Speech, Affect, and Intervention in *Chance*

Anne Enderwitz  
*Freie Universität Berlin*

**CHANCE**, the last of Conrad’s Marlow narratives, resembles “Heart of Darkness” in its concern with language, storytelling, and interpretation. Never one for “neat endings” (Erdinast-Vulcan 1989: 52) and clear messages, Marlow produces in *Chance* an intricate web of diverse narrative voices, piecing together “bits of disconnected statements” (222). Nonetheless, the way in which *Chance* approaches language differs from Conrad’s earlier explorations of the threatening failure of representation and communication in “Heart of Darkness.” “Heart of Darkness” exhibits the struggle involved in communicating experience with Marlow mourning the lack of unmediated access to lived experience and “the truth of things” (54). *Chance*, on the contrary, scrutinizes the power of language to affect and intervene without lamenting the loss of certitudes. Its primary focus is not on the absence of an original referent beneath language and narrative but on how language affects us and what possibilities it offers. The scene of Flora’s trauma plays a key role in demonstrating the potency of language to affect people. In the end, however, the emphasis is not on the word’s ability to wound. As the novel progresses it emerges that the potency of words to move people to action offers possibilities for intervention that can empower the subject. Not accidentally, *Chance* even offers a fairly “neat ending.”

**From Representation to the Power of Speech**

Famously, Marlow calls the elopement of Flora and Captain Anthony the “affair of the purloined brother” (148), speaking from the standpoint of Captain Anthony’s sister, Mrs Fyne. This allusion to Poe’s detective story “The Purloined Letter” (1844) is suggestive. Captain Anthony has not only disappeared, quite as the letter M. Dupin is asked to find in the original Poe story, but, just as the letter’s contents remain unknown, the original Captain Anthony is, in a sense, a blank, being the one character
with whom Marlow never speaks. Instead, he is entirely pieced together from the comments of others, an extreme case of a general phenomenon in the Marlow stories. In “Youth,” “Heart of Darkness,” Lord Jim, and Chance events are first transmitted by an anonymous first-person narrator and then by Marlow. Furthermore, in the latter three narratives, important parts of the stories are told by other characters. In Chance, as in “Heart of Darkness” and Lord Jim, Marlow relies heavily on other people’s accounts for the creation of his own, and the reader is confronted with multiple narrative perspectives.

Conrad’s allusion to Poe’s detective story also operates on a more literal level, for a letter lies at the heart of Flora’s and Anthony’s love complications. As in Poe, this one is “one of the blank spots, one of the absences in the narrative” (Hampson 1980: 11), with Mrs Fyne alone familiar with its contents. In “The Purloined Letter,” the author of the letter, a member of the royal household, is in the power of Minister D., who has stolen the compromising letter and could, at any moment, make it public. Flora, too, has delivered herself into the power of Mrs Fyne by detailing in writing her motivation for running off with Captain Anthony. In contrast to the minister in Poe’s story, Mrs Fyne actually communicates the letter’s contents to Captain Anthony via her husband. The disclosure does not prevent Anthony from marrying Flora, but it leads to his resolve to renounce all desire for her. This resolve works “infernal mischief” (328) on the marriage, foreclosing the possibility of intimacy. Ultimately, it seems, the novel’s plotting revolves around the letter and the verbal excess that fills the “blank”: it moves Mrs and Mr Fyne to action and provokes Anthony’s fateful resolution.

Conrad’s allusion to Poe draws attention to the blank spots at the heart of the narrative as well as to the acts of interpretation and communication, which they necessitate. The doubtful status of the referent emerges quite clearly here as in the other Marlow narratives.\(^1\) The point is reinforced by the complex narrative structure that draws attention to the act of narration. We might argue that Chance is once again about “the question of the relation of subjective narration to objective events” (Hampson 1980: 12). Erdinast-Vulcan demonstrates how the “ingenious system of sub-narrators,” which constitutes the

---

\(^1\) Paul Armstrong points out that Conrad, along with Ford and James, shifted the focus of the novel from “constructing lifelike worlds to exploring the dynamics of world construction” (1987: ix). Representation becomes the focus of the literary work.