Joseph Conrad
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Critical literature about Conrad is, to use one of his favorite words, immense. This immensity should not, however, discourage us from asking, occasionally, simple and perhaps even elementary questions, the answers to which may reveal patterns otherwise difficult to discern. One may also note that, in the thick tissue of scholarship, often very fine, there remain thinner patches. Remarkably enough, although Conrad was a multi- (or cross-) cultural writer, the terms of interpretation applied to his work refer more frequently to psychology than to semiotics. Even more remarkable is another neglected patch. It is well known that Conrad was a writer deeply concerned with establishing emotional and intellectual contact with his readers. Moreover, for an artistically innovative and challenging writer he has been over the years exceptionally popular. But studies of Conrad applying the reader response approach continue to be very rare. I keep on dreaming of a scholar who would ask the question about the implied (in Wolfgang Iser’s) or intended (in Erwin Wolff’s terminology) reader of Conrad’s works.

In my tentative essay I want to steer our attention—gently, without much specialist terminology—in these two neglected directions.

Personal narratives, as we all know, are one of Conrad’s trademarks. What stylistic means and structural devices does Conrad use in the texts of his
personal narrators to make them actually sound like personal narratives? How and to what extent do his narrators learn and tell us about the psychology of other protagonists? Or to put it even more simply: how do Conrad’s texts justify the fact that the narrator knows what he tells about? Of course, all these questions have been asked before—but usually in more specific forms.

The use of personal narrators by Conrad is commonly explained in terms of the author “distancing” himself from the narrative point of view, or “placing a screen” (in the shape of a teller) between himself and the written text. Both concepts are psychological. The former term begs the question whether indeed in every instance we have to do with “distancing”—moving farther rather than, as may be the case sometimes, with closing up, narrowing the distance (emotional or intellectual) to the content. The latter formulation is obviously metaphorical, with all the advantages and disadvantages of this figure of speech. Both clearly entail the idea of “subjectivity.”

An omniscient, a nonpersonal narrator (“authorial voice”), an unnamed frame narrator, and every personal narrator, whether quoted directly or indirectly—the appearance of each of them is bound up with a discrete language, constituted by words, phrases, whole conceptual networks, and an implicit consciousness. Do personal narrators augment the component of subjectivity? Not necessarily, and not prima facie. The sense data registered by our consciousness may be justly called “subjective.” But once we want to communicate them in words (or other signals), they have to become conceptualized and conventionalized, that is, converted into intersubjective signs. Languages—systems of communication—cannot, by definition, be “subjective” in the basic sense of the term (= idiosyncratic, not implicitly shared by other persons). In fact, using personal narrators is—from a semiotic point of view—not a step in the direction of “subjectivity,” that is of egotism and uniqueness, but rather the opposite: it is to use a technique of open identification of the code used (with the concreteness of identification depending on the degree in which the given narrator is characterized). This happens because the facts as told have to be conceptualized twice: once from the perspective of the communicated content as imagined “factually,” that is in an interpersonal language of comprehensible description, the second time from the specific perspective of the given teller. A case of “delayed decoding” (in Ian Watt’s terminology) may serve as a good if macabre example: the author has to visualize how the corpse of the

1. I skirt here the whole epistemological controversy whether they are indeed “basic,” that is, unmixed with innate ideas, and free from the components of expectation.
3. Captain Mitchell in Nostromo, with his ostentatiously stressed conventionality of thought and expression, is a good example, see Senn 1980, 153.
wretched Señor Hirsch, killed by Colonel Sotillo, would look and then imagine how it could have been perceived by an ignorant observer (Nostromo, 427). In “indirect speech”—a form very often used by Conrad—the languages of the primary and secondary speakers are superimposed, offering a scintillating mixture of semantic perspectives.

When Marlow complains in Heart of Darkness about the impossibility of conveying “the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence” (Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories, 82), he refers at the same time to two problems: the first is a chasm between the experience and the word, the bane of all writers aiming at authenticity; the second is the practical difficulty in finding—a language in which one may communicate with an audience for which the facts described are even more novel and exotic than to Marlow himself. Conrad, unlike Joyce in Finnegans Wake, was never interested in creating a “private language”; on the contrary, he wanted “to hold up... the rescued fragment [of life] before all eyes,” to make us “see,” that is, to reconstruct and share his original experience (preface, Nigger of the “Narcissus”, x; my emphasis). This is why using the device of personalized narrative was for him so natural. It meant to evoke different conceptual networks, to look at the same objects from various and clearly defined points, or to set mirrors which refract under different angles. It was analogous to Conrad’s use, notably in Lord Jim, of components belonging to various literary genres: the adventure story, the novel of education, the chivalric tale, tragedy—components stemming from a number of traditional conventions, appealing to a wealth of different associations and ultimately creating an effect of artistic polyphony.

After these rudimentary preliminaries I pass on to my questions. Looking for answers I shall limit myself to three tales and one novel with personal narrators: “Amy Foster,” Heart of Darkness, “Falk,” and Lord Jim, and then juxtapose the results with two novels where personal narratives occur only sporadically, Nostromo and The Secret Agent.

I begin with “Amy Foster,” as it is the simplest, and represents what seems to me a paradigmatic case. The story has two personal narrators. One, unnamed and identified only as an inhabitant of Kent who had spent some time abroad, introduces and repeats a tale told by Kennedy, the local doctor. The frame narrator’s function is to characterize Kennedy (formerly a surgeon in the Navy, traveler, and learned specialist in exotic fauna and flora) and to vouch for his intelligence, humanity, and an “inexhaustible patience in

4. This chasm has been known to Joseph Conrad from his early readings of Adam Mickiewicz, who in his “Great Improvisation” (in Dziady [Forefathers’ Eve, 1834]), spoken by Konrad, to whom Conrad owed his given name, complains about words “which belie the thoughts, and vibrate over them as the earth over an underground, invisible river.”
listening to [people’s] tales” (Typhoon and Other Stories, 106). Kennedy’s report is of a synthetic character, and its veracity is never put in question either by the doctor himself or by the frame narrator.

The narrative begins from the end: we first meet Amy Foster, during one of the frame narrator’s rides through the country in Kennedy’s company, as a widow, tending the son of the late Yanko Gooral. Then Kennedy begins his almost chronological tale—almost, because, very naturally, he supplements and elucidates his reminiscences with his knowledge about Yanko, acquired at later stages of their acquaintance.

The focal theme of the piece is one of cultural and psychological divides. The eponymous protagonist is a young, mentally limited woman, plain and dull, who nevertheless turned out to have “enough imagination to fall in love” (107) and to show pity for the wretched castaway Yanko, victimized by the local peasantry (121). Amy is difficult to communicate with, and thus both narrators, and consequently the reader, are deprived of any possibility to follow her thoughts. And while Amy’s mind remains impenetrable because there is so little of it, Yanko’s is at first inaccessible not only because he does not know English, but also because he operates within a very different cultural code and system of values. He is initially characterized by the movements of his body, “lithe, supple and long-limbed”; by his “long elastic stride that made him noticeable at a great distance” (111); and by his voice. The language of his body, his gestures, are fairly easy to interpret (134, 138), but to understand them requires, we learn, a receptive attitude, a readiness to accept him as human. As we know, the tragedy of Yanko stems from the local villagers’ refusal to recognize his fundamental humanity, from the fact that they (and in the end Amy herself) identify his otherness with madness.

In the course of “two or three years” Kennedy learns enough from Yanko to reconstruct his origins and the story of his shipwreck. This reconstruction is couched mostly in free indirect discourse, allowing the reader to follow at the same time the workings of Yanko’s indigenous conceptual framework (notably his social, cultural, and religious notions) as well as Kennedy’s subtle juxtaposing of them with the local Kentish customs. Yanko’s wonder at the hostile and plainly inhuman attitudes of most of his new neighbors is evidently shared by Kennedy; in the end the reader is more likely to identify with the strange castaway from the Eastern Carpathians than with the English folk around him. The question, however, of why Amy is capable of showing initial sympathy for Yanko and then refuses to understand him in his illness—remains unanswered.

The scope of the information passed by the narrators to the reader is clearly circumscribed. Kennedy unobtrusively though repeatedly signals that
he presents hypotheses and results of investigation: “no doubt” (118), “I should say” (118), “maybe” (119), “looks as if” (123), “I suppose” (127). Elements of introspection appear solely in free indirect speech, and are expressed in Yanko's own terms. In fact, almost the entire psychology of the story is grounded in behavioral observation. This is fully justified in view of the characters of Amy and Yanko, but still significant and, I believe, characteristic of Conrad’s general authorial attitude: to identify the language in which one can understand a given person one begins with behavioral scrutiny.

In *Heart of Darkness* the role of the wretched Yanko is, in a way, played by the Africans. They seem incomprehensible, but Marlow—unlike the “pilgrims”—has no doubt that they are human and that he is simply unable to decode their signals: “…a bit of white worsted round his neck…was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act?” (*Youth: A Narrative, and Two Other Stories*, 67). Of course, *Heart of Darkness* is much more complex, both in its content and structure, but it raises the same dual problem of communication. This problem consists, first, of understanding the psychology, individual (of Kurtz) and collective (of the Africans), evidently unconventional by the standards of the observer; and second, to find a language to convey to the audience (and the reader) the results of the investigation. The basic structure is also analogous to that of “Amy Foster” (written two years later): there is an unnamed frame narrator, who introduces and comments upon a story told this time by Charlie Marlow. The frame narrator provides little factual information about Marlow (in “Amy Foster” we learn more about doctor Kennedy); we are to find out much more from Marlow himself (about his seagoing past, his Continental connections, fluency in French, some knowledge of German, etc.). But the frame narrator recommends Marlow as a storyteller and even offers a clue on how to interpret his tales (Lothe 1989, 26–28). Marlow interrupts his tale from time to time, which gives the frame narrator opportunities to insert comments: on Marlow’s posture and face, on the behavior of other listeners, on the very scene of storytelling. One of these comments is particularly significant; to Marlow’s appeal for consent: “You see me, whom you know…”—the narrator reacts by saying that “[i]t had become so pitch dark” that for a long time Marlow had been for them “only a voice” (83). The function of these interruptions is, of course, to put Marlow in relief as a protagonist, and not merely the teller of a story: he not only recites the narrative, but responds to the reactions of the audience.

For the sake of brevity, I shall look only at the two main objects of Marlow’s psychosemiotic scrutiny: the Africans and Kurtz. His visit to Brussels alerts Marlow that in the Congo he will be met by a discrepancy between appearances and reality. When in the Congo, he is faced with two concurrent
challenges: one is the country itself, completely novel to his experience, the other a glaring contrast between the colonialist ways of describing Africa—and reality. He reacts by adopting a radically empiricist attitude: facts, not declarations; things, not words; designates, not signs are his guide (e.g., 65, 71, 76–77). “There was surface-truth enough [he says about his concentration on his work on the riverboat] in these things to save a wiser man” (97), and he resolutely prefers surface-truth (silently supplemented by his human solidarity) to lofty slogans.

As to the black Africans, he is painfully aware of failing to understand not only their speech, but also their behavior (107). But, as I have already noted, he admits and respects their humanity—which not only sets him apart from local white officials and the “pilgrims” from Europe, but insulates him against the rhetoric of Kurtz, to whom he stands at the opposite cognitive pole. While Kurtz “has kicked himself loose of the earth,” carried away by the magic of his own words (116–18), Marlow has stuck to simple facts. This humane empiricism constitutes the basis for his moral authority.

Marlow’s consistent psychological behaviorism and the concomitant reticence to speculate enhance his image as a personal narrator. And so do his complaints about the difficulty of finding an adequate language in which he can convey the gist of his experiences (82, 116–17). The flow of his narrative is by and large chronological, with scattered, naturally occurring elements of prolepsis (115) and analepsis (as when he sums up his information about the background of Kurtz, 117). Extended analytic fragments in which he accounts for his observations alternate with fragments in reporting, conversational style (e.g., 51, 53, 65, 70) and with pieces of introspection (e.g., 65, 97, 119). There are even rhetorical addresses to his listeners (“I hear,” “you wonder,” 97). All in all, one of the great strengths of Heart of Darkness lies in Marlow’s convincing role as a narrator, although if we try to recapitulate what we know about him, we find that it does not amount to much. He comes to life through the story he tells and the way he tells it, but to visualize him the reader must rely entirely on his own uninstructed imagination (what height? hair? eyes? age? accent? origins?). He is, in fact, mainly his voice.

The narrative structure of “Falk” (more than twice the length of “Amy Foster” and a little shorter than Heart of Darkness), written two years later, is again analogous: a frame narrator introduces a tale, told by the main narrator. But this time the frame narrator uses the first person plural, speaking in the name of “several of us, all more or less connected with the sea”; the main narrator remains unnamed, and his story in not put in quotation marks. There is an initial dialogue between the frame and the main narrators (Typhoon and Other Stories, 147), but one detects no difference of attitudes or perspectives:
they are evidently all linked by the companionship of the sea. About the main narrator we first hear only that he is a man “of more than fifty, that had commanded ships for a quarter of a century” (147); later, from his own tale, we learn that at the time of the action he was less than thirty and in his first, fortuitously obtained command of a sailing ship.

He tells us how, in the course of his efforts to have his ship tugged out to sea, he was compelled to act as an intermediary and a psychological interpreter within the triangle: Hermann, captain of the German steamer the Diana—his niece—and the “centaur” Falk, the owner of the sole tugboat in the port. We may note that the silent niece takes pity on Falk (236) analogously to Amy Foster’s compassionate treatment of Yanko; but the analogy stops here, and in the niece–Falk case the motive of sexual attraction is made fairly obvious.

Although the narrator does not, of course, have a direct access to the thoughts and feelings of other protagonists, he does not seem to encounter essential difficulties in understanding their motives and actions. There is a language gap between him and Hermann’s family, jokingly remembered, but it turns out to be of no practical importance. No knowledge, factual or intuitive, of other cultures seems required from the narrator. Once Falk’s secret—gruesome, but apparently of only external consequence (217)—is revealed, all mysteries of the situation disappear. The narrator’s moral convictions seem to be seriously engaged only once, when he questions Falk’s Darwinian equating of “toughest” and “best.” In telling his story, he follows the chronology of the events virtually throughout. Utterances by other protagonists are by and large given in reported speech, which increases the immediacy of action, but at the same time makes the narrator as a person redundant and increases the effect of theatrical conventionality; only occasionally, and notably in rendering Falk’s tale, the more “digested” indirect speech is used. In his dealings, the narrator displays self-avowed cunning (as he says, in the interest of his ailing crew) and common sense, but no discernible personal traits. The location where the story is being narrated is described precisely and vividly (if somewhat acerbically), the place of the action itself is not named (although Bangkok is clearly suggested), and the main narrator is even unsure whether the eponymous protagonist was “a Dane or perhaps a Norwegian” (161). There is no dialogue between the frame narrator(s) and the unnamed young captain, and the story ends without the frame narrator’s farewell.

Unlike “Amy Foster,” which is a story about Yanko Gooral, brought to life by the voice of the compassionate and sagacious doctor Kennedy, and Heart of Darkness, which is a story as much about the Congo and Mr. Kurtz as about Charlie Marlow—“Falk” reads like a yarn about just one of the narrator’s adventures which did not engage his own personality. Marlow confesses that
his African experience has changed him; Kennedy is moved to reflect on the difference between Yanko and the Kentish villagers (111), and the reader has no doubt that Kennedy’s attitude to the latter has been modified. In “Falk” the related story seems to be just an expanded anecdote, grist for “a vague tale still going about town” (240); it does not endow the teller with any recognizable individuality. But the unnamed narrator’s noncommittal attitude fits the content: the reverberations of Falk’s story of his survival-by-cannibalism are amply rendered by the contrasting reactions of his listeners in the story.

The narrative structure of Lord Jim, a novel four times the length of Heart of Darkness, is unique within Conrad’s opus by its coupling of the introductory “authorial,” omniscient narrative with the subsequent long (and technically very complex) narration of Marlow. About the Marlow of Lord Jim we know, in fact, rather less than about that of Heart of Darkness. They share their seaman’s experience, their knowledge of French and German; the protagonist of Lord Jim has, also, more opportunity to display his classical education; but about his past we know less than about Stein’s or even the French lieutenant’s. His British and/or continental background is left unelaborated. This is quite remarkable for the main teller of a major and convoluted story, who plays the role of arbiter between other personal points of view.

I appreciate Jakob Lothe’s argument about the authorial narrative in Lord Jim as “diverse, edited personal narration” (Lothe 1989, 133) (in fact, when it returns, momentarily in chapters VIII, IX, and XXXVII, and extensively at the beginning of chapter XXXVI, it is in an openly personalized form), but I consider it based on a sophisticated specialist analysis. What must strike the common reader is the immediate contrast between the omniscience (even if limited) displayed in the authorial narrative of the first four chapters, where we get an easy access to Jim’s thoughts and dreams, and the distinctly circumscribed and personalized knowledge of Marlow and his subsequent interlocutors. The initial form of the narrative puts Marlow as a personal narrator into sharp relief: he knows about Jim much less than the reader, who listens to Marlow’s report about collecting information and opinion from other personal sources, as he proceeds in his inquiry.

His quest has two objectives. Initially, Marlow wants to find out what happened onboard the Patna and why Jim behaved as he did. Later, and what turns out to be much more complicated and problematic (both for Marlow himself and for the critics, analyzing the novel), he attempts to understand the evolution of Jim’s posttrial attitude and his behavior, especially in Patusan. Marlow’s primary source is, of course, Jim himself: Marlow watches him very closely, registering his movements, gestures, and tone of voice, and not only listens attentively to his confession, but enters into a polemic with him.
Not less importantly, he carefully collects information from other sources and adduces their evidence and opinion either in reported or (more often) in free indirect speech. Apart from Jim himself, there are no fewer than eleven secondary personal narrators; in the order of their appearance: Jones (Captain Brierly’s first mate), Brierly himself, the French lieutenant, Chester, Marlow’s friend Denver, Egström, Stein, Cornelius, Jewel, Brown, and Tamb’l’tam. They are all carefully scrutinized, as Jim is at all times, by Marlow, who displays the same inquisitive and behaviorist attitude which we know from *Heart of Darkness*. They all enter with their physical and psychological characteristics, their idioms (Gallicisms of the Frenchman, Chester’s Australian colloquialisms, Egström’s primitive grammar, Stein’s Germanisms, etc.), their specific points of view, and their autonomous judgments; they use different descriptive and evaluative languages. The reader has to take into account not only facts reported (and retold by Marlow), but also the evaluative slant of the informants: their values determine their judgments and color their descriptions. It ought to be obvious that “Gentleman” Brown wants Jim to feel with him the double solidarity of a white man and an outcast; but we receive no indication that Jim feels that way. When we hear about Cornelius’s opinion that Jim “is just like a child,” we ought to remember that that “child” has been for a few years a shrewd ruler of the country, and conclude that for Cornelius being an adult implies readiness for treachery. When we hear Jewel’s accusation that Jim is a traitor, we must realize that it echoes analogous emotional charges expressed by innumerable bereaved mothers and widows against their sons and husbands who had lost their lives while doing what they thought was their duty to their king or nation. When in *Chanson de Roland* Olivier tells Roland that his foolhardiness will cost him the hand of Olivier’s sister Oda—the gist of the reaction is the same.

I comment more extensively on these instances because I wish to highlight the fact that what is problematic for Marlow and his interlocutors (and hence for the reader) are not Jim’s actions as such, nor even his feelings, but the ethical categories by reference to which they ought to be understood. This, by the way, makes Marlow’s quest more intensely personal: “there was no incertitude as to facts,” we hear (56); and only persons can evaluate. Furthermore, there are in Marlow’s expressed opinions both uncertainties—he repeats that he has not fully understood Jim—and discrepancies, which additionally signal his role of an engaged protagonist.

When Marlow asks Jim “what advantage [he] can expect from this licking of the dregs” (153) after the trial, or wonders why he attaches so much importance to “his disgrace, while it is the guilt alone that matters” (177)—he reveals that he is unaware that the ethics of shame and the ethics of guilt
constitute two distinct traditions in the history of European moral ideals. No
wonder that his talk with the French lieutenant ends in mutual incompre-
hension. Marlow, attached to the rigid seaman's code, but at the same time
a member of the nation which has given birth to Utilitarianism, tries—like
many others—to combine the ethics of principles with the ethics of results. In
practice, they may, with luck, coincide; but they are grounded in contradictory
systems of values. The code disregards psychology: duty, fidelity, and honor
are ideals binding irrespective of emotional circumstances (the fact which
Jim does not initially accept). The antithesis of Jim's reasonable jump from the
deck of the doomed Patna is Bob Stanton's futile and heroic death.

It is noteworthy that the two of Marlow's interlocutors who quite readily
find the words—and whole conceptual frameworks, well grounded in concrete
traditions—to describe Jim's predicament haven't encountered him before:
they talk about a paradigmatic case. Both the French lieutenant, a figure
straight from the pages of Alfred de Vigny's Servitude et grandeur militaires,
and the former romantic revolutionary Stein, see Jim's situation in terms of
an ethics which considers practical consequences irrelevant in the face of "the
fixed standard of conduct" (35). The instinctively practical Marlow has doubts
about the "sovereign power" of such a standard: in what does this power
reside? Indeed there is, on the horizons of Lord Jim, no transcendental power
to endorse it; the "certain" but simple faith of Jim's father (5) does not seem
to reach that far. The rules of the code of honor are man-made and grounded
solely in the history of human communities. Therefore, for breaking them the
main punishment is shame—not the guilt a sinner feels.

Marlow reports on the extensive and probing investigation which con-
cerns, as I have remarked, the language and hue of evaluation rather than the
specifics of description of Jim's character and deeds. The investigating team
consists of men, and one woman, of diverse background and equally varied
axiological attitudes. Thus their points of view are clearly individualized and,
as assembled by Marlow, augment the personal character of his own tale as
well. The reader witnesses the process of gathering and juxtaposing informa-
tion and is asked—indeed, compelled—to participate in it actively, as during
a personal encounter.

This multifarious tissue of reports and opinions is spread on the highly
complicated time-framework of the novel. I once called Lord Jim a treatise
in practical epistemology (Najder 1965, 100); this referred both to the mul-

5. A good illustration of this point is to be found in Nostromo, when Dr Monygham's
"conception of his disgrace" is described: "It was a conception eminently fit for an officer and a
gentleman. . . . It was a conception which took no account of physiological facts or reasonable
arguments" (375).
Najder, “The Personal Voice in Conrad’s Fiction” 33

tiplicity of sources and to the reconstruction of the sequence in which the data are collected. Jim’s history is recorded from different perspectives and in many temporal segments. (Adopting an arbitrary rule that any bunch of events described at the length of at least one page is given a separate number, I calculated that there are in _Lord Jim_ at least fifty-three such clusters.) Thus the first cluster (Stein’s youth) emerges in chapter XX, the last (the privileged man reading Marlow’s letter in London) in chapter XXXVI. Out of forty-five chapters, only in fifteen is the narrative by and large chronological. However, while remarking the complexity, the reader does not have an impression of artificiality: time-shifts come quite naturally, as they chronicle a natural process of accumulating and conveying information. The notoriously convoluted time-structure of _Lord Jim_ reflects the common course of our piecemeal learning about facts and evaluating actions we haven’t ourselves witnessed. By the same token it serves to underscore, again, the personal character of the narrative: in an authorial telling there would be scant empirical justification for such lack of chronological continuity in the narrative. I referred above to Jakob Lothe’s observation that the restraints within the formally authorial narrative in _Lord Jim_ in the first four chapters create the impression that it constitutes in fact an “edited” personal narration, that there is somebody behind it. When the “Privileged Man” of chapters XXXVI and XXXVII (an undisguised racist, by the way; see 338–39) takes over as the audience of Marlow’s narration, he may leave the reader with a vague feeling that this most attentive listener to Marlow’s yarn merges somehow with the “authorial” voice of chapters I to IV, the source privy to the initial inside information on Jim’s past. This feeling would be, of course, irrational. What remains certain, however, is that the preponderance of personal points of view, and the lack of a central narrative command, invite the reader to be uncommonly active, weaving together the multiple narrative threads to work out a coherent whole. This enforced cooperation between the reader and the author was, I am convinced, Conrad’s conscious aim. To achieve it, he uses ostensibly contrasting ruses.

_Nostromo_ is—forlornly—a novel written by an unnamed, omniscient authorial narrator. Within its text, overtly personal narratives are scarce; only three stand out: Captain Mitchell’s yarns about the recent past of Costaguana

and about his own experiences, Decoud’s letter to his sister, and the story of Dr. Monygham’s imprisonment and torture, told in free indirect discourse. But *Nostromo’s* time structure is no less complex than that of *Lord Jim*: after the majestically slow, panoramic chapter I we move to what will turn out to be late events, and then proceed to jump backwards in chapters II to VIII. And in subsequent chapters the course of the narrative is more often analeptic than proleptic, with several loops (as on pp. 539–51, in the midst of the scene in which Dr Monygham and Nostromo look at the body of Hirsch). Cedric T. Watts, who has meticulously charted both the chronology of events within the story and the sequence in which they are told, proposes four reasons for what he calls narrative “deviousness:” to endow fictional events with a stereoscopic plausibility; to enhance the text’s ironies; to suggest that history is repetitive, or even cyclical; and to challenge the reader with “resistances to overcome” (Watts 1982, 152–53).

These are very perceptive comments, but they concern not so much the reasons for, as the artistic consequences of Conrad’s technique. There is, in fact, no prima facie justification for an omniscient narrator not to tell the story straight from the beginning to the end. Apart from the four effects listed by Watts, by means of such an intensive use of time-shifts Conrad contributes to a more general, elusive, and at the same time all-pervasive impression: that we have to do with a person who handles the flow of the narrative. As Ian Watt puts it, “the frequent changes of time and place must have an assumed directing narrator” (Watt 1988, 43). This is, however, not the only and not the main factor at work which aims at achieving the same effect.

The authorial narrator of *Nostromo* does not behave like a purveyor of possessed information, but rather like an investigator and interpreter, deciphering data and often hesitating about the categories that can be used to understand what he has learned and what he is currently witnessing. Thus we find here the same actively inquisitive attitude which we have noted in “Amy Foster” or *Lord Jim*. The multiplicity of possible meanings of narrated facts is signaled by the very ambiguity of the main protagonist’s name (527). The difference between appearances, “bare” facts—as in the description of men and horses running patternlessly on the plain, which Giorgio Viola observes (26–27)—and facts decoded is revealed over and over again and forms the epistemological leitmotif of the novel.

And if the unnamed main—authorial—narrator is nominally omniscient, he usually refrains from introspection and watches his protagonists from the outside, like a true behaviorist; Cedric Watts talks even about his occasional

“solipsism” (Watts 1982, 79). Particularly attentive to physiognomies, the main narrator reads the eyes and faces of protagonists for their moods, feelings, and intentions: thus, for instance, Sotillo’s eyes shine to him “with rapacity and hope” (343). This investigative attitude is, naturally, shared by personal narrators, such as Decoud and Captain Mitchell, who extensively report on their behaviorist psychological findings; we find an excellent example on pages 487–89, in a fragment where the Captain studies the hidden emotions of Nostromo. To recognize and interpret different cultural and individual codes of behavior (and implicit evaluative languages) constitutes a recurrent motif; the story of Mr. Gould-father and a Finance Minister residing in Sta. Maria offers a grotesque example (54–55); another example would be Charles Gould’s meaningful silences (203).

Three subjects of scrutiny stand out: Nostromo, Dr. Monygham, and Costaguana as a whole. The differences in the perspectives on the eponymous protagonist of the novel are obvious; and it is perhaps only worth noting that Nostromo himself changes his conception of his own personality (523–24). Dr. Monygham is variously decoded by the engineer-in-chief, Nostromo, and Emilia Gould. But perhaps most remarkable is the diversity of perspectives on the country where the action takes place: we have the contrasting general opinions of the older Mr. Gould, Charles Gould, Emilia Gould, Captain Mitchell, Father Romàn (398–400), Don Pépé (89), Martin Decoud, Antonia Avellanos, her father; not to mention the implicit views of figures like Señor Fuentes, Pedrito Montero, or Sotillo. (Even the Goulds’ parrot makes its contribution [69]). Their judgments and their conceptual frameworks are, to a certain extent, sorted out by the main narrator. But there is no reason to treat his tangential, usually implicit, and often caustic comments as more authoritative than the opinions of the protagonists: he does not seem to possess a treasure trove of facts known only to himself, nor, more importantly, does he possess the moral authority of, say, Doctor Kennedy of “Amy Foster” or the French lieutenant of Lord Jim. It is the reader who has to contribute the essential component of evaluative order: the reader in collaborative dialogue with the main narrator.

This last, maintaining the discursive tone of narration, seems constantly in search of an interlocutor. He is eager to express judgments about particular protagonists; for example, a deflating assessment of Decoud (153) who, at the same time, seems very close to his own point of view (Lothe 1989, 210). The narrative easily oscillates between the authorial and definitely personal (i.e., of the particular protagonist’s) point of view (cf. 26–31). Very frequent modalization of the text by the use of words like “seem,” “appear,” “like,”

8. See Senn 1980, 74, 85–86 for other examples.
“look,” and above all “as if” strengthens the personal component of the narrative: Werner Senn, who provides a painstaking analysis of Conrad’s use of this stylistic device, notes that “whatever seems, seems so to somebody”; the same applies to “appear”; while “as if” implies seeing objects from two perspectives at the same time (Senn 1980, 145, 148, 150, 157–58). This constant shimmering of narrative colors makes the single, sudden, and momentary transition from the third to the first person singular (95) sound unsurprising: the reader has been mentally prepared for such open admission of individuality, because he or she is conscious of the constant interplay of angles of vision, which can be justified only by the presence of personal participants.

In such a context also the very extensive use of the free indirect speech (and thought) mode, which permits the easy introduction of the words or thoughts of a protagonist but implies the mediation of a narrator “who selects the most telling and salient features and embeds them in his own narrative” (Senn 1980, 169), strengthens the impression of a person, hidden behind the ostensibly impersonal text. Such an implicit person enters more naturally into dialogue with the reader than an abstract, unnamed, disembodied entity, represented by the authorial narrator. Such dialogue engages, and obliges, the reader to pay attention (“to keep us guessing,” as Ian Watt says [Watt 1988, 31]). Consequently, the consistent personalization of the narrative in Nostromo results in making the reader a companion, or even an accomplice of the anonymous teller. It makes the reader of Nostromo, like the reader of Lord Jim, co-responsible for the assembling of temporal and thematic elements of the whole structure.

In comparison with Lord Jim and Nostromo, The Secret Agent is indeed “a simple tale,” as it is coyly named in its subtitle. Sparse in its style, it is frugal even in the number of characters: although the place of its action is much more populous than Patusan and Costaguana put together, it has few protagonists. And the action itself is, by any comparison, economic. But there is yet another difference, more important from the point of view of my subject: the text of The Secret Agent does not involve its readers emotionally in a way and to the degree found in the other two Conrad novels. The narrative preserves a consistently ironic distance and, apart from the Assistant Commissioner, there is in this story—in which only the poor Stevie is not a double (or treble) agent—no other character with whom the reader could identify. Both Lord Jim and Nostromo abound in such women and men; indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the number of decent protagonists in Nostromo is the strongest argument against the novel’s alleged pessimism (Najder 2005).

However, the answer to the question: to what extent does the authorial form of narration in The Secret Agent engage the reader in such a way as to
give the impression of a personal intercourse?—is anything but simple. We may note that the time structure of the novel (the plot) is both complex and far from following the chronology of events (the story) described; this may be an indication of a personality at work. Decoding the protagonists’ behavior, both interactive (as for instance in the conversations between Verloc and Mr. Vladimir, or Chief Inspector Heat and the Assistant Commissioner, or—the most fatally deficient—between Winnie and her husband) as well as filtered through the narrator, is the main motif (both semiotic and psychological) of the novel. The macabre examination of the remnants of Stevie (87–88) is just one—and the most memorable—example of the investigative approach prevailing in the narrative. Charles Jones is certainly right when he writes that “[m]uch of the novel’s strength and attractiveness lies in the shifting of the reader’s viewpoint brought about by his constant uncertainty of the nature of the linguistic data confronting him—i.e., whether it represents the author’s narration, a particular character’s direct or reported utterance, or a mixture of all three” (Jones 1968, 165). Thus we find in The Secret Agent salient semiotic and structural elements, identified in Lord Jim and Nostromo as engendering the personal coloring of the narrative.

On page 13 the narrator, hitherto conventionally anonymous and omniscient, suddenly shifts gears and appears as a reflexive and doubting “I” (“I am not sure . . . For all I know”). The reader may feel startled and ignore the intrusion; as Jakob Lothe says, this grammatical self-identification “probably does not make the narrative as a whole appear less authorial” (Lothe 1989, 231). And indeed, throughout the text the variation of angles of vision seems tightly controlled by the central narrative authority, preserving most of the time an archly ironical posture. “Authorial,” however, does not equal impersonal. Lothe’s analysis of the complex and sometimes evolving relation of the narrator to his main protagonists, particularly to Winnie and Stevie (1989, 253–59), indicates that the narrator displays the traits of a concrete person, with shifting, unstable psychological attitudes.

Thus the problem of the “personalization” of the narrator in The Secret Agent (or of an instinctive search for a person behind the authorial narration) seems to concern not so much the structural symptoms of individuality, which are present in the text, as the mental qualities of such a person. To put it in simple terms: it is a great challenge to the reader’s empathy to imagine, to get a feel of the teller as a concrete human being. And although there have been attempts to identify the unnamed narrator of The Secret Agent (notably with the Assistant Commissioner himself!)—for all the reasons briefly listed above the plea for his existence is psychologically less urgent than in the case of Nostromo.
A conclusion of this tentative and unsystematic inquiry must begin with the banal statement that Conrad’s art does not easily submit to generalizations: each of his major works is structurally distinct. And if his attitude toward his reader remains clear and constant—Conrad always wants to engage, involve, activate his readers—he does not repeat his techniques, he uses different strategies to achieve this end.

The idea that in Conrad’s prose we can hear a peculiar “voice” has been put forward for a long time and in many versions. For Albert Guerard it was audible “to some extent regardless of the narrative point of view and whether or not a fictional personage is speaking or writing” (Guerard 1976, 7). This voice was, for Guerard, “unmistakably a speaking voice” (Guerard 1958, 1). Werner Senn echoes this opinion when he writes that “an interpreting, ever active, infinitely flexible human voice is [in Conrad’s prose] of central importance . . . above all in that area where fiction and reality meet and intersect, in the pragmatic relationship between reader, narrator and author” (Senn 1980, 179). The positioning of that voice has been variously understood: it appears in personal, or in authorial narratives, or both; Guerard could hear it in all forms of Conrad’s prose (explaining this mainly by resemblance to the spoken word); others (as, e.g., Senn 1980, 176) concentrated on the speech of personal narrators.

Conrad’s recurrent use of personal narrators has been usually ascribed to the necessity or compulsion to put a “psychological distance” between himself as author and the contents of his fiction. My experience as biographer has taught me to shun such hypotheses. They are, on the one hand, impossible to prove, on the other—useless in artistic analysis and irrelevant to the common reader, who in most cases knows little or nothing about Conrad himself. Maybe Conrad found it emotionally easier to tackle certain themes by making them handled by clearly individualised protagonists different than himself; maybe, but I don’t know a way to prove or disprove such a thesis; and—so what? That Conrad’s writing strategies consistently aim at engaging the attention and emotions of the reader is not a psychological, but a critical thesis, which can be supported—quite apart from references to Conrad’s own programmatic statements—by textual analysis. The impulse to be in contact, to activate, to consort with the reader as a person—this goal is, I believe, to be recognized as an (if not the most) important organizing principle of Conrad’s style and narrative techniques.

It has seemed to me worthwhile to take a closer (if cursory) look at the means Conrad uses to convince his reader, or rather to make him feel instinctively, that while reading his prose he communicates with other persons, other human beings, who talk to her or him about their experiences and reflections.
But this is not all. In the tales and novels I have concentrated upon, and especially in “Amy Foster,” Lord Jim, and Nostromo, there exist (or seem to exist) an unnamed supernarrator, who offers us the narratives of others. This implicit narrator possesses the qualities of a person. And his chief human quality is to encourage the reader to be just as inquisitive and sensitive, semiotically and emotionally, as he is. The metanarrator creates for the reader the potentiality to assemble the whole fictional universe.

I would not identify this metanarrator with the “author.” That would oversimplify the structures and at the same time hamper the reader in pursuing the task to which she or he has been invited. I believe Conrad’s unspoken objective—and the internal artistic logic of his works—is that the reader, in search of the countenance of the metanarrator, sees his, or her, own face in the mirror.
Works Cited


