Epistemology of Narrative:
Marlow’s Unreliable Narration in Chance

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1. Introduction

Joseph Conrad’s Chance is a problematic novel on which critics have made varied arguments. It is a classic view proposed by the early critics such as Moser and Guerard that the best phase of Conrad’s career begins around Heart of Darkness or Lord Jim, culminates in Nostromo, and ends at Under Western Eyes, which more or less remains to be the basis of the discussion on Conrad’s later career even today. In this view Chance has been seen as the beginning of the decline of Conrad’s creativity, despite its being his first commercial success which at last freed him from financial concerns. Hewitt, for instance, dismisses Chance as a failure for its poor cliché, sentimental exaggeration, and imprecise rhetoric.

On the other hand, reassessments on Chance have been made since then, and especially in recent years critics often analyze it theoretically in modern terms, one example of which is Scott McCracken’s article “Postmodernism, a Chance to reread?”, which, focusing on concepts such as mass culture and masculinist modernism, interprets the novel in a cultural studies-like standpoint. Given such a movement, it might appear that the trouble of positioning Chance within Conrad’s career has died away, and that the evaluative attempts of the early critics of the achievement and decline theory have become obsolete.

However, it is notable that not a few of such recent reviews on Chance tend to discuss it in their particular terms and omit to examine its accomplishment as a novel. I am not insisting that we should again undertake Leavisian canon formation of Conrad’s works naively, but we should keep in mind the fact that the drastic change of Chance in quality should entail an evaluative viewpoint as to its accomplishment, and that we cannot but be aware that Chance is not the same as Conrad’s acclaimed novels like Lord Jim or Nostromo. The aim of the present study is, as it were, to re-review Chance as a novel bearing in mind the critical problematics mentioned above, and thereby consider the vicissitudes of Conrad’s later career. Under Western Eyes, Victory, and some of the short stories collected in ‘Twixt Land and Sea shall be also referred to.

2. Marlow’s Unreliable Narration

In discussing this peculiar and apparently melodramatic novel one should consider its form first; when viewed in these terms, for example, it becomes clear that the complex way in which fragmented information about Flora is put together into a meaningful whole reflects one of the central motifs of the text, the possibility of understanding others. The most conspicuous formal characteristic of the text is its mode of composition; first, the novel is tidily divided into two
parts which are pompously named—Part I: The Damsel and Part II: The Knight—and each has chapters with titles such as *The Governess* and *The Tea Party*, which we cannot see in any earlier work of Conrad. Second, the entire text is composed of Marlow’s narration most of which is derived from what he hears from his acquaintances and his speculation or interpretation. As these things suggest, the point of the novel is not simply to focus on the two lovers, Anthony and Flora: we cannot see in them Conrad’s eagerness to delve into their psychology as characters—especially his characterization of Flora is almost a cliché. Their love romance can be seen even as allegorical, and the way the motif of “chance” is dealt with is so commonplace that the title of the book seems to be something like a parody of the melodramatic aspect of the novel. On the other hand Marlow’s expansive narration occupies a large part of the text in terms not only of quantity but also of impression—sometimes his abstract reflection gets so compelling that it nearly ceases to be the narration of the actual event—and, the focus of the novel is half explicitly moved onto his narration.

Therefore *Chance* is not a simple love romance as asserted by some critics, but a complex novel with self-conscious irony which focuses on Marlow’s subjective narration. In this context Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan argues that it is Marlow so much more lively than in the early works who is the real protagonist of the novel, and that in this novel the frame, namely Marlow’s narration, is more important than the substance, the narrated romance (157). In this light the strictures on the work for being shallow allegory or melodrama seem to be irrelevant for focusing too intently on the love romance and missing the self-consciousness of the text in presenting it.

The central issue of the novel is how Marlow narrates the story of the lovers, and how he is presented as a narrator-character. In my view the irony of the work—or of Conrad—is also directed sharply at Marlow. Despite his sarcastic cynicism and disagreeable misogyny, Marlow shows certain virtues essential to the novel such as imaginativeness, sympathy, and curiosity concerning others—one of the main themes of Conrad’s novels is understanding others—and the frame narrator’s defense that Marlow’s mockery is just a mask appears to be quite trustworthy. In this sense Marlow is not to be depicted ironically, and criticism accusing Marlow of offensiveness as a character seems to overlook these elements.

It is because Marlow is what is called an unreliable narrator with probable self-deceit whose words cannot be entirely trusted that he is to be looked at ironically. Marlow as a narrator-character can be seen in several of Conrad’s earlier works such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, but there he is like another person; he is a reliable firm narrator, as well as a complex character, showing without any apparent irony his concern about moral values such as loyalty and self-constraint, who is supposed to reflect much of Conrad’s own conservative thoughts. We could regard such a character of Marlow as one of the main attractions of the earlier works.

Marlow in *Chance*, on the other hand, is not like that: he does not seem to have much interest in those moral principles, and his narration makes the borderline between facts, speculation, and interpretation quite obscure. During his analysis of the lovers’ affair he often employs verbose rhetoric and questionable generalizations which mostly lack profundity and validity as Hewitt points out. Moreover, he shows a sort of complacency when he seems to be more interested in the act of speculating and interpreting the lives of others itself rather than in
gaining the actual knowledge of them—Marlow says to the frame narrator, “Don’t you think that I have hit on the psychology of the situation?” (138). His somewhat perverted stance in narration can be also seen in the following passage where he dwells on the precision of his word.

Her last sleep, I won’t say of innocence — that word would not render my exact meaning, because it has a special meaning of its own — but I will say: of that ignorance, or better still, of that unconsciousness of the world’s ways, the unconsciousness of danger, of pain, of humiliation, of bitterness, of falsehood. (91)

But what seems to lie at the bottom of Marlow’s suspicious narration is his problems in sexuality, which I shall go on to discuss.

3. Problems in Sexuality as the Motive for Marlow’s Narration

As Marlow himself admits, he lacks solid virility, and has sufficient femininity to be regarded as almost an androgynous figure; he contrasts himself with Mr. Fyne and reacts complexly to his masculinity which seems entirely devoid of self-consciousness. Robert Hampson supports my view when he argues that Marlow seems to have “an uneasiness or a conflict in relation to the heterosexuality and the masculinity that he asserts” (117). In the text there are two scenes where Marlow acknowledges to the frame narrator that he does not know women well.

But I don’t think it was compunction. That sentiment is rare in women. . . .

‘Is it?’ I [the frame narrator] interrupted indignantly.

‘You know more women than I do,’ retorted the unabashed Marlow. ‘You make it your business to know them — don’t you? . . . (137)

‘You say I don’t know women. Maybe. It’s just as well not to come too close to the shrine. But I have a clear notion of woman. (292)

He does not say much about these things, but it would not be irrelevant to speculate that this inexperience of women has some influence on his identity as a man; for example, when the frame narrator disagrees with his misogynistic statement, Marlow spitefully calls him “a chivalrous masculine beggar,” (54) which shows his emotion about masculinity may easily shade into neurosis. There are also scenes where Marlow as a bachelor implies his desire for marriage.

Perhaps if I had had a helpful woman at my elbow, a dear, flattering, acute, devoted woman . . . There are in life moments when one positively regrets not being married. No! I don’t exaggerate. I have said — moments, not years or even days. Moments. (120)

I hope there’s enough of a kid and an imbecile in me to answer the requirements of
some really good woman eventually — some day . . . Some day. Why do you gasp? You don’t suppose I should be afraid of getting married? That supposition would be offensive . . . (131)

Despite his biting misogynistic discourses that appear quite often in the text, he does not deny his wish to take part in the heterosexual world, which would require him to adopt the definite masculinity he lacks. That is to say Marlow feels alienated in the realm of sexuality, which is symbolized in the fact that as an ex-sailor he does not feel at home with life on the sea any longer as well as with life on the land: maritime life represents the masculine world Marlow should have belonged to as the frame narrator remarks:

The sea is the sailor’s true element, and Marlow, lingering on shore, was to me an object of incredulous commiseration like a bird, which, secretly, should have lost its faith in the high virtue of flying. (39)

Moreover, considering his strange self-consciousness about being an on-looker, one could even hypothesize that Marlow is dimly doubtful of his own potency as a man, and these things lead to his ambivalent attitude toward women which recurrently oscillates between contempt and admiration.

Here my supposition is that these problems in sexuality act as the motive for Marlow’s eager narration of the love romance, and that his deepest interest is strictly not in knowing the actuality of the affair but in constructing his own story out of it. This is not to say that what Marlow narrates is untrue or fictional, but that the process in which he puts information together into one story of chivalrous love with his interpretation and speculation is performed according to his personal interest. It is notable that Marlow has never met Anthony while he has seen all of the other major characters in the text, because he seems to project his own sexual situations onto that of this figure, about whom Fyne says that “My brother-in-law [Anthony] knows nothing of women” (204). Marlow feels a sort of affinity with Anthony, and interprets the love romance as a platonic story of a knight and a damsel; he needs to construct it as platonic, since otherwise he would be led to confront his own problems of masculinity and sexuality above, which should involve pain. In narrating the affair as a platonic romance he can indirectly justify or glorify himself and repress his own problems by presenting his double, Anthony, as a heroic knight who does not show definite sexuality. In this respect Snyder rightly argues that Marlow cherishes an “aggrandizing self-image as a maiden-rescuing bachelor knight” (179).

Consequently Marlow becomes an object of irony for his subtle self-deceit in the narration, and here we should question not only Hewitt’s argument that Marlow represents large part of Conrad’s own view, but also Gary Geddes’ argument, quite favorable to the novel, that Conrad makes Marlow look at the knight-damsel frame of the text ironically; it is Marlow who constructs the knight-damsel story. The ostentatious titles given regularly to the parts and chapters mentioned in the second section are an exaggeration of ‘narrativeness’, which parodies Marlow’s arbitrary narrativization of the affair.
4. Problematics of *Chance* as a Technical Experiment

The above shows that *Chance* focuses on the process where Marlow narrates the romance of the two lovers according to his personal interest. As Daniel Schwarz argues, one of the major motifs Conrad has explored throughout his career is an epistemological one: each man's recognition of the world is unconsciously influenced by his psychological needs. In *Chance*, those needs seem to come from Marlow's problems in sexuality as I have argued, and among lots of elements this book focuses principally on the epistemological theme in a rather grotesque way by presenting ironically the process by which an unreliable narrator narrativizes life of others. It is partly in order to express this process more vividly that Conrad chose an allegorical romance as the material of that interpretative narration; at the same time other ontological themes Conrad has dealt with in his other works such as disquiet and alienation in the modern world are dramatized in the love romance of Flora and Anthony, though some of those aspects seem to be Marlow's projection of his own feelings. We could say that Conrad has invented an original technique of narrative to support his new interest, and this experimental style should be regarded as a certain degree of accomplishment.

The germ of this experimentation is recognized in *Under Western Eyes*, the last of his "political trilogy". Unlike other two, *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*, this novel adopts a first person narrator who presents the tragedy of Razumov by combining the information taken from Razumov's diary and his own encounters with Razumov. Though the apparent center of the novel is Razumov's existential drama and political idiosyncrasy of Russia as seen from the Western Europe, we cannot miss the problematic narration of the old British teacher of languages whose actual interest lies not so much in Razumov's life as in his own affection for Nathalie. Here the unreliability of the narrator coming similarly from personal interests such as sexuality and aging produces a discrepancy in the narrative focus, which experimentally functions as, as it were, a dwarfing of the traditional aspects of Conrad's earlier career represented in Razumov's moral drama.

We can also see the trace of the new style in the short stories written in the same period. Especially remarkable is "A Smile of Fortune", a strange story narrated by a captain who gets attracted to a mysterious and indifferent girl in a solitary southern island. The narrator here is overtly unreliable and self-deceptive as he almost visibly avoids facing the fact that he is not a heroic rescuer of the miserable girl as he thinks but just a voyeur who hopelessly lacks potency as a man. Marlow as a narrator is a more complex character than this as he relativizes himself to a certain extent and most likely tries to avoid self-deceit, but his prying-like observation on the lovers and the uncertainty in his virility inevitably remind us of the pathetic captain. Conrad seems to have written this short novella in order to explore his new style of unreliable narrators in a drastic way.

When we see *Chance* according to the view above, however, we cannot miss the fact that the period after De Barral's death, namely the period in which Flora and Anthony start their days as true lovers, is omitted from the text. When the catastrophic crisis breaks out between Anthony and Flora's father, De Barral, she for the first time becomes aware of her love for Anthony, and after the menace of De Barral to their love is eliminated by his suicide, the lovers supposedly...
cease to be nominal husband and wife for the first time since their marriage. For Marlow who empathizes with Anthony and narrativizes the affair as a platonic romance of the knight-damsel frame, the act of narrating this period of probable consummation between Flora and Anthony would have been a distasteful but highly significant opportunity to confront his own problems. Nonetheless after telling the suicide of De Barral, Powell from whom Marlow gains latter half of the information about Flora and Anthony jumps to the day of Anthony’s death years later in the collision of ships, and the “true” matrimony of the lovers is never narrated. This means that Marlow’s problem in sexuality remains essentially untouched, although he apparently quits the disembodied theory and moves from self-sufficient cynicism toward sincere commitment to reality. Here we must consider the contrast between Powell and Marlow; at the last part of the novel Powell who “form[s] no theories about facts” (220) unlike Marlow goes to court Flora while Marlow just see them off alone in his boat; he is kept to the position of an on-looker, and we cannot but question Erdinast-Vulcan’s argument that Powell and Marlow are interchangeable surrogates of each other.

The fact that Marlow fails to confront his inmost problem means that Chance leaves its issue unanswered; that is, its focus is mostly on foregrounding the epistemological motif in a brand-new style, not on exploring the course of Marlow’s problem. Here the problem of evaluating the achievement of Chance as a novel crops up: on the one hand its experimentation and highly artistic stance in treating what I should call “epistemology of narrative” are to be acclaimed, but on the other hand we cannot deny that the way Chance presents its theme is somewhat awkward, and its style of the frame-substance reversal and mock allegorical mode distances Chance from lively human situations. Apart from the extent of its literary achievement, it is certain that such style is quite unsteady and not to be kept continuously.

In fact Conrad seeks in Victory, his next novel, for another style of experiment in which he avoids the roundabout structure of Chance and attempts to fuse its self-conscious use of allegory and the earnest human situations, though in my view its high requirement undermines Conrad’s artistic stance, leading to the comparatively poor achievement of the novel. The unsteadiness of his innovative style affects even more disastrously the later works after Victory where Conrad seems to lose the “technical vigilance” which was, as Thorburn argues, indispensable for his earlier achievement and produces melodramatic works on which a defensive critical view like that on Chance is next to impossible. In this light Chance is a crucial turning point when we think of the achievement of Conrad’s career, and to be sure the major view of critics that Chance is the beginning of his decline is relevant. However, as I have demonstrated, Chance includes some experiments of style and artistic stance which are marvelous from the viewpoint of twentieth century’s modern literature, and which critics should pay much more attention to. Scrutiny of the potentiality and limitation of Chance leads us to review the reason of his failure in the later works where he seems to deviate from the psychological approach of his earlier works simultaneously with the attempt of stylistic experiment, the meaning of which is quite noticeable when we compare Conrad’s career with that of other modernist writers of psychologism such as Henry James and Virginia Woolf.
Notes

1 For example, it is of course Marlow who presents Anthony as “the rescuer of the most forlorn damsel of modern times.” (201)
2 As John Palmer argues, Chance requires a good deal of critical attentiveness to appreciate its literary value because of the unclear thematic focus and deceptively melodramatic elements.

Bibliography

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