

Introduction

There are ways to start an introduction on Joseph Conrad's works other than by discussing Rembrandt's sketch of an elephant (Figure 0.1). But what a beautiful elephant this is. It is stamped as a masterful work by the quick interplay of overlapping lines, the sense of ease in its accurate portrayal of movement, and the large signature that signals the artist's pride. In no obvious way is the depiction of this elephant reminiscent of *The Anatomy Lesson*, *The Night Watch*, *Belshazzar's Feast*, one of Rembrandt's self-portraits, or any other of his canonical works. The tired label of chiaroscuro is difficult to apply here. The picture's material, size, motif and origin as a noncommissioned work preclude it from being classified among the masterworks. Its position on the margin of Rembrandt's artistic output, however, is unrelated to its inherent artistic skill (it has a more unified display of perspective, light and shadow than *The Anatomy Lesson*, for instance). Given this marginal position, we can approach Rembrandt's elephant with fresh eyes: allowing Rembrandt's art to talk to us directly rather than through the mediation of an established critical response.

An elephant, of course, is seldom in the position of being marginal. Margins themselves are of central importance for establishing artistic identity. The Italian art historian Giovanni Morelli (1816–91) catalogued depictions of ears, noses and fingers to establish the authenticity of paintings by Raphael, Botticelli, Mantegna, Titian and others. Going against a tradition that was “addicted to philosophical crotchets” and relying heavily on intuition as a means of interpretation, he published his work under a pseudonym, acutely aware that the “German and French critics would inevitably ridicule you if you were to tell them that even the nails were characteristic of a great master.”¹ Apart from developing a technique that was verifiable and reproducible, he brought his readers close to the artwork itself. He variously referred to this as the “experimental method” and “the scientific study of art.”² Rather than concerning

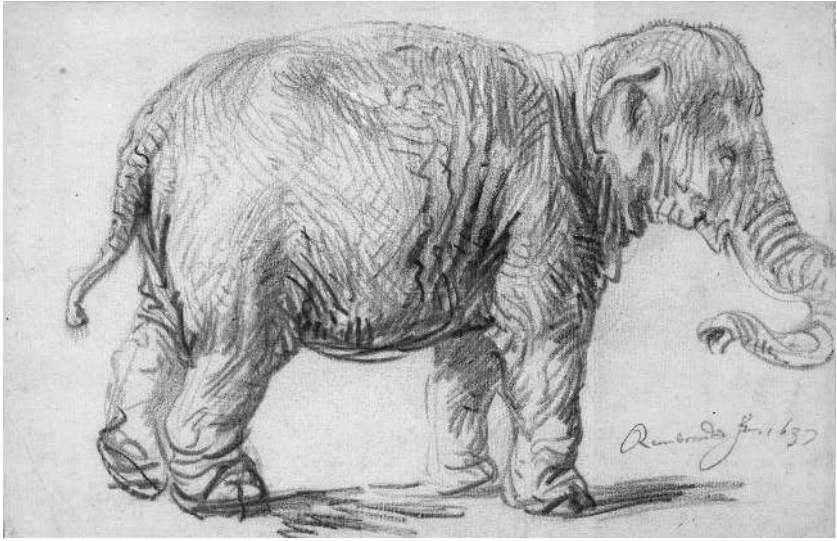


Figure 0.1 Rembrandt van Rijn. 1637. The Albertina Museum, Vienna.

himself with chronology, tradition, cultural history, the definition of beauty, or a picture's placement in the history of painting, he urged us to look at the painting itself and fondle its details: "Look at this Raphael's type of ear in the children. See how round and fleshy it is; how it unites naturally with the cheek and does not appear to be merely stuck on, as in the works of so many other masters."³ Morelli was not particularly interested in ears as such but sought to identify forms that were distinctly Raphael's: the fingerprints of an artwork, the artist's handwriting: "the characteristic features in a work of art."⁴

For Conrad's fiction, many critics have taken anything but a Morellian approach to his detail-rich writing. The tendency of Conrad criticism has been, in Cannon Schmitt's formulation in a recent essay on the tide in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), to "read through the manifest details of a text to some sort of veiled or latent level of significance."⁵ Thus David Leon Higdon and David Galef, respectively, complain that Conrad criticism routinely ignores significant elements of the text that are secondary to the "main action" and overlooks the "whole supporting cast" of the "minor characters."⁶ The result of this macroscopic approach, Albert Guerard seems to maintain in a discussion of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), is that as a critic, one "may even never get around to mentioning what are,

irrespective of structure or concealed meaning, the best-written pages in the book.”⁷

Whether the aforementioned statements represent Conrad criticism in moments of healthy self-awareness or ill-founded objections by a few contrarian Conradians, Conrad’s texts have always been seen to encourage a type of selective reading for something outside the texts. According to E. M. Forster (1879–1970), himself influenced by the detail-oriented focus of analytic philosophy, Conrad “is always promising to make some general philosophical statement about the universe and then refraining in a gruff disclaimer.”⁸ In all of Conrad’s stories, argues Wilson Follett (1887–1963), there is “a sense of seeking and not finding.”⁹ More recently, Ian Watt found that “Conrad’s fiction was to remain dense with concrete images that impelled the reader’s imagination to look for larger meanings”¹⁰ and David Leon Higdon notes that in *Under Western Eyes* (1911) patterns “encourage us to rush blindly ahead of the story to certain conclusions.”¹¹ “The structure of *Heart of Darkness* is the structure of the endlessly deferred promise,” writes J. Hillis Miller.¹²

The sense of deferred promise is present in more writings than *Heart of Darkness* and relates to the way many texts appear to withhold crucial facts, such as Falk’s cannibalism, Razumov’s espionage, Captain Whalley’s blindness and that the *Patna* – “sunk at sea” (LJ 66) – made it safely back to harbor. The sense of deferred promise is also related to the temptation to approach Conrad’s texts with an overarching question, like: “Who is Kurtz?”; “Is Lord Jim ‘one of us?’”; “Is Jimmy Wait an impostor?” Yet these focused questions that the texts pose may, paradoxically, be directly at odds with the stated aim of Conrad’s primary and detailed investigations.¹³ In response to Elsie Hueffer’s “attack on my pet *Heart of Darkness*,” Conrad admits, somewhat patronizingly, “the fault of having made Kurtz too symbolic or rather symbolic at all. But the story being mainly a vehicle for conveying a batch of personal impressions I gave the rein to my mental laziness and took the line of the least resistance. This is then the whole *Apologia pro Vita Kurtzii*” (CL 11.460). There are two main ways to read this explanation, where Conrad playfully equates his defense of Kurtz with the cardinal John Henry Newman’s defense of his life and his religious beliefs in *Apologia pro vita sua* (1864). Either, Kurtz is no more than one personal impression, among many others. Or, Kurtz’s intended function is like a cookie jar or plastic bag – a container, nothing more, which holds distinct, eclectic elements together.

In the “Author’s Note” to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Conrad stresses that the crew is the protagonist – not Jimmy Wait, the title character.

Jimmy, like Kurtz, is the vehicle of the story: “he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action” (xi), the book is “written round him” (vii). Likewise, Conrad writes to Hugh Clifford that “the whole story” of *Lord Jim* (1900) is made up of “side shows just because the main show is not particularly interesting – or engaging I should rather say” (CL II.226). Instead, what appears to hold a central position is often described indirectly, frequently outside of direct experience and present tense, like Kurtz’s words in *Heart of Darkness*, the cargo in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, the treasure in *Nostromo* (1904), Napoleon in *Suspense* (1925), Lord Jim’s jump from the *Patna*, sexual activity in *Victory* (1915), and the bomb explosion at the Greenwich observatory in *The Secret Agent* (1907) (neatly placed in the empty space between two paragraphs). Another way of putting this is that Conrad uses the same description for multiple “central” things: an absence.

Is there meaning in these empty spaces in the narrative? At times, this notion of indirect writing is explained from the perspective that Conrad was keenly aware of the need for suggestiveness in a work of art (“Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion,” CL VII.457), and of the limits of language, as if his texts were the product of an impossible attempt to asymptotically approach incommunicable experience. Stephen Skinner usefully connects this mode of writing with the rhetorical concept of apophasis, an “artistic method that seeks to express the inexpressible in such a way that its unsayability directs the imagination towards it while remaining beyond speech and comprehension.”¹⁴ As useful as this explanation of the function of an absence is, it places the focus and center of a story outside the text: on the inexpressible or the “otherwise present.”¹⁵ It can also suggest, if taken as a blanket answer, that the words that make up a story are subservient to a larger image and can “be referred back docilely to an idea that stands above it and explains it,” to borrow Edward Said’s expression.¹⁶ Such a starting point, however, makes it difficult to read a story like “The Return” (1898), which lacks a main idea but “consists for the most part of physical impressions; impressions of sound and sight, railway station, streets, a trotting horse, reflections in mirrors and so on, rendered as if for their own sake” (7), as Conrad explains in the “Author’s Note” to *Tales of Unrest* (1898).

Impressions rendered “as if for their own sake” may serve a main theme, plot, or idea, but they can also be understood as autonomous narrative units. For instance, “the splashy trotting of a horse” (118) that Alvan Hervey registers during an idle moment in “The Return” is unconnected

Introduction

5

to the story's overarching theme of infidelity, or connected in such a circuitous manner to the theme that this connection is not its primary or intended function. These types of element are, then, distinct from those rare details on which an overarching story pivots: without the rivets in *Heart of Darkness*, for example, Marlow would not get to Kurtz and without the piece of calico labelled "32 Brett Street" (SA 99) – "an incredible little fact" (SA 110) – the police would not get to Mr Verloc's residence in *The Secret Agent*.

In my reading, Conrad's fiction exhibits a fascination with details that have significant value exclusive of their service to an overarching narrative. To varying degrees, the texts poke fun at their public writers for the ease with which they engage in generalizations – like Carleon Anthony, Julius Laspara, Peter Ivanovitch, Professor Moorsom, Avellanos, Decoud, Michaelis, Ossipon, Callan, Sevrin, Mrs Fyne, Mr X and Kurtz, who write about justice, revelation, feminism, morality, love and "queer politico-amorous rhapsodies" ("The Informer," 100). Conrad's own writing style instead echoes in the young captain's diary entries in *The Shadow-Line* (1917), Decoud's writing in his pocket-book in *Nostramo*, Marlow's writing to "The privileged man" (254) in *Lord Jim*, and Razumov's writing in his journal in *Under Western Eyes*. It is private, individual, distracted and occasionally discursive.

Modernism itself can, of course, be conceived of as an assorted collection of private impressions: a plotless segment of literary history. And, after the canonical studies on Conrad's impressionism by Eloise Knapp Hay, Ian Watt, Bruce Johnson and John G. Peters, it is far from an original claim to stress the importance of the individual impression for Conrad's texts.¹⁷ Even so, there is the possibility that Conrad scholarship has lagged behind its own findings. Gregory Ulmer argues convincingly, in "The Object of Post-Criticism" (1983), that the criticism of modernism has only belatedly become modern; it is still concerned with categories, labels and structures rather than with collage and montage.¹⁸

Counting the advances in biographical and historical criticism in the 1930s; psychological criticism and New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s; existential philosophy and New Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s; post-structuralism, postcolonialism and gender studies in the 1980s and 1990s; and many later developments,¹⁹ Conrad criticism places the details of his fiction in the background: in the service of something else. To be fair, this is a large claim given the overwhelmingly large scale of Conrad criticism, leaving one with the feeling that you "could spend the rest of your life just reading secondary literature on Conrad."²⁰ Yet, while the close reading

practices of New Criticism and other fields are certainly detail-oriented, and while there are numerous detailed studies on Conrad – no one states that his or her studies are primarily about details. If Conrad is a writer of detail, the primary elements of Conrad's prose have not been claimed as the primary focus of study. Indeed, if one had only read secondary literature on Conrad's writing, rather than Conrad's own writing, one would form the mistaken view that Conrad's texts were predominantly concerned with defining categories, taking positions, declaring ambivalences and arguing stances. In other words, impressions “rendered as if for their own sake” – to quote Conrad's phrase for the ingredients of “The Return” – are not studied as such.

But can one study impressions rendered for their own sake? Or does the study become a type of arational criticism of merely registering observations? In a chapter titled “Animals as Art Historians,” Arthur Danto relates an experiment where pigeons were taught to distinguish between Bach and Stravinsky. That achieved, the next step was to see if they would classify Buxtehude, Scarlatti, Walter Piston, Eliot Carter and Vivaldi as Stravinsky-like or Bach-like. They agreed with the critical consensus that Buxtehude and Scarlatti were Bach-like, Walter Piston and Eliot Carter, Stravinsky-like. But they found Vivaldi Stravinsky-like, “leaving it up to us to decide whether they were in error or instructing us in how to think about and listen to Vivaldi.”²¹ I think the pigeons were right. They had the advantage of approaching the question without being art historians and without an awareness of critical concepts like dissonance, staccato, the Baroque and contrapuntal texture: they were paying attention to the individual form of the music without filtering it through established critical categories.

Categorization, in any form, is always an attempt at summary and simplification; apart from the implicit argument provided by these unwittingly philosophical pigeons, Hume, Locke, Bergson, Russell and Nietzsche – responding to Platonism and its outgrowths – contend that abstract concepts bundle incompatible particulars. In a paragraph that could work as a manifesto to Conrad's own type of detail-rich writing, Nietzsche strikes a cautionary note about the formation of concepts. He explains how even a simple concept like “the leaf” is a tremendous abstraction:

In particular, let us further consider the formation of concepts. Every word instantly becomes a concept insofar as it is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin; but rather, a word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases – which means,

Introduction

7

purely and simply, cases which are never equal and thus altogether unequal. Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept 'leaf' is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects.²²

A more concrete example of a blunt word than "leaf" which constantly fails to explain a particular feeling or situation is "love." Nietzsche's *Morgenröte* (1881) explains that the word "love" (*Liebe*) is actually a superlative and that our misunderstanding derives from excessive usage. In a letter written during the composition of *The Rescue* (1920), Conrad explains that he has consciously avoided the word "love" in the story: "Attempting to tell romantically a love story in which the word love is not to be pronounced, seems to be courting disaster deliberately" (*CL* 11.122). Despite the occasional reference to the word in the story, the readers of *The Rescue* are left to create their own vision of "love" – rather than let the blunt word flatten and discolor the unique narrative.

This avoidance of summary words and large categories can be classified as distracted writing. A distracted focus is one explanation for why, like the crew of the *Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* or the anarchists in *The Secret Agent*, Conrad's writing is eclectic – constituted by "books so fundamentally dissimilar as, for instance, 'Almayer's Folly' and 'The Secret Agent'" ("Preface," *PR* 18). Even with an interest in the political, moral, historical and philosophical values of Conrad's texts, I find it difficult to subsume his eclectic and detail-rich authorship under large narratives or large categories; it rather presents itself in the form of Sir Ethelred's handshake of a "glorified farmer" (*SA* 112), how from "behind that structure came out an impression of pale plumpness in a frock-coat" (*HD* 51), and how the "perforated pipe gurgled, choked, spat and splashed in odious ridicule of a swimmer fighting for his life" (*LJ* 138). Or what better way to introduce anyone to Conrad than with this sentence on Cornelius from *Lord Jim*: "His slow laborious walk resembled the creeping of a repulsive beetle, the legs alone moving with horrid industry while the body glided evenly" (*LJ* 214). Or take this paragraph from "Falk" (1901): "The night came upon him and buried in haste his whiskers, his globular eyes, his puffy pale face, his fat knees and the vast flat slippers on his fatherly feet. Only his short arms in respectable white shirt-sleeves remained very visible, propped up like the flippers of a seal reposing on the strand" (214). This paragraph, on fatherly feet and short arms like seal flippers, is certainly one of the most remarkable in Conrad's fiction – yet, it is neither discussed nor mentioned in secondary literature. For these and many other reasons, both

quantitative and qualitative, it is tempting to argue that there is a significant gap between the criticism and the reading experience.

In Conrad studies, sentences are frequently discussed not on the basis of their inherent exuberance, brilliance, or strength but whether they fit an overarching critical category: a situation where “reading has been displaced by a project of sorting by theme.”²³ A rejection of an overarching category as a guiding principle of primary interest prevents a situation of repeating established facts; introducing a new category allows for a situation where the same facts are repeatedly arranged in new combinations. Like Heyst’s mind, which was as if constructed of “a white-walled, pure chamber, furnished with, say, six straw-bottomed chairs, and he was always placing and displacing them in various combinations. But they were always the same chairs” (*V* 202). What is needed is not a new seating plan – a new category – but attention to the minute, independent and eclectic details that characterize Conrad’s writing. Similarly, by shifting our interest to the details, and decentering our gaze, we can pay more attention to the content of books rather than, say, entertain an idea about an overarching and superseding argument.

Yet, if Conrad scholarship were to cease to enlighten us with abstractions – what Nabokov calls “the academic purpose of indulging in generalizations”²⁴ – the change from a focus on large narratives would invite accusations of triviality and misdirected attention. This, in the spirit of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes* who, when lectured on the horrors of Russian feudalism, “went on studying the stripes of the grey fur of the cat” (171); like Adolf Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, who when lectured on the philosophy of bomb throwing, focuses his mind on the material and color of a sock – “Mr Vladimir’s hand clasped the ankle reposing on his knee. The sock was of dark blue silk” (*SA* 22); like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, who in haste toward the Company’s station, finds his attention drawn to a bit of white worsted tied round a native’s neck: “Where did he get it? Was it a badge – an ornament – a charm – a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas” (58–59); or, like Conrad who in the midst of attempting to finish an autobiographical text cannot seem to help stating how, regarding his writing desk, his eye “was attracted by the good form of the same drawer’s brass handles” (*PR* 37).

These details about the grey fur of a cat, a blue silk sock, a bit of white worsted and a drawer’s brass handles indirectly relate to larger themes. On one level, however, these details’ function and value as autonomous units are more apparent than their relation to the direct and larger questions we

Introduction

9

as readers might have about autocracy, anarchism, colonialism and Conrad's life. Indeed, there is no further reference to these details in their respective narratives so it is difficult (but not impossible) to see how they function in a larger context – and why they are not trivialities. “Yet this discursiveness is not so irrelevant to the handful of pages which follow” (17), Conrad writes in “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record* (1912); with these words he seeks to excuse his penchant for digressions and forewarn about the nonlinear narratives that make up this attempt at autobiography – that is mainly an eclectic collection of observations on (a) his grand uncle Mr Nicholas B, (b) a Bali pony, (c) the physical characteristics of his writing pen, and (d) a diatribe against Rousseau.

Faced with this type of reading experience, where the descriptive details do not always seem to support the main structure, Conradian scholarship has two main options: (1) impose order on eclectic detail, or (2) explain the disorder (re-evaluate our idea of disorder). If we seek to explain the disorder – rather than explain it away – we should engage with the *mot juste*, an idea developed by Flaubert and frequently invoked by Conrad. This idea that every element of a text should be composed of an adequate word is potentially problematic. The result of the *mot juste* applied indiscriminately is a horizontal narrative, without a hierarchy of aesthetic importance. This implies that the reference to a dark blue silk sock in *The Secret Agent* is a detail articulated with as much care and patience as the details that make up Stevie's explosive end or Winnie's implied suicide; the author's focus is evenly distributed across the words, whether they describe “the gorgeous perambulator of a wealthy baby” (*SA* 24) or the explosive effects of the Professor's X2 green powder.

In other artistic media, this type of horizontal approach is not considered equally abnormal. Speaking about the paintings from Picasso's early period, John Loughery explains how

a bare foot is rendered with the same gravity as a facial expression. The patchy sand of an empty fairground says as much about loss and exhaustion as the look in the eyes of the artist's saltimbanques. The wrinkles in the face of *The Old Fisherman* (1895) are as finely calculated as the lesbian kiss, or the position and body language of each dancer, in *Le Moulin de la Galette* (1900).²⁵

By paying attention to all elements of a painting, Loughery is following in Morelli's tradition.

By looking at the margins of previous research and Conrad's texts, I wish to offer a new approach to reading Conrad in monograph-form: where the particularity of the reading experience is directly reflected in its

scholarship. Phrased in relation to the current critical landscape, this can be seen as an experiment in what I want to call “distracted reading”: a type of reading where you allow yourself to pay attention to all aspects of a text, regardless of their ranking as more or less important by secondary literature. This is similar to “surface reading,” which, in its focus on what is “evident, perceptible, apprehensible,” aims to “bypass the selectivity and evaluative energy that have been considered the hallmarks of good criticism.”²⁶ The primary focus of my monograph is simply to write on what Conrad writes about. This is a surprisingly controversial idea since it means allowing the minute, independent and eclectic details of Conrad’s prose to guide the critical enterprise. It is from this perspective that a descriptive list becomes a contentious argument, and why it is significant that there are more than 25 types of hats and more than 150 different species of animals in Conrad’s fiction, more than 400 ellipses in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, and 109 doodles in the *Shadow-Line* manuscript. Apart from large segments of texts that have not been discussed in secondary literature, there are nonlinguistic texts – his drawings and doodles – that are in the position of being an untapped primary source; treated as a marginal and minor detail of Conrad’s authorship. At times, however, these visual and verbal texts overlap in content, technique and existence: the doodles and the writings are created with the same paper and ink, by the same mind and pen, in the same time and space continuum. In addition, Conrad’s doodles and drawings are of especial interest in his role as a writer of verbal impressionism.

In *Conrad and Impressionism* (2001), John G. Peters cautions “that any similarities between impressionist art and literature result from similarities in philosophy – not technique.”²⁷ This distinction is tremendously useful for opening up the discussion about Conrad’s impressionism to writings on philosophy. However, the distinction strategically downplays the possibility that philosophy and technique can overlap – in the same way that content and form overlap.

Philosophy is not necessarily an independent, autonomous activity that stands above art and explains it. A painting can be a manifesto. Seeing technique as indistinguishable from philosophy, I take a perspective more similar to that of the French art historian Henri Focillon (1881–1943):

a work of art exists only insofar as it is form. In other words, a work of art is not the outline or the graph of art as an activity; it is art itself. It does not design art; it creates it. Art is made up, not of the artist’s intentions, but of works of art. The most voluminous collection of commentaries and memoirs, written by artists whose understanding of the problems of form is fully equaled by their understanding of words, could never replace the meanest work of art.²⁸