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Study of Joseph Conrad's Marlow  
Narratives*

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## **The Storyteller in Chance: A Case Study of Joseph Conrad's Marlow Narratives**

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Charlie Marlow, whose given name we hear on only two occasions, is one of the most celebrated of Joseph Conrad's creations. Narrator and character in four texts, "Youth", Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim and Chance, he has often been regarded as Conrad's autobiographical alter-ego. The aim of this article is to examine the narrative structure of Conrad's Marlow texts with relation to the oral tradition of storytelling as it is described in Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller". This will be undertaken with specific reference to Chance. The implications of this narrative technique will then be further examined with reference to the readings of death offered by Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot.

As I will examine with reference to Chance, Marlow plays a complex part in Conrad's fiction. The nature of his role is neatly summed up by Wayne C. Booth who asks:

Is Heart of Darkness the story of Kurtz or the story of Marlow's experience of Kurtz? Was Marlow invented as a rhetorical device for heightening the meaning of Kurtz's moral collapse, or was Kurtz invented in order to provide Marlow with the centre of his experience in the Congo? Again a seamless web, and we tell ourselves that the old-fashioned question "Who is the protagonist?" is a meaningless one. (Booth 346)

Meaningless or not, the designation of Marlow as a character or narrator, or as both, has been the subject of much critical debate. Pierre Vitoux, in "Marlow the Changing Narrator", emphasises the narrating act, arguing that Marlow "is part of the tale not as a character in it, but as the narrator of it, merging into his role"

(94). In contrast, Alan Warren Friedman's "Conrad's Picaresque Narrator", reads the four Marlow texts together and argues that Marlow should be read as the character central to the quartet: "Read as a unit, Conrad's Marlovian fictions [. . .] differ markedly from what they are in isolation. In the four works taken together, Marlow himself becomes the moving centre of an episodic, larger fiction in which characters and incidents spin off and revolve around him" (8). Despite their apparent polarity these two readings of Marlow are not mutually exclusive; rather it is possible to situate Marlow in either position, as narrator or character, or as occupying both positions simultaneously within a single text. It is the dual nature of Marlow, which results from the structure of the texts, that prompts Booth's rejection of the over-simplistic, and often reductive, question, "who is the protagonist?" and it is this dual nature that makes the texts in which he appears so rewarding to narratological study.

Frederick R. Karl remarks "Chance is, for all its trappings, thematically one of Conrad's most straightforward novels" (242).<sup>1</sup> Its story (here as elsewhere I am using Gérard Genette's terminology) is certainly straightforward. Flora is the daughter of the disgraced financier Mr de Barral who, at the start of the story, has been jailed for fraud. The destitute young woman subsequently elopes with Captain Anthony, the brother of one of her protectors, the feminist Mrs Fyne. At the behest of his wife, Mr Fyne attempts to intervene in the marriage and as a result Captain Anthony comes to believe that Flora does not love him whilst Flora remains under the impression, gained during a painful childhood, that no-one could possibly love her. At this point, Flora's father is released from prison and joins the couple aboard the *Ferndale*, and for a time there is an atmosphere of despair as the young couple retreat into their own worlds of isolation and depression. Events come to a head when Mr de Barral attempts to poison Captain Anthony and, when this fails, drinks the poison himself and dies. Freed from the shadow of de Barral Flora and Captain Anthony discover their love for one another and live happily together until the time of Captain Anthony's death in a shipping accident six years later.

Despite its relatively straightforward story Chance is an extremely complex text

and there is, perhaps, a certain disingenuousness in Marlow's remark that "The means don't concern you except in so far as they belong to the story" (Chance 326). The apparent mismatch of subject matter with technique has attracted a great deal of critical interest and generally negative comment. The majority of this comment comes from critics who would agree with Marlow about the primacy of story over narration. The Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad summarises one of the questions many critics address when considering Chance: "Does such an apparently melodramatic and highly contrived romantic situation deserve to be treated with so much effort and attention, or is the novel merely an exercise in technique for its own sake?" (Knowles and Moore 60). Voicing just such concerns, Robert Lynd wrote in the Daily Mail (15 January 1914): "if Mr. Conrad had chosen to introduce us to his characters in the ordinary way, he could have told us their story in about 200 pages instead of the 406 pages of the present book" (Conrad, Chance 457). Jocelyn Baines concludes, "there are only rare occasions when anything is gained from this cumbersome method of presentation" (382). Similarly Karl responds, "the vast scaffolding of method is perhaps more distracting than edifying, more detrimental than constructive" (242). Karl's comment deserves consideration as it can be seen as being at once justified and unnecessarily pejorative. Karl sees Conrad's method as both distracting from, and detrimental to, the "story" and in a sense this is true. Flora's story is repeatedly buried beneath the weight of voices that, whilst purporting to tell it, more often than not simply talk about telling it. However, for any study that concerns itself with the primacy of narrative, Conrad's method is both edifying and constructive because it directs attention away from the story towards the "scaffolding of method" that is its narrative technique and, if my reading is accepted, a story in itself. This second story, a story of narration, is to my mind far more compelling than the stock romance plot of Flora de Barral. For readers unfamiliar with Chance a brief survey of its structure may prove helpful in illustrating the extent of its vast scaffolding of method.

Chance bears the subtitle "A Tale in two Parts" and correspondingly the novel

is divided into two sections: “The Damsel” and “The Knight”. As with Conrad’s other Marlow narratives this story is presented by an unnamed narrator who presents Marlow’s oral narrative in readable form, including in his narrative the scene of its original transmission. Like Lord Jim, Chance contains the narratives of several other characters but employs the frame narrator to a larger extent, commenting extensively on both Flora’s story and Marlow’s narration. Uniquely, in Chance two narrators are introduced: Marlow and Charles Powell. In the first chapter Powell delivers a second-level narrative about his early days as a sailor. The significance of Powell’s story lies in the effect it has on Marlow, who shortly begins his own second-level narrative about a character mentioned in Powell’s story: Captain Anthony. This narrative is introduced in the same way as Powell’s: it is initially recounted by the first narrator before, after a few pages, he yields, at least partially, to Marlow. Marlow’s narrative is homodiegetic (he appears as a minor character in the story) and narritized (there is little attempt at verisimilitude by the way of minimising the evidence of the narrating act). Marlow’s narritized narrative contrasts with the first narrator’s reported narrative (his narrative pretends to reproduce Marlow’s narrative accurately without drawing attention to its own status as narrative). What links the two narrative levels is that, like Marlow in the second-level, the first narrator is also homodiegetic, frequently appearing in his narrative as a character that interacts with Marlow, but only in this first-level narrative. To be able to say this is to identify two stories in Chance, the story of Flora *and* the story of transmission enacted variously at the “river-side inn” and in the first narrator’s “rooms” (3, 257). In the second section of the novel, “The Knight”, the first narrator reproduces Marlow’s continuation of the tale taken from a later time of telling. In this section, pieced together by Marlow from his discussions with Powell, Marlow is absent as a character and so the narrative would be classed as autodiegetic, the only such section in any of the Marlow texts. This is significant in that the narrative is a reproduction of an earlier reproduction. The first narrator reproduces, in this second half of Chance, Marlow’s narrative, which is itself

taken from the story told by Powell. Thus the second section of the novel has three levels of narrative which might be diagrammed:

First narrator's narrative [Marlow's narrative [Powell's narrative

Flora's story is then concluded in a rather perfunctory style when Marlow rejoins it as a character to arrange the marriage between Powell and Flora.

What should be evident from the description above is that whilst Flora's story may be simple, the narrative structure of Chance greatly complicates that story with the addition of a second-level story – that of its subsequent narration and reception. Recalling Marlow's dismissal of the "means" in favour of "story" a close reading of the novel's narrative structure reveals the distinction between these two elements of narrative to be problematic. Or rather, what is at one point the means can be at another the story and Marlow is at once a creator of, and the subject of, narrative. There is a certain irony in the fact that when Marlow is described as "nearly invisible" it is at this very moment that he appears to the reader (Conrad, Chance 359). Similar moments occur in Heart of Darkness where he is described as "sitting apart [. . .] no more than a voice", "sat apart, indistinct and silent" (Conrad 58, 121). At these points of apparent disappearance Marlow appears as a character, as a narrator and as the physical embodiment of narrative technique. At such moments, which tend to occur when the story reaches a point of particular significance (here in Chance Mr de Barral has just discovered that Flora is married) there is an incongruous emphasis on Marlow's narration, the competing story. To identify these two stories as the "two parts" of Chance might be a more productive reading of the novel's subtitle than the more obvious division of the text into its two sections: "The Damsel" and "The Knight".

Conrad's complex narratives clearly resist the formal constraints implied by terminology such as that set out by Genette, or at least they make it clear that narratives and narrators can occupy more than one position within a single text. Within the narrative of the first narrator Marlow is a character of the diegesis. It is as a character of this story that Marlow provides a second narrative;

a metanarrative with its own metadiegesis: this is Flora's story. This is the case made by Friedman: his reading emphasises Marlow's story, situating him primarily as a character of his own metadiegesis. On the other hand, if Marlow's acts as a character of the diegesis are emphasised over the story he relates, then it is easy to situate Marlow as a character and this is the line Vitoux pursues. The contrasting readings offered by Vitoux and Friedman make it clear that in texts with several narrative layers emphasising certain elements over others can result in radically different interpretations. However, neither critic undertakes to situate Marlow as a character of the first narrator's narrative in a story that is about narration.

The primary concern in the remainder of this paper will be with the relation between narrating and story. This is the relation between the events recounted in the texts, the story, and the telling of these events by Marlow and his first narrator, the narrating. The question I wish to ask is what happens when narrating becomes story? In order to study the implications of the curious narrative of Chance, where narrating becomes story, I intend to begin by considering it with reference to some of the comments made about oral narrative by Benjamin in "The Storyteller". This move is made in the awareness that Chance is not an oral narrative (although it purports to repeat one) and secondly that the storytellers of the oral tradition that Benjamin discusses are not, in fact, confined to the oral mode. Notably, Benjamin finds "the incomparable aura about the storyteller, in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson" all of who produced written texts (107). It becomes clear that Benjamin uses his discussion of oral storytelling as a way of approaching written narrative, a realisation that recalls Marie Maclean's claim that the study of narrative has "convinced so many distinguished theorists of the genre (Propp, Todorov, Brémond, Prince, Greimas), that the basic problems of narrative can, in the first instance, be better understood in relation to oral narration" (1). This claim will be expanded towards the end of the paper when I will explore further the meaning Benjamin gives to the term "storyteller".

It should be recalled that each of the Marlow texts is presented as a written

account of the reception of an earlier oral narrative. Marlow is a narrator in the oral tradition whose listeners come to expect a story; he has, according to the narrator of Heart of Darkness, a “propensity to spin yarns” (Conrad 30). My intention is to begin this section by looking briefly at the ways in which Marlow conforms to Benjamin’s definition of a storyteller before looking at the more problematic aspects of his definition as it relates to what Benjamin calls the wisdom of death.

Benjamin associates storytelling proper with the artisan class and, as sailors, both Marlow and Conrad resemble his idealised storyteller perfectly, “peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling” (85). Marlow’s technique fits well with Benjamin as he continues his description of the tradition, “Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow” (91). This recalls Marlow’s presentation of his information gathering in Chance, which can at times appear to be a series of interviews with the principal characters. This description also encompasses the narrative of the first narrator whose written narrative always follows the same pattern, beginning by introducing the scene in which he first heard the story he later commits to paper.

These details are almost incidental to what Benjamin views as the central feature of storytelling. The key to storytelling is to be found in the transmission of stories from one narrator to another and the repetition of this process. “[S]torytelling” writes Benjamin, “is always the art of repeating stories” (90). If Marlow, as he appears in the four novels, has one defining characteristic it might be this: he is clearly a character who likes to tell stories. There is almost an audible groan when, in Heart of Darkness, the narrator says, “we knew we were fated, before the ebb began to run, to hear about one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (Conrad 32). Similarly there is a certain sense of good natured weariness when the narrator of Lord Jim remarks, “And later on, many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him at length, in detail and audibly” (Conrad 67). It is not the



repetition of story by the same storyteller that is significant so much as its transmission to another storyteller: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin 87). Up to this point I have made little mention of the anonymous narrator who recounts Marlow’s story, but, like Marlow, he is a seaman and, again like Marlow, he continues the telling of tales that he has heard, effectively performing the same act as Marlow at a higher narrative level. What is clear in Chance is that a large number of voices present Flora’s story and, as I have suggested, the narrating of that story is a story in itself. Benjamin’s claim that “the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” could find few better examples than those provided by Conrad which, employing numerous narrative layers, clearly display the marks of their retelling (92). The key to storytelling is to be found in the transmission of stories from one narrator to another and the repetition of this process. It is the presentation of this process of transmission as the first-level story that connects Chance, and indeed the other Marlow narratives, so clearly to Benjamin’s essay.

This emphasis on the transmission of the story, Genette’s narrating, is the defining feature of the storyteller for Benjamin, and it is this that he claims distinguishes oral narrative from written narrative. The contrast he draws between oral storytelling and the novel is directly comparable to the contrast drawn by the narrator of Heart of Darkness between the “yarns of seamen” which have a “direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut” and the narrative technique of Marlow for whom, “the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that are sometimes made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (Conrad 30). Understood in narratological terms Marlow’s words suggest that meaning will be found not in the story so much as in that which surrounds it, in the narrating act. According to Benjamin the very nature of the printed text as a

finite object, which he regards as being self-contained like the story within the nut of Conrad's analogy, ensures that both writer and reader must exist in solitude, at a remove from one another. This is in contrast to oral narrative where storytelling is defined by its relational aspect. It is clear that this is what distinguishes Benjamin's storyteller from the novelist, but the question that this poses is what does it mean to say that the novelist is "isolated"?

In distinguishing between the storyteller and the novelist Benjamin outlines the historical factors that have contributed to the decline of storytelling. These include not only the rise of the novel (which is identified as a symptom rather than a cause), but also the decline of the artisan class and a move towards "information", noting that "it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (89). By "information" Benjamin is referring to the presentation of events in a pre-interpreted form, typified by newspaper and television reporting. This point is important and I will return to it later in my reading of Chance. It is in these historical and social factors that "The Storyteller" most clearly reveals what have been identified as the Marxist theory behind much of Benjamin's work. More significant than these factors, however, is the idea that "in the general consciousness the thought of death has declined in omnipresence and vividness" (Benjamin 93). This changing relation to death is central to Benjamin's essay for it bears on the possibility of the transmission of narration, and access to what Benjamin terms variously the "authority" or "wisdom" of death is central to his understanding of narrative. Accordingly, in order to properly interpret Benjamin it is necessary to understand the significance he attaches to death.

In his use of the term death Benjamin would fall prey to the same criticisms that Derrida levels at Philippe Ariès in Aporias, namely that he assumes an empirical knowledge of what "death" means: "The question of the meaning of death and of the word 'death,' the question 'What is death in general?' or 'What is the experience of death?' and the question of knowing *if* death 'is' - and *what* death 'is' - all remain radically absent *as questions*" (Derrida 25). Nonetheless it is on

the understanding of this term that Benjamin's thesis rests for it is in the relation to death that he differentiates between the storyteller and the novelist. In the remainder of this paper I intend to work through the distinction that Benjamin makes between the storyteller in the oral tradition and the novelist, a distinction that he makes in terms of their respective possibilities for accessing death. Such a study necessitates a move from the general notion of death that is empirically demonstrable in the observation that "people die" towards a more rigorously philosophical approach to death. I will undertake this ambitious project with reference to theories of death as they appear in Heidegger's Being and Time, Derrida's Aporias and Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death".

The first necessary move in attempting to work through this distinction is to consider in more detail the claims that Benjamin makes about death. I will begin this with reference to two quotations. In the first Benjamin writes,

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. (Benjamin 93)

And in the second:

His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. (Benjamin 107)

The first quotation prompts the question, how does death become the sanction of everything the storyteller has to tell? Benjamin's answer is contained in the second quotation: death grants the storyteller's the ability to tell his "entire life". The authority granted by a life that has been "consumed completely" can be equated with the authentic Being of Dasein, which Heidegger defines as Being-towards.

Death is central to Heidegger's study of Being, he famously defines it as "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein" (294). By this he understands death to be the final possibility for Dasein, which has itself been defined in terms of possibility. Death is the possibility unique to the individual Dasein to no

longer exist. Heidegger writes: “*death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein’s ownmost possibility - non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein’s end, in the Being of this entity towards its end*” (303). By referring to death as Dasein’s “ownmost” possibility, as non-relational, Heidegger makes it clear that the death is utterly isolating. In other words “my death”, as an event to which only I have access, guarantees the possibility of my individual actions. In the light of this, it might be said that of all possibilities death most intensifies the “mineness” of experience. The awareness of the inevitability of its own death, it is that which cannot be outstripped, guarantees Dasein the ontico-ontological priority that makes it unique: it is the omnipresent threat of annihilation that makes Dasein aware that its Being is at issue and it allows the assumption of responsibility for each individual’s life. The acceptance of death as Dasein’s ultimate possibility, a possibility that exists in the Being of Dasein towards its end, leads Heidegger to conclude that Dasein can be grasped in its wholeness, and thus play its role as the cornerstone of his exploration of the meaning of Being.

It is this relation to death that allows Being to appear, as Joshua Schuster remarks: “Heidegger does not posit a mere linear connection between beginning and end but rather implies the complicity of both in allowing for the thinking of Being to appear” (Schuster par. 19). By its everpresent threat of annihilation death makes clear not just the particulars of Dasein’s existence but the fact that existence itself is an issue for Dasein. Without what Schuster terms the “mineness” of Dasein, that is the ownmost possibility of death which relies on an always already present, pre-theoretical understanding of “mineness” and “death”, there can be no access to Being.

In Aporias Derrida undertakes a close reading of Heidegger’s problematic formulation of death as “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein” (Heidegger 294) and poses the question: how can one think this aporia? His response deserves quoting at length: “We will have to ask ourselves how a (most proper) possibility as impossibility can still appear *as such* without immediately

disappearing, without the ‘as such’ already sinking beforehand and without its essential disappearance making *Dasein* lose everything that distinguished it” (71). In other words, Derrida is asking how *Dasein*, as that which is distinguished by its unique access to death, can remain distinct from other orders of being when at the moment that it would realise its ultimate distinguishing possibility it is, being dead, no longer present to do so. Whilst Heidegger regards death as the possibility of the appearance of the impossibility of possibility as such, Derrida regards this formulation of death as the primary and originary example of the aporia. Derrida sees the aporia that is death lying in the impossibility of experiencing one’s own death: it is the disappearance of the “as such”. In posing the question: “What difference is there between the possibility of appearing as such of the possibility of an impossibility and the impossibility of appearing *as such* of the same possibility?” Derrida argues for the denial of any difference, and concludes that the distinction between *Dasein* and other entities cannot be sustained and that *Dasein* never has a relation to death “as such” (75). Derrida suggests that death is in fact *Dasein*’s least proper possibility in that, at the moment of its realisation, that before which it would appear is no longer there. With this introduction of a non-access to the “as such” of death Derrida turns it from being the most proper possibility of *Dasein* to the most improper and inauthenticating one.

Thus two readings of the same sentence emerge, “the possibility of impossibility” is read by Heidegger as the possibility (of *Dasein*) guaranteed by its impossibility (death) and by Derrida more straightforwardly as the impossibility of possibility, in other words the impossibility of accessing “my death”. Derrida’s deconstruction of Heidegger’s crucial sentence instigates an aporia at the heart of Being and Time which relies on *Dasein*’s relation to death to distinguish it from other orders of being. Derrida’s reading of Heidegger introduces an almost parallel aporia into Benjamin’s “The Storyteller”, where the storyteller relies on access to death in order to access wisdom. Recognising that the authority of the storyteller can only be derived from a misrecognition of death, can at best be what

Benjamin recognises as a “borrowing” of authority, it is useful to introduce Blanchot’s work on literature where he develops a “double death” that maintains both Heidegger’s death, the first death, alongside a second death which is the impossibility of that first death.

Benjamin’s claims for the storyteller recreate the relation that Blanchot describes as existing between the first and second deaths. The storyteller, or writer, attempts to write the definitive work that will “relate” the story that has the authority granted by death, and yet what is ultimately produced as a book, to use Blanchot’s term, only serves to reveal the lack of such authority or wisdom. This is because Blanchot’s double death reverses the authentic death of Heidegger, that which give Dasein the authority to say “I”, to the passivity of dying in which the “I” becomes “One”. Paradoxically, “my death”, approached for authority, becomes the very thing that denies any authority. The impossibility of dying becomes a reversal of the guarantee of individuality that Heidegger finds in death. In other words it becomes impossible to say “I die” but only “one dies”. In his suggestion that the proper experience of death can only ever be to the death of the other Blanchot’s thoughts can be seen to diverge from those of Heidegger who regards death only in terms of the individual Dasein.

With this in mind Benjamin’s claims for the storyteller come into focus. The authority granted by death can only function in relation to the death of the other, and thus the storyteller’s power is correctly situated in the relaying of his message rather than in the message itself. Literature’s power, and I would equate Blanchot’s notion of literariness with the wisdom of Benjamin’s storyteller, lies in its connection to death which it reveals through a language that precedes the individual, mirroring the experience of death which is characterised by the passivity with which it transforms the individual “I” to the “one”. To better understand this passivity it is necessary to consider Blanchot’s concept of language. Blanchot follows Hegel in regarding negativity as the essence of language.<sup>2</sup> This negativity explains the way the name functions to negate the reality of the object named: “For me to be able to say, ‘This woman’ I must somehow take her flesh and blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent,

annihilate her. The word gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being” (Blanchot 379). This process, which Blanchot describes as “deferred assassination”, functions by naming (380). Whilst language does not literally kill anyone it does announce real death. The woman of the example above is not killed by words, but the act of naming her. The phrase “this woman” announces that she can be detached from herself, from her actual existence, and “plunged”, to use Blanchot’s term, “into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies the possibility of this destruction; [...] if this woman were not really capable of dying [...] I would not be able to carry out that ideal negation” (380). The nothingness of which Blanchot speaks is the nothingness of the “I” becoming “one”, a change that is exemplified when “this woman” is spoken in universal language. Whilst the negation at the heart of language is masked in “everyday” language, replacing the absent thing with a concept, literary language refers only to itself, revealing the absence that is at its heart. It is this relation of language to nullity that connects language to death. Language raises existence into being, and it reveals that death is the most human quality.

Following Blanchot, a re-reading of the first quotation from “The Storyteller” would place a useful emphasis on the “borrowed” nature of the authority granted by death. The first death that would provide the guarantee of meaning refuses ownership, and yet it is from ownership that the first death derives its nature. This refusal is emphasised by the aporia of the second quotation in which the storyteller is identified by the ability to tell his “entire life”. Continuing to read the second quotation, the emphasis is placed on the “gift/relate/tell” which characterises storytelling as a transaction or transmission. For Blanchot this transmission, so central to Benjamin’s definition of the storyteller, is the essence, or truth, of literature. In this the two writers approach a similar conception of literariness and there is a direct comparison to be drawn between Benjamin’s statement, in “The Task of the Translator”, “For what does a literary work ‘say’? What does it communicate? It ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information” with

Blanchot's "literature's ideal has been the following: to say nothing, to speak in order to say nothing" (Benjamin 70; Blanchot 381). Storytelling is the appearance of language as language. In other words, the authority or wisdom of the storytelling of which Benjamin speaks is the appearance of death in language.

Returning, after this long diversion, to Conrad's Marlow texts it is possible to continue the reading of Chance as a novel that displays an acute awareness of the way in which narrating and story interact. The nature of this transmission requires the close reading of a quotation from Benjamin's essay that was introduced early on in this discussion: "it is", he writes, "half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (89). This statement initially seems to be at odds with Benjamin's suggestions that the story will exhibit the "fingerprints" of its many tellers, however on closer inspection these fingerprints turn out to be evidence of the repeated transmission rather than the reduction of story to information. This can be witnessed in Chance where the insertion of the Marlow story has the surprising effect of making interpretation not easier but harder. Counter to the expected clarity, the great number of commentators in the text makes the informational aspect of the story recede. Leslie Hill notes a similarly paradoxical effect at work in Blanchot's Thomas the Obscure where, "The bizarre result is a writing in which everything already seems to possess somewhere in the novel its own implicit or explicit interpretation, except for the process of commentary itself, which remains uninterpreted and, one might add, boundlessly uninterpretable" (65). The polyphonic structure of Chance affords the numerous characters involved with ample opportunity to interpret, filter and translate the events they recount, explaining everything away except for the very activity of their narrating – an act comprised of their constant commentary on and critiques of events.

This emphasis on narrating over story manifests itself in the way that Marlow's narrative act is littered with doubt. The lack of narrative stability is exemplified when, towards the end of the novel, Marlow is trying to describe Captain Anthony's first meeting with his father-in-law, Mr de Barral:



*“Why Anthony appeared to shrink from the contact [...] is difficult to explain. Perhaps [...]. Possibly [...] he may well have been [...].*

*“In Short, we’ll say if you like that for various reasons [...]. [my emphasis] (Conrad, Chance 350)*

Marlow’s listener replies by challenging this failed narration and refusing Marlow’s attempt to make him party to the creation of the narrative that is implicit in his “if you like”: “‘Why do you say this?’ I inquired” (350). Marlow is frequently challenged by the unnamed narrator who retells Marlow’s narrative, his reactions of disbelief recurring throughout the text: “‘Come, Marlow,’ I said, ‘you exaggerate surely – if only by your way of putting things. It’s too startling’”; “‘You have a ghastly imagination,’ I said with a cheerfully sceptical smile”; “‘How do you know all this?’ I interrupted” (80, 102, 264). Marlow’s usual reaction is one of irritation: “No! I don’t exaggerate”; “You smile?”; “What the devil are you laughing at?” (136, 145, 353). The disputes between Marlow and his narrator are well illustrated by an early exchange:

“Do you expect me to agree with all this?” I interrupted.

“No, it isn’t necessary,” said Marlow, feeling the check to his eloquence, but with a great effort at amiability. “You need not even understand it.” (Conrad 63)

Marlow’s assertion that his narrative requires neither agreement nor understanding is remarkable. What Marlow demands, and here he is in accord with the storyteller, is that his story is transmitted. Comprehension, in terms of what Benjamin would call information, is not necessary. The realisation of the inaccessibility of information, equated with the negation that is central to literary language, is what marks out Chance and the other Marlow texts as works of storytelling.

Susan Jones’ study of Chance provides a good example of an approach that moves away from the reading of stories as purely informational. According to

Jones' interpretation, the result of the numerous narratives that surround Flora is that she recedes from the reader with the increasing attempts to bring her to the fore: "In the final version [of Chance] it is Flora herself who has become the 'text', the location of endless interpretations of the 'damsel's' part. Yet her failure to inhabit fully the role of heroine simultaneously creates an ellipse at the centre of the narrative" (159-60). In this reading of Chance, Flora disappears; or rather the impossibility of adequately representing woman within the genre of romance appears. Flora appears in Chance as her own refusal to appear. Jones reads Conrad as deliberately dramatising the male-constructions of language and genre and examines the ways in which his technique, whilst clearly belonging to male-centred discourse, explicitly questions its own foundations: "by limiting Marlow's voice so that it never achieves final authority, Conrad registers the dilemma of women who are unable to form identities untrammelled by plots, poses, gestures that have not already been invented for them, and that are not already entrenched at a cultural level" (115). This dilemma, which neatly recalls Blanchot's announcement of the death of "this woman", is the result of the negation inherent in a language that precedes the individual.

This Blanchotian reading of "The Storyteller" opens up the possibility of approaching the Marlow texts from what are extremely profitable angles and recovering meaning from what Blanchot identifies as the double negation of literary language. Identifying the various ellipses in the stories - Flora in Chance, the wisdom of Kurtz in Heart of Darkness, or Jim's absent jump from the Patna in Lord Jim - allows meaning to emerge from the narrating act itself. My conclusion is a return to the question of what occurs when narrating becomes story: it would appear that it is in this intersection that the work of the storyteller is located, where the meaning of the literary emerges.

### Endnotes

1 The narratological terminology that is employed in this paper is drawn from Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse*. Genette identifies three distinct ways in which the word "narrative" is commonly used. The first refers "to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse [. . .]. A second meaning has narrative refer to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse [. . .]. A third meaning "has narrative refer once more to an event: not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself." (Genette 25-6) To avoid the confusion that might result from the inherent ambiguity of the word "narrative" Genette develops his own terminology. The first version of "narrative" retains the title "narrative", the second becomes "story" and the third "narrating".

2 The ideas central to this aspect of Blanchot's thinking are introduced by Hegel in "Sense-Certainty", the first chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*. (G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979. pp. 58-66). Given the context of this discussion it is worth noting that whilst the thought experiment Hegel employs in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* uses the written word its results are applied to both written and spoken language.

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**First Response**

This is a lively and challenging appraisal of Marlow's ambiguous positioning in several of Conrad's texts, notably CHANCE. The theoretical insights are generally illuminating, although it seems to me that the boundaries between oral and written storytelling are unfortunately blurred, despite the disclaimers made with respect to Benjamin's essay on 'The Storyteller'. (The tensions and interactions between orality and print forms of literature have become an important field of scholarly investigation over the past few decades; subtler, more comprehensive discriminations need to be offered - if only by way of clarification.) Perhaps the analysis of death in relation to storytelling might also have been nuanced by moving from Derrida's APORIAS to THE GIFT OF DEATH, in which Heidegger's claims are revisited through comparisons with Kierkegaard and Levinas. However, the writer's mediation of this debate through Blanchot is effective. It highlights the complex negativities and silences of literary language, while providing a fresh perspective on the shifting processes which occur when 'narrating' becomes 'story'. This opens up intriguing ways of understanding what is at stake for both novelist and reader in the selection of narrative designs or strategies, sometimes with the result that the very process of storytelling becomes its own disconcerting and aporetic outcome. Despite its theoretical innovation, the article is a little disappointing as an account of CHANCE. By keeping textual detail at arm's length and avoiding focused specificity, the narrative form of the novel is justified by assertion rather than clearcut demonstration. From this perspective, the discussion would have benefited from some engagement with Henry James's double-edged, yet searching, appraisal of Conrad's frequently contested method in 'The New Novel' (1914). Closer comparisons and contrasts might also have been drawn with the other fictional works in which Marlow features; there is at least one tantalising glimpse of storytelling, as seen in HEART OF DARKNESS, which is not fully elucidated. Yet the paper

remains suggestive; if it does not altogether deliver on its promises, readers may be persuaded to apply the prevailing model more broadly to Conrad's related endeavours.