Ships in the Night: Intimacy, Narration, and the Endless Near Misses of *Chance*

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*Chance* inscribes a search for a narrator capable of setting out its scenario, a quest made more complex by the fact that for much of the novel a middle-aged man is called in to unveil the consciousness of an all but fallen young woman. Indeed, by the end of the novel the struggle of Conrad’s primary narrator, Marlow, to place *Chance*’s elusive female protagonist into perspective becomes a theme in its own right. In negotiating the story’s voyeuristic aspects, including Marlow’s own affective complexities concerning Flora de Barral, Conrad comes to frame an interrogation of his narrator’s perspectival practices, including the text’s increasingly fruitful collusion between the marine aspects of its scenario and the interiorities of its cast. This essay explores the means by which Marlow’s symbolic usages not only move productively between scenes set at sea and the narrative presentation of the story’s dramas of morality and intimacy, but also incorporate the several near misses of Conrad’s published scenario.

A further observation can be made concerning Marlow’s narrative stance. While playing down the “mere visual impressions” he sees sustaining a journalistic or “picturesque point of view,” Marlow comes close to mocking those moments in which one acquires merely “ponderous, useful, unvibrating” information as opposed to the awarenesses by which true “knowledge” is composed (68). As will be seen, this paper is most concerned with those points where, despite Marlow’s acknowledgement of the “fine resonant quality” proper to full understanding, he resists pursuing such resonances where they “touch upon the transcendental” (68) – that is to say, where they are most full of the sorts of reflections and associations by which “resonant” qualities might be translated into deeper meaning. Whilst these phrases are occasioned with reference to Flora’s father, Marlow is elsewhere more

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1An interesting elaboration of my argument would doubtless emerge had I opportunity to pursue these same issues through the novel’s extant manuscripts.
inclined to engage “transcendental” categories in rounding out the narration of profound insight. I would raise a similar point with regard to Chance’s feminine aspects – for while an important reader of Conrad’s work like Ian Watt may recognize how “nowhere, I imagine, can subject matter have called more strongly for externality and indirection of presentation” (1968: 316), even Watt stops short of wondering whether such indirection has resonance or whether it might prove the central means by which Conrad addresses the dodgier substance of his scenario: eloping former heiresses, a sea captain’s long delayed marital consummations, or the romantic inclinations of an attractive young widow.

Conrad does more than use an indirect route as a way of narrativizing the occasionally awkward intimacies the story sets in motion. For instance, where the innermost subjective processes of his cast tend towards the amatory, it is the synaesthetic poetics of consciousness with which he animates the conflicted affects and emotions of his leading characters, rather than the presumed and perhaps unrepresentable contents of their thoughts. Accordingly, Chance’s mediation of feminine interiority is carried out largely through its author’s textual strategies, including the marine tropes of its later chapters. To this end, the novel’s self-conscious narrative complexities operate less as a means of transferring the burden of Flora’s intimate consciousness onto a less socially and aesthetically contentious plane of discourse, here the sea, than of allowing its readers to glimpse the difficulties of communicating that consciousness outside of an essentializing point of view.

Equally, it is precisely the “useful” aspect of information that is not in question in Chance as it is, say, in Lord Jim. There Marlow is presumably free to depict Jim’s failures to face himself through full disclosure of the latter’s physical and mental life; but how is he to depict the sensory and cognitive experiences of the refined if still traumatized Flora de Barral, especially where the solution to her drama depends upon her attracting and securing a suitable mate? More directly, seeing that gender will turn out to be both the vehicle and the tenor of Chance’s narrative difficulties, how is the transcendental “resonance” of Flora to be reified such that she is not simply an accessory to the more easily staged reflections of whomever it is she marries, or, since she is presented with several potential spouses, how is she to avoid seeming the goal or prize of a domestic drama, but rather a living, thinking woman? Moreover, since she is initially presented as a girl “still too innocent, and indeed not yet sufficiently aware of herself as a woman” to comprehend the sexual advances of men (137), how is her maturity to be narrated when, to