aided and inspired by narrative theory, they discuss the intricate and fascinating ways in which Conrad, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, used and experimented with narrative in order to give aesthetic shape to his ideas, impressions, thoughts, doubts, and fears. Conrad is a modernist author, and modernist fiction presents a particular challenge to the study of narrative: it is the product of the epistemic break at the turn of the century, which generated an aesthetic break and a problematization of realistic narrative premises. As the following essays show, Conrad’s narrative art both illustrates and responds to this break in ways that make him a most rewarding author to read and study in the twenty-first century.
Works Cited


