"Il Conde" as an Introduction to Conrad's Works

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Introduction: Conrad's best work is distributed over all three of the fictional forms he employed. He is most famous for novels like *Nostromo* and novellas like *Heart of Darkness*.[1] But he was also a great short story writer. Some of these stories are useful in providing neat and time-saving introductions to Conrad. An excellent case in point is "Il Conde."[2] Even though it is not about the sea, it could be a textbook introduction to Conrad. This paper will try to show three ways in which "Il Conde" epitomizes Conrad's fiction: first, it uses Conrad's favorite narrative technique; second, along with a typical narrator, it has a very typical Conradian hero; and finally, the story treats three of Conrad's most prevalent themes. After a summary of the plot, for the benefit of those who have never read the story, this paper will be divided into three parts, with one devoted to each of these points.

Plot: The Narrator[3] tells of meeting the Count in Naples. The Count was popular with the staff at his hotel, who called him "*Il Conde*"—Conrad's Italian miscue for "*Il Conte*"[4]—literally meaning "*the* Count," as if he were the "*the* Count par excellence" (610). The Count was very well-bred, as, obviously, was the Narrator, and they soon became dining companions. It was no accident that the Count was living

out his days in the Gulf of Naples. He had a rheumatic affliction which reduced him to inactivity in any other climate—for instance, in Bohemia, where his daughter "had a castle" and the name[5] "of a very aristocratic family" (612). The Count believed living in Bohemia or anywhere but the Gulf of Naples would kill him within the year. After three weeks of acquaintance, the Narrator had to take the train north to attend a sick friend. When he returned, he found the Count in a state of dignified depression, which the latter explained as follows:

At a public concert, when he had stepped out for a moment, "within a stone's throw of a thousand people," (620) he was held up at knife point. A young man asked him for a light and suddenly produced a knife and demanded all of the Count's money. The Count was quick to comply.[6] However, he had prudently[7] left most of his money at the hotel, and the thief was unsatisfied with his haul. The Count swore he had no more money. Actually, and fatefully, he had forgotten a twenty-five franc gold piece that he used to carry around (presumably in France) "in case of an accident," and somehow still had. Of course, the accident he had been contemplating was "having his pocket picked," not "a brazen and insulting robbery" (625, with previous quote). The young man then demanded the Count's rings, but both were family mementos, and the Count refused to give them up. In fact, he closed his eyes, "fully expecting to be feel himself being...disemboweled by the push of the long sharp blade resting murderously against the pit of his stomach...the very seat...of anguishing sensations" (623). Nevertheless, when he opened his eyes again, his antagonist was gone.

After this confrontation, the Count felt oddly famished. He found a small restaurant to dine at, forgetting he had handed over all the cash in his pocket. Then he discovered the twenty-five franc gold piece that

he had hidden away. As he sat down to dine, he was startled to recognize the young man again, sitting at a nearby table. Just before leaving the restaurant, the robber stood near the Count's table, looking at nothing in particular, and muttered something through clenched teeth, in a voice too quiet for the anyone but the Count to hear. He cursed the Count for lying about having no more money and swore to get even. In the Count's mind, the young man's expression—the same vicious snarl he had shown during the robbery—seemed to validate this threat. Then he composed his face again and left. The Count learned from a waiter that the young man, though a student from "a very good family," was "the chief, *capo,* of an association of young men—of very nice young men"—a "very powerful *Camorra.*" The way the waiter "shut down one lid" and "breathed [this] out" (627, along with proximate quotes) is enough to suggest that a *Camorra* is a Mafia-like society. The word *capo*—practically an English word by now, after its use in so many American Mafia movies—seems to confirm this, as does the Count's fatalistic comment to the English Narrator that knowing what a *Camorra* was—as the English Narrator couldn't—meant he was "a marked man" (628).

The conclusion to this story is the Count's resolute trip North. He decided not to chance another rendezvous with the *capo* or his surrogates. He was less distressed by the threat to his life than the humiliating nuances of such an event. Therefore, he had already made up his mind to leave the Gulf area, despite his conviction that the move would kill him. As the Narrator saw the Count off on the train for his journey to the fatal Northern climate, he was reminded of a Japanese samurai preparing to commit *hara-kiri.*

Part I : Conrad's Favorite Narrative Technique

The first point of similarity to the majority of Conrad's work is indirect narration combined with sharp sensual detail.[8] This is the technique that at its most extreme, in *Chance*, was humorously compared by Henry James to a line of bailers in a leaky boat, passing the pails of water from hand to hand (235).[9] It may well be that Conrad overdoes the layers of narration in the case of *Chance* (the narrator telling us what Powell told him about what Flora reported of Captain Anthony's actions). But they serve the serious artistic end of making the events described seem more plausible by distancing the author and presenting experiences in the way we tend to have them: some directly and many vicariously. Conrad's technique is one of several modern reactions[10] to the nineteenth-century tendency of author's to talk directly to the reader.[11]

In this story, the technique is much less conspicuous than in *Chance*. The narration seems direct enough, at first sight. However, the critical part of the story is the fatal evening when the Count is robbed and meets his tormentor again at the restaurant—and this is told at one remove, since the Narrator was not present. Conrad stresses the fact of the Narrator's absence by having him visit his friend at this time; even the Narrator's train trip north is briefly depicted, with the Count obligingly seeing him off at the station.

Paradoxically, the use of the indirect method—a means of enhancing the narrative reality—invites credibility[12] problems because of the nature of this story: so much of the narrative depends on something subtler than action, and would be easier to accept at first-hand. This subtlety can be observed in two facts about the critical section of the

story:

First, the most serious things that happen during the robbery are suggestive rather than overt. The Count might have been sliced open like a watermelon (like the Swede in "The Blue Hotel," a story by Conrad's good friend Stephen Crane); but he wasn't. What is important to "Il Conde" is the Count's anticipation of this outcome.

Second, the Count wasn't so concerned about being killed. He fully expected his move to a Northern climate to produce that result anyway; yet he moved. What terrified him about the young *capo's* first and threatened attacks was the insult done to his gentle mode of existence. For him moving North was a choice of death over dishonor. Hence, he is not running away so much as facing up to his private code.[13]

To offset the strain put on the reader's credulity by a second-hand account of something so internal, Conrad stresses the Count's unusual sensitivity. The Narrator prefaces the Count's story with the following impressions:

> He stared at me very hard. And I understood then how really impressionable he was. Every small fact and event of that evening stood out in his memory as if endowed with mystic significance. If he did not mention to me the color of the pony which drew the *carozella*, and the aspect of the man who drove, it was a mere oversight arising from his agitation, which he repressed manfully. (616).

Heart of Darkness discloses the same hyperbolic reverence for detail on the part of its narrator, Marlow. F. R. Leavis, while approving of the detail in that famous novella, complains about the hyperbole, which he

considers a straining for some nebulous and false "significance" (206-207); he could in fact be referring to phrases like "mystic significance" in the passage above from "Il Conde." In this case, though, the phrase is not intended to heighten the effect but to justify the Narrator's ability to present the story in such intimate terms.

Thus we are warned of the surprising extent of nervous detail in the Count's "original" version. The Count even remembers what the orchestra was doing (not just what it was playing) at the point where his assailant showed him the knife:

> "The clarinet...was finishing its solo, and I assure you I could hear every note. Then the band crashed *fortissimo*, and that creature rolled its eyes and gnashed its teeth at me with the greatest ferocity. ' Be silent! No noise or'" (620; the final dash is in the text).

All of this is characteristic of Conrad. Sensual details are his hallmark, and indirect presentation is his prevalent technique. The story requires the use of both.

Part II : A True Conradian Hero

As a character study, "Il Conde" is even more representative. What it exhibits above all is Conrad's tendency to portray two types of good men: the protagonist, who has some flaw (sometimes amounting to no more than inexperience), and the narrator who discusses him. The narrator, in turn, is either anonymous and omniscient (informally identifiable with Conrad himself) or a fairly flawless character, like Captain Marlow, of several novels and stories.[14] In either case, he is perfectly reliable.

Sometimes the same character serves both as the imperfect hero and the seemingly flawless narrator. This is the case in such fine rites-of-passage stories (or *bildungsroman*) as "The Secret Sharer" and *The Shadow Line*, where each narrator as an older man relates an experience from his younger, untested days. As protagonist, he still exhibits the insecurity of youth, but as a narrator he is as close to perfection as Marlow. In fact, Marlow could be the narrator of either "Sharer" or *Shadow Line*, since both are anonymous Merchant Service captains, and their temperaments are consistent with his.[15] What can be said with more relevance and assurance is that at the time of narration, as older, initiated men, both captains are essentially *like* Marlow. And so is the narrator of "Il Conde."

The protagonist of "Il Conde" is of course the Count himself, who is reminiscent of several heroes from Conrad's best works, including Axel Heist of *Victory* and Captain Anthony of *Chance*. Both of the latter suffer from being excessively gentle. Heist finds it impossible to express any emotion in a direct, unironic way, and consequently fails to gain real intimacy with the young woman he is protecting. This leads to the rather operatic tragedy. *Chance* is that rare event in Conrad's career, a novel with a happy ending.[16] But the potential for tragedy depends on the excessively genteel feelings of Captain Anthony, who has also taken a young woman under his protection—the heroine, Flora. Anthony has impulsively invited Flora aboard his ship, and even married her for respectability's sake. But his gentle hands-off policy toward her (so at odds with either character's natural inclination) almost brings about Flora's suicide.[17]

The virtue that the Narrator first recognizes in the Count is his gentility. Even before he learned about the Count's title and important

connections, he recognized him as a truly cultured "European," totally lacking in pretensions. He is also able to speak at least four languages (612).[18] Furthermore, he was too gentle to expect anything but the extremely civil treatment that he receives from the servants who call him "Il Conde." As with Heist and Captain Anthony, the Count's gentility serves to make him more charming rather than less, but it involves a problem: he finds it impossible to bear the kind of insult that the young robber offers him twice and promises, in the meeting at the restaurant, to offer him in aggravated form a third time. From a common-sense perspective, this is not a dishonor. It is hardly the Count's fault that he is set upon and berated by a young misanthrope. Nevertheless, he regards such vilification as dishonorable, perhaps because it makes him shrink in a way that he has never had to do before, in his near-seventy years.

While he is overly gentle, the Count qualifies himself on the positive side as a Conradian hero by being exceptionally courageous. In this respect, his title might be regarded as a symbol of his aristocratic attitude toward his personal safety. He is astounded by the young man's attack, but is never frightened into passivity. He speculates quite coolly on the futility of a fight (he would only be killed) and even of the inadvisability of calling out:

> The idea of setting up a vigorous shouting for help occurred to him, too. But he did nothing of the kind, and the reason why he refrained gave me a good opinion of his mental self-possession. He saw in a flash that nothing prevented the other from shouting, too...."He might have said anything—bring some dishonoring charge against me—what do I know? By his dress he was no

common robber. He was an Italian—I am a foreigner." (620)

Although he is appalled by the indignity of the situation, the Count is as efficient in his thinking in this dangerous moment as a man of action.

More positively and concretely, the Count twice chooses death to what he regards as dishonor. When the thief demands his rings, he refuses as resolutely as Conrad's best ship's masters:

> "*Vostrianelli*."
> "One of the rings," went on the Count, "was given me many years ago by my wife; the other is the signet ring of my father. I said,'No. *That* you shall not have!'" (623)

In fact, his refusal is reminiscent of Captain Mitchell in *Nostromo*. Mitchell is no hero; he is a bit of a fool, even. Yet he is decent and brave, a worthy representative of the British Merchant Service that Conrad so esteemed. Mitchell proves his courage in the scene in which he is captured by the rebel leader Sotillo. Incensed by the rough treatment he is receiving, he puts his foot down when his watch is taken and angrily demands it back. This belligerence so amazes Sotillo (a coward and a primitive with no understanding of honor) that, after some blustering he frees Mitchell and even returns his watch.[19]

Naturally, the Count's refusal is a greater demonstration of courage than Mitchell's stubbornness because of his superior imagination. As Leavis notes, Mitchell is "sane and stable to the point of stupidity" (223) and doesn't have enough penetration to realize the danger he is in. The Count, on the other hand, knows exactly what to expect from his accoster when he refuses to give up the rings. He closed his eyes,

fully expecting—I don't know whether I am right in recording that such an unpleasant word had passed his lips—fully expecting to feel himself being—I really hesitate to say—being disemboweled by the push of the long, sharp blade resting murderously against the pit of his stomach—the very seat, in all human beings, of anguishing sensations. (623)

It would be inaccurate to conclude that what is demonstrated by Captain Mitchell is not courage of any kind. In the words of the novel, "For all his pomposity in social intercourse, Captain Mitchell could meet the realities of life in a resolute and ready spirit" (335). He proves this assertion in the ensuing action. Yet, obviously, his resolute spirit is an easier attainment and a lesser virtue than the Count's, because it is fortified by insensitivity.

Finally, as already stated, the Count's decision to leave the Gulf of Naples, along with its unflinching execution of the decision, is a peculiar act of aristocratic courage. Like Dr. Johnson he surely does not wish to die, but he feels every bit as sure of death in the Northern climate than he would be remaining in the Gulf of Naples area. For reasons already discussed, he regards the indignity of being accosted as worse than the certain death that awaits him (he thinks) within a few months of his moving North. Thus, the Narrator's last sight of the Count reminds him of Japanese ritual suicide:

He was not afraid of what could be done to him. His delicate conception of his dignity was defiled by a degrading experience. He couldn't stand that. No Japanese gentleman, outraged in his exag-

gerated sense of honor, could have gone about his preparations fro hara-kiri with greater resolution. To go home really amounted to suicide for the poor Count. (628)

Part III : Conradian Themes

The third and perhaps most noticeable fact that makes "Il Conde" a good introduction to Conrad is the intermingling of themes. Three ubiquitous themes in Conrad are isolation, sudden disaster, and the inadequacy of "natural man." The story provides very pure examples of these themes.

First, the Count's isolation is stressed at every turn of the story. In this respect, the Count resembles nearly every one of Conrad's heroes. *Victory's* hero Axel Heist, for instance, lives by himself on an island in the Malayan Archipelago, and is the subject of idle European gossip all around that vast area because, as the narrator comments, "An island is but the tip of a mountain" (19).

The definitive case of isolation is Razumov, the hero of *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad's Russian novel about a young man who is trapped into spying for the Tsarist government. As a spy in Switzerland, he discovers that there is absolutely no one he can confide in, including the young Russian woman he comes to love.[20] This eventually becomes too much for him: in effect he attempts suicide by confessing to the group of antigovernment conspirators that he has infiltrated. As it develops, instead of being murdered by the conspirators, he is attacked by the only vicious member of that circle (most being somewhat fatuous, but infinitely preferable to the Tsarists), and this man deliberately bursts his eardrums. Razumov lives out his life less isolated

than he was, but cut off from the sound of the human voice.

Like Heist and Razumov, the Count is a foreigner, with no intimate friends. As mentioned in the plot summary, the servants refer to him only as "*Il Conde*," as if he were the only count in Naples. And we get the strong impression that he might as well be the only count: within the confines of the story, he has no contacts with the local aristocracy. Thus, from the evening of the robbery to the day of the Narrator's return, he clearly has confided his problem to no one. He seems to have no intimate friends except the Narrator. But as well as the two gentlemen harmonize with each other, their intimacy is quite restricted. The Narrator knows neither the Count's name nor his native country.[21] He learns the married name of his daughter, which is Bohemian, but:

> This is as near as I ever came to ascertaining his nationality. His own name, strangely enough, he never mentioned. Perhaps he thought I had seen it on the published list. Truth to say, I never looked. At any rate, he was a good European—he spoke four languages to my certain knowledge—and a man of fortune. (612)

Our last view of him is sitting alone on the train, his head looking resolutely ahead at nothing.

The second Conradian theme that the story illustrates is the sudden and random nature of disaster. In *Lord Jim*, for instance, the defining moment is when Jim's ship, the *Patna*, strikes the submerged body of a ship that had sunk on some previous voyage. This brings about a panic in which Jim disgraces himself by joining the *Patna's* cowardly officers and jumping ship, leaving the passengers to their fate. The resulting sense of lost honor is Jim's tragedy and leads to his suicidal demise.[22]

What especially defines the night of the collision is Jim's very secure feeling. The weather is perfect; he is alone on deck; and he feels a deep sense of serenity:

> A marvelous stillness pervaded the world, and the stars, together with the serenity of their rays, *seemed to* shed upon the earth the *assurance of everlasting security*. The young moon recurved, and shining low in the west, *was like* a slender shaving thrown up from *a bar of gold*, and the Arabian Sea, smooth and cool to the eye *like a sheet of ice*, extended its *perfect level* to the *perfect circle* of a dark horizon. The propeller *turned without a check, as though* its beat had been part of *the scheme of a safe universe*.... (19; italics mine)

All the suggestions of perfection and eternity in the above passage are introduced by either similes (*like, seemed to*) or subjunctives combined with similes (*as if, as though*). This is Jim's imagination, which is belied by the reality of the balmy evening: "his eyes roaming about the line of the horizon, seemed to gaze hungrily into the unattainable, and did not see the shadow of the coming event" (21)—that is, the shadow of the submerged ship. After the sudden collision, the seemingly eternal beat of the propeller becomes the "wheezy thump of the engines" (26).

The Count feels equally complacent before he is attacked by the young man. He loves music and it is a pleasant evening. But the primary source of his complacency is simply the assumptions he has developed about his own life. In this respect, the Count's calamity is a better illustration of this theme than Jim's. Jim has been exhibiting subtle signs of weakness all his life, and his misfortune might well be a

demonstration of the nemesis awaiting someone with his peculiar flaws. But as the Narrator describes him, the Count has no flaws at all except the one illustrating this theme:

> Probably he had never had any grave affairs to attend to in his life. It was a kindly existence, with its joys and sorrows regulated by the course of Nature—marriages, births, deaths—ruled by the prescribed usages of good society and protected by the State. (612)

His encounter with the thief is a demonstration that sudden disaster is indifferent to character and even awaits the most exemplary people. Indeed, the Count's only flaw is his lack of awareness of this. His attitude reminds one of the sin of presumption, which a Catholic tradition (probably not a formal dogma) identified as an "unforgivable sin"[23] : the assumption that one is definitely saved. The Count's "sin" is a kind of secular presumption, his goal being not eternal salvation but a life free of submerged disasters. He presumes that fate has saved him from untimely vicissitudes.

Finally, the story illustrates the basic imperfections of man in a state of nature. It has been common during the Romantic era and since to agree with Rousseau that man in a natural state is good. But Conrad seems closer to Hobbes's classical view that the life of man without civilized governance must be "nasty, brutish, and short." This is a theme in every important novel of Conrad's except *Chance*. It is central to *Nostromo* that the anarchy of the government of Costaguana[24] reflects the lack of civilization, and that no decent government is possible in such a state. The same is shown about the various sultanates in *Lord Jim* and the minor Malayan novels. And *Under Western Eyes*

shows the devastating effect of the Tsarist tyranny on the lives of seemingly cultured Russians.

A similar lack of basic stability mars the Count's placid existence in Naples. Nominally a part of Italy, Naples is nevertheless crime-ridden and controlled by gangs. This is something the Count understands very well, and the Narrator (clearly British and used to a more civilized government) has to learn. The Count has already given his opinion that the Gulf of Naples is the healthiest climate in the world for people with rheumatic conditions, and a favorite spa of the ancient Romans for that reason. In fact, the Narrator observes, "This was the only personal opinion I heard him express" (611). Yet, after the young *capo* (or *Camorra* leader) threatens revenge, the Count dismisses the Narrator's suggestion that he change residences but stay in Southern Italy: "You do not know what a *Camorra* is, my dear sir. I am a marked man" (628).

Conrad was intentionally implying something about the harmful effect of the body politic on the quality of life. Thus he names the site of the fateful concert "the Villa Nazionale" (613). Not only is the Count accosted in a public place, it is a national hall. This name reminds us that the Count (as the Narrator understands him) assumes he is "protected by the State" (612)—and coming only one page after this surmise, the name is significant and must have been devised by Conrad to underscore the Count's vulnerability in such a State.[25] The truth waiting to emerge is that no State protects perfectly, and such an imperfect government as Naples' can hardly be relied on at all. Even the university professors take orders from these young *Camorra*. Consequently, unprotected by an enlightened government, a man's life may indeed by "brutish and short" even when physical "nature" is both beautiful and curative.

Notes

1 Even though Conrad's novellas are probably less important than his novels overall, he has a special place in literature, along with Henry James, for demonstrating how good a novella can be. Perhaps for temperamental reasons, he had fewer failures in this form than he did in the novel. There is ample testimony that two of his greatest novels were torture for him to write. He actually had Ford Maddox Ford write a small part of *Nostromo* for him. And he complained bitterly about the difficulties he was having with *Under Western Eyes*, while at the same time producing "The Secret Sharer," a near-novella (a long short story) of the very highest quality, with ease and confidence (cf. Karl, 722).

2 In fairness, no less a Conradian critic than Leo Gurko thinks this story is trivial and unconnected with Conrad's great work: "...here [in "Il Conde"] again a tiny incident is forced to stand on its own feet, unsupported by the overtones with which Conrad invests his significant work" (165-66). A measure of this paper's success might be how well it refutes Gurko's assertion. But his "overtones" may not refer to anything as humble or definable as the criteria presented in this paper. Gurko is generally the clearest of writers, but his meaning here is somewhat vague.

For a more positive view, Wilfred S.Dowden asserts, "By far the best of [the set of short stories appearing under the name of] *A Set of Six* is 'Il Conde,' a short story set in contemporary Naples" (109). Dowden's study of the story considers such matters as sound imagery, symbolism, and subliminal repugnance. He sees the Count as victimized by a hatred for the "vileness" of the Italian type, characterized by the Roman busts he dislikes as well as the "type" that his young assailant represents. There is certainly something to be said for this interpretation, but it is relevant here as an example of how much more in the way of "overtones," as the word is normally used, Dowden notices than Gurko.

3 The use of the upper-case *N* in "Narrator" is restricted to the narrator of this story, to avoid confusion with the other narrators discussed, but also because he has no proper name, and "Narrator" is a surrogate name.

4 This observation is thanks to Zabel's introduction in this paper's text edition (608). Since Zabel's notes were revised by Frederick R. Karl, it is unclear who

really deserves the credit.

5 This story is strangely devoid of names. We never learn the daughter's famous married name. Furthermore, as so often, the narrator of the story is anonymous. And even the Narrator never learns the Count's name.

6 As he pointed out, he was nearly seventy years old and would certainly have been stabbed to death if he fought with the young man. He was especially sure of this because of the malevolent and nasty manner that the young man evinced.

7 As things turn out, the Count's prudence leads to his tragic decision to leave the Gulf of Naples—in Conrad's own metaphor, a move equivalent to a ritual Japanese suicide. If he had been less careful and carried a lot of money to give the thief, the young man's subsequent threat would never have been made. He would not labor under the malevolent misimpression that the Count had hoodwinked him. Thus prudence itself is transmuted into a fatal mistake. This is a very Conradian touch.

8 Actually, Conrad's constant use of this technique can be exaggerated. Some of his best stories and novellas are simply told by the protagonist. "Youth" and *The Shadow Line*, for instance, are narrated by the main protagonist—an older captain of the British Merchant Service recalling a youthful rite of passage. The same can be said for "The Secret Sharer," except that one critical bit of narration is at a further remove, since it comes from Leggett and only through the narrator. Furthermore, the great novella *Typhoon* is a simple third-person narrative. *Nostromo* is a third-person narrative too, though its various experiments and time distortions make its total effect far from simple.

9 It is ironic that Henry James would be the eminent critic who took Conrad to task for an instance of obscurity. *Chance* is far less obscure, for all its indirection, than any of James's three final novels (*The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove, and The Golden Bowl*). It is also considerably easier reading than *The Awkward Age*—or even than James's very subtle review of *Chance*.

10 The most radical attempt to distance the author from the narrative is surely the "stream-of-consciousness" technique of James Joyce. It was also famously employed by Virginia Wolf and William Faulkner. This technique was named for a

phrase from the American psychologist William James (brother of Henry) describing how a person's mind drifts from object to object. The technique seeks to duplicate this random drift without authorial intrusion. Joyce's *Ulysses* provides the ultimate example of stream-of-consciousness. The novel is brilliant, hilarious, and many other things, but rather long for something so difficult. One is reminded of Samuel Johnson's admission that for all the virtues of *Paradise Regained*, no one ever wished it were longer. The first part of Faulkner's great novel *The Sound and the Fury*, on the other hand, demonstrates how lucidly the technique can be employed. Perhaps part of the reason for the lucidity of this part, though, is that the other three parts are not stream-of-consciousness, and the whole novel is short and vivid enough to read twice without a sense of hardship.

11 To be accurate, this is an eighteenth-century tendency as well. *Tom Jones*, Henry Fielding's eighteenth-century trail-blazer, is the classical model of authorial intrusion. Fielding intersperses the action with facetious essays on his narrative method, and even on the plausibility of the action. Henry Sterne carries this tendency to its logical conclusion in *Tristram Shandy*, a fantastic novelty in which narrative intrusions become the whole point, and the plot is trivial. But novelists like Conrad were reacting to their immediate predecessors, most prominently Dickens and Thackery—especially the latter, whose *Vanity Fair* keeps up a running conceit, in which the characters are Thackery's puppets. As his own illustrator, Thackery actually ends this novel with a picture of the puppets being put back in their box. This is really trifling with the reader's involvement in the story.

12 Perhaps words like "credibility" and phrases like "the reader's credulity" seem to imply something absurd—that the goal is to put readers in a temporary state of psychosis, in which they really confuse fiction with reality. What Samuel Johnson wrote about the credibility "problem" in the plays of Shakespeare (defending the Bard against early critics who thought he should have observed the unities of time and place) applies to prose fiction as well: "The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (431). Readers are "in their senses" too, and know that the story is only a story. What Conrad strove for was an approach that would renew fiction as a means of conveying essential truths by removing it as far as possible from nineteenth-century artifice.

13 The conclusion is consistent with the internal nature of the Count's sufferings. His decision to move to a Northern climate merely prefigures his death—the death itself is never verified. In practical terms, for all we know, the Count exaggerated the influence of climate on his health and is living in his daughter's Bohemian castle at the time of narration. The moral point, in such a case, would still be that the Count faced what he thought would be his death as squarely as a samurai warrior committing ritual suicide.

14 Marlow is a major protagonist in *The Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*. He also narrates *Chance*, though his role in the action of that novel is fairly limited. As I imply in the text of this paper, there are several other stories with narrators who could just as well be Marlow.

15 Since the young captains of both narratives are undergoing their maiden voyages as ship's master, they cannot actually be the same person. The point is that only circumstances distinguish them: they are mirror images. And Marlow could be the older (narrator) version of either.

16 This is probably a major factor in *Chance's* surprising popularity. As good as *Chance* is, Conrad had, after all, written better and less contrived novels. But such a great and hardworking writer deserved this rare popular success, and his obvious pleasure in the astonishing sales of the novel—evident in the preface to the second edition—is very moving.

17 Actually, Flora has already been in the last stages of preparation for suicide three times. All three times she has been stopped by an ignorant, but lucky, act of kindness. This fourth time, she is lucky again, which is part of the reason the novel is entitled *Chance*.

Readers who have never read *Chance*—which in the 1990's would mean most readers, even most American students of English literature—are advised that Anthony and Flora are actually in love with each other, but both are prevented by modesty and inexperience from knowing their own feelings or suspecting the repressed feelings of the other. Complicating this is Anthony's dread of taking advantage of his nominal wife, which prevents him, presumably until the dénouement, from consummating the marriage. Flora's experiences for the past seven years have taught her to expect rejection, and she mistakes Anthony's gentle treatment for aversion.

18 It is relevant to observe that the same could be said of Conrad, who of course spoke and wrote English and his native Polish, but also French, which he learned years before taking up English. In this respect the Count is an especially Conradian hero, though it has to be admitted that Conrad didn't always regard linguistic ability as a virtue. He observes of one character in *Under Western Eyes* that he spoke Russian "as he spoke and wrote four or five other European languages, without distinction and without force" (287). But Conrad's most reliable narrator, Captain Marlow, is shown in *Heart of Darkness* to be at least bilingual. It is his proficiency in French that secures him the African job from a French-Belgian firm.

19 Mitchell's foil in the novel is the Jewish merchant Hirsch. Hirsch cowers before the whole situation he is thrown into, and when he becomes Sotillo's prisoner, he is tortured and finally shot. In fact, Hirsch redeems himself at the end of his life by spitting in Sotillo's face and precipitating Sotillo's shooting of him, which has dire practical consequences for Sotillo. Nevertheless, the general cringing of Hirsch enhances our impression of Mitchell's courage (or stupidity).

20 The young woman is Natalia Haldin, sister of the student revolutionary Haldin, the man who assassinated a truly barbarous Tsarist minister. Haldin then made the fatal mistake of trusting Razumov to help him escape from Russia. Instead, Razumov reported Haldin to the authorities, who (it transpires) tortured Haldin to death and then expressed their gratitude to Razumov by condemning him to this life as a double agent. Razumov's dilemma develops into horror when he realizes that he has fallen in love with Natalia, who reveres her brother's memory and thinks Razumov was his loyal friend. She is a gentle noncombatant in the group of subversives he has infiltrated. Her association with the members is through her devotion to her brother, the group's martyr. Razumov gradually recognizes how betraying Haldin has blighted the life of this innocent girl. His confession is an act of love.

21 Gérard Jean-Aubry, Conrad's friend, identifies the sources and seems to imply something about the country of the Count. The model for the Narrator was Conrad himself, and the original Count was "a charming Polish aristocrat, Count Sigismond Szembek...." Conrad met Count Szembek in Capri, and the Count "told him about a misadventure he had recently suffered in Naples, which, with minor

modifications, inspired Conrad's story 'Il Conde'" (247). But there is no reason at all to conclude that *our* Count is a Pole; and it is much more rational to assume the Narrator is British (as Conrad was by adoption) than Polish-born like Conrad. It is a rare Pole who has mastered British idioms, mannerisms, and attitudes. One "minor modification" is that the real Count regarded his experience as a "misadventure," while the fictitious Count chooses to die because of his encounter. All of which is to say that the story is completely independent of its source.

22 Of course, instead of the phrase chosen, we could just as easily say that the accident leads to Jim's "suicide." I avoided the single word only because this is one of many examples of the hero leaving the exculpating punishment to someone else. Much later in the novel, Jim marches into the encampment of Doriman, a man he knows will kill him, and dies in a very deliberate, ritualistic manner. Obviously, Jim's murder was a calculated suicide.

23 The other "unforgivable sin" was said to be despair, which is the opposite of presumption. Both were termed "sins against the Holy Ghost"—unforgivable because they precluded repentance. Even in the late 1950's and early '60's, this was taught as a sort of vague doctrine in the (Catholic) Jesuit high school I attended. Conrad himself had no religion as an adult; he was a confirmed agnostic. But like almost all nineteenth-century Poles, he was raised as a Catholic. So he must have been aware of this tradition and might well have realized how the Count's one weak point resembles presumption.

24 Costaguana is fictional, but, as Karl (for instance) makes clear, it was modeled on Columbia (144). Similarly, Sulaco, the splinter state (conceived and supported by Western commercial interests) parallels the U.S.-created Panama, which, for the sake of the Panama Canal, the U.S. simply annexed from Columbia. But Karl thinks "Cartegena in Columbia would appear to be the basis for Sulaco" (144).

25 Critically speaking, it is illogical to ask what the author intended. The work usually has its own frail existence quite apart from biographical notes pertaining to the author's nuance-by-nuance intentions. And there has long been critical agreement that it should. As D.H. Lawrence, the least academic of critics, advised, we should believe the work, not the author. Even so, one way of stressing the significance of a particular nuance is to conclude that the author must have been as conscious of it as we are—the one qualification being that if the author

could somehow be proven *not* to have been thinking along the lines we identified, our interpretation would still be valid.

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