“Let that Marlow talk”:
*Chance* and the Narrative Problem of Marlow

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EARLY COMMENTATORS quickly noted the significance of Conrad’s creation of Marlow. Virginia Woolf drew a distinction between how Conrad presents his characters before and after him, suggesting that his early characters were “seafarers, used to solitude and silence. They were in conflict with nature, but at peace with man,” but she adds that “it is clear that to admire and celebrate such men and such deeds, romantically, wholeheartedly and with the fervour of a lover, one must be possessed of the double vision; one must be at once inside and out” (1924: 493). For Woolf, Marlow provided Conrad with this ability: “Conrad alone was able to live that double life, for Conrad was a compound of two men; together with the sea captain dwelt that subtle, refined, and fastidious analyst whom he called Marlow.”

Other critics considered Marlow’s purpose to be different but no less important. Joseph Warren Beach pointed to his role in creating multiple points of view: “Conrad’s problem was to secure the advantage of the many points of view without losing that of coherence. It was to make a real composite of these many pictures taken from so many diverse angles, to make a *synthesis* of material so disparate. And he solved that problem most successfully through the help of Captain Marlow” (1931: 353). Frances Wentworth Cutler viewed Marlow in yet another way, arguing that he places the reader in the position of groping rather than grasping for meaning:

But Marlow’s method not only defies the text-books: it insistently questions some basal assumptions of the critics of fiction. ... The older novel, the simplification of life, gave us the creative process achieved, the decision handed down. ... But with Conrad we actually enter the creative process: we grope with him through blinding mists, we catch at fleeting glimpses and thrill with sudden illuminations. (1918: 37)
Edward Crankshaw went so far as to argue that Marlow was crucial to Conrad’s literary progress, remarking that “he seems to me to provide a key, the key, to all the problems surrounding Conrad the novelist as distinct from the man” (1936: 67). For Crankshaw, Conrad created Marlow in order to comment “without ruining his illusion” of reality and to maintain his “aloofness and impersonality” (73); by employing Marlow, Conrad can reveal subjectivity while maintaining authorial objectivity: “Marlow we find indeed a creature of necessity. For it was he among other aids who enabled Conrad to illuminate with subjective comment state of mind which he could never have rendered objectively because he could not invent, because he could not visualize what he had never seen” (119).

Marlow has been the subject of much subsequent commentary, most of which focuses on his role in “Heart of Darkness” and Lord Jim, and to a lesser degree “Youth,” with little criticism directed towards the Marlow of Chance. Similarly, throughout commentary on Chance, periodic oblique references appear regarding Marlow as the novel’s narrator and his relationship to his previous incarnations, but most of these observations are made in passing. In contrast, J. W. Johnson discusses the topic at length, asserting that “Conrad’s use of Marlow as a narrator is not only subtle and appropriate but essential to the nature of the work”; he suggests that Chance parodies the Victorian novel and reveals “the deficiencies of Victorian culture and the failure of chivalric idealism as a the guide to life” (1968: 91). Johnson goes on to argue for consistency in Marlow’s character and contends that he evolves from a youthful participant and adventurer in “Youth” and “Heart of Darkness” to the less idealistic, more tragic narrator of “Heart of Darkness” and then to the narrator of Lord Jim, who sees life as ambiguous and complex; still later, he becomes the realist narrator of “Youth” and ends as the tolerant narrator of Chance, who sees life ruled by vicissitude (93-95).

This essay disagrees with Johnson’s contention concerning Marlow’s consistency, arguing instead that the Marlow of Chance differs in language, method of tale-telling, and world view and bears little resemblance to the Marlow of Conrad’s earlier work.

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1 A recent exception is Paul Wake’s Conrad’s Marlow (2007: 102-10). However, Wake’s concern with Marlow is narratological, and he does not imply differences between the Marlow of Chance and the earlier Marlow, the main focus of my argument.