Joseph Conrad

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Lothe, Jakob, et al.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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When we write critical essays our attention is primarily directed over our shoulder, back toward those critics who have produced studies of those texts with which we are now attempting to engage. But when we read a collection of critical essays on a common theme, sometimes we are prompted to look ahead, to recognize a temptingly unexplored territory the collection makes at least partially visible. In this Afterword, we would like to call attention to two salient features that we glimpse in the landscape of future studies of Conrad and narrative theory. Let us call them a thicket of narrative ethics and a meadow of narrative sequence. We choose these features because they emerge from an effort to look across the boundaries of our own categories of voice, sequence, history, and genre, and because we believe that they also display two different relations between narrative theory and Conrad’s practice as a writer. We hasten to add that we do not want to claim that these two features of the landscape are the only ones the collection makes visible, and we especially do not want to have our focus on them restrict the vision of other readers. Instead, we offer our descriptions of these two features as both an illustration and an invitation: an illustration of how the collection as a whole helps identify new territory, and an invitation to other readers to use the collection to identify other salient features within it.
Narrative is, among other things, the means by which we organize the particulars of our experience into patterns that make sense for ourselves and for others. Narrative theory is, among other things, the means by which we account for the ways in which narrative makes sense of experience. Behind those two similar phrases “make sense” and “account for” are large issues. Classical narratology accounted for narrative’s way of making sense by trying to write its grammar, or more particularly, by trying to identify its constituent elements, their individual natures, and their various modes of combination. Contemporary narrative theory, however, while still indebted to the work of Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Tzvetan Todorov, and other early narratologists, finds that their focus on grammar frequently fails adequately to capture narrative’s explanatory power. There is too much missing from analysis in the classical mode: while it is helpful to identify differences between cardinal functions and catalysts or those between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narration, such identification by itself cannot account for narrative’s capacity to affect our emotions, our values, our politics, our sense of selfhood and so much else that we compose and consume narrative for. Consequently, as the essays in this volume indicate, contemporary narrative theory draws on a range of theoretical discourses in its various efforts to account for narrative’s ways of making sense of experience. The many essays concerned directly or indirectly with narrative ethics—those by James Phelan, Gail Fincham, Jeremy Hawthorn, Christophe Robin, Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, and J. Hillis Miller—provide an especially good example of this phenomenon.

In Ethics and Narrative in the English Novel, 1880–1914 (2001), Jil Larson articulates a principle that surely all those writing about Conrad and ethics would accept. Arguing that “[o]f all the fiction writers I consider, Joseph Conrad is the most committed to the ideal of ethical principles,” she explains:

[H]is novels are full of identifiably good and evil characters, and his narrators and implied authors rarely shy away from moral judgments. Still, the radical ways in which Conrad departs from nineteenth-century narrative tradition complicate the principled, clearly defined morality that can be identified in his texts as a Victorian inheritance. (14–15)

This passage contains the crucial perception: change the narrative techniques and you alter the moral and ethical dimensions of the narrative itself. The perception itself is based on an underlying principle, derived from the Russian formalists and from later narrative theorists, that technique does not simply serve to transmit or convey an already formed content. Technique is both the means by which that content is shaped and communicated and an integral
part of that content—including its moral and ideological dimensions. However, our contributors are far from producing a uniform delineation of how the ethics of Conrad’s techniques is linked to, and blends with, the larger ethical force of his narratives. (It is for this reason that we have chosen to refer to the new territory of Conrad and narrative ethics as a thicket.) Phelan emphasizes the ethics of the telling in *Lord Jim*, while Miller analyzes *Nostromo* as a parable about the deficient ethics of Western capitalism. Robin draws on poststructuralist theory to explore, among other things, *Nostromo*’s concern with the relation between “imperial time” and “ethical time.” Focusing on Conrad’s use of the language teacher in *Under Western Eyes*, Fincham draws on both classical and contemporary narrative theory in order to discuss Conrad’s exploration of the ethical relations within the “rationality-sympathy-vision” cluster. Hawthorn does something similar, though his theoretical sources are not exactly the same as Fincham’s, in analyzing how Conrad in *An Outcast of the Islands* exposes the negative ethical consequences of reducing a life such as Willems’s to linear metaphors of progress. Erdinast-Vulcan relies on yet another set of theorists—Hayden White, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others—to show how *Nostromo* exposes the nightmare of history.

Our contributors are not, of course, the first commentators on Conrad’s fiction who have been struck by—and who have attempted to investigate—the way this body of work requires the reader to ponder over the ethical issues that it dramatizes. The English critic F. R. Leavis, for example, whose book *The Great Tradition* did more than any other critical work to establish Conrad’s reputation in the mid-twentieth century, declared of *Nostromo* that its “rich and subtle but highly organized pattern . . . is one of moral significances,” and he drew attention to “the question that we feel working in the matter of the novel as a kind of informing and organizing principle: what do men find to live for—what kinds of motive force or radical attitude can give life meaning, direction, coherence?” ([1948] 1962, 211; emphasis on original). This statement is strong on ethics but weak on narrative technique, which is buried in there, no doubt, as part of the novel’s “highly organized pattern.”

By 1995, however, the ethical turn in narrative studies was well underway, a phenomenon reflected in Adam Zachary Newton’s chapter on *Lord Jim* in his *Narrative Ethics*. Newton linked Conrad’s novel to Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and found both works “paradigms for narrative ethics.” Discussing a passage from *Lord Jim*, Newton suggests that it shows “how complexly hermeneutic, representational, and narrational ethics intersect” (1995, 78), and his chapter offers a painstaking and sensitive investigation of this complexity.

The contributors to the present volume seek, in different ways, both to
add some further revolutions to the ethical turn in narrative studies and to build on the specific work of critics such as Leavis, Newton, and Larson in ways that—taken together—illuminate not just single texts but the novelist’s fictional oeuvre in its development and its variations. Looking forward, we are less interested in the particulars of their differences and disagreements than in their more general concern with narrative ethics in Conrad’s fiction. Because our contributors both share this concern and take diverse approaches to it, they help open up the territory of Conrad studies for productive debates and new insights about the relations between technique and ethics, the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling across the rich corpus of his work.

Furthermore, a look at this thicket shows one kind of relation between narrative theory and Conrad’s narratives. Since these essays demonstrate that Conrad’s narratives respond remarkably well to a variety of theoretical approaches, they collectively indicate that in this thicket theory operates as a powerful lens affecting our vision of those narratives. At the same time, Conrad’s narratives retain the power to disconfirm what a given theory might predict we should see in them. Again this situation is one in which we neither move toward a single, grand vision of Conrad’s narrative ethics nor conclude that it will always be impossible to adjudicate different visions. Instead, we immerse ourselves not in anything so grand as Stein’s destructive element but rather in the thicket of critical views of Conrad’s ethics.

The issue of narrative sequence is an even more pervasive concern in the collection. There are, of course, the three essays in this volume’s section on Sequence: Hawthorn’s essay on metaphors of life’s progress in An Outcast of the Islands; Susan Jones’s analysis of character movement in Heart of Darkness; and Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s discussion of flashes of insight across Conrad’s work. But we can easily add to this group Phelan’s effort to trace the progression of Lord Jim; Simmons’s interest in following the voyage of the Narcissus across the expanse of Conrad’s text; Erdinast-Vulcan’s exploration of Conrad’s challenge to linearity in Nostromo; Lothe’s attention to the sequence of shifting genres in Lord Jim; and Stape’s analysis of Conrad’s experiment in autobiography. We believe that these essays collectively provide a good basis for new studies of Conrad’s various and complex solutions to the problem of moving his narratives from beginning through middle to end. We also believe that, in this meadow of narrative sequence, it is Conrad’s narratives that are the dominant partner in the relation between theory and object of study. While the diverse essays draw upon another eclectic body of theory, in each case, the critic is using the theory to try to catch up to—and do justice to—Conrad’s varied, complex, and challenging practice.

There are no doubt multiple reasons for the differences between what we
see in the thicket and in the meadow. Conrad’s experiments with narrative sequence, despite their complexity, appear to be matters about which we are more likely to reach agreement. The diversity of ethical theory is arguably greater than the diversity of theory on narrative sequence. At the same time, we also need to notice that our meadow and our thicket are less distinct than our metaphors indicate. Going back to the principle that technique is inextricably related to ethics, we can recognize that in order to engage fully with the ethics of Conrad’s novels and short stories we need to attend to the complexities of their sequences, particularly the ways in which they often challenge linear progression and put the chronological out of joint.

But again we are interested in taking an even broader view, one which focuses less on both the overlap between thicket and meadow and on the reasons for the differences between these features of the Conrad-and-narrative-theory landscape. We regard the situation as a healthy one: the push-and-pull between theory and narrative, with first one and then the other in the ascendency but neither wholly dictating to the other, ensures the flourishing of that landscape. Theory provides a valuable influx of nutrients for the soil, its flora, indeed, for the whole ecosystem, but theory should never be mistaken for the landscape itself. At the same time, without those nutrients, the landscape will soon be used up. If Joseph Conrad: Voice, Sequence, History, Genre succeeds in persuading its readers of the mutual dependence of Conrad and narrative theory, we believe it will have itself made an important contribution to the flourishing of that landscape.
Works Cited

