

TESTIMONY ON TRIAL

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BRIAN ARTESE

Testimony on Trial

Conrad, James, and the Contest
for Modernism

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Introduction

If there is any idea in narrative theory that has achieved permanent recognition even among general readers of fiction, it is surely that of the 'unreliable narrator.' When I teach a novel that makes use of first-person narration, the phrase will crop up even among first-year undergraduates. Our suspicion of a narrator who is also a character within the story is not limited to fictions that send specific signals or clues that he is not to be trusted, or that he is ignorant of crucial facts, as in the well-known case of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. Even when reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, students will remind me that the facts of the story are necessarily suspect because its central actor is telling the tale. As with any mortal, Charlie Marlow's vision of his world is naturally clouded and distorted by the limits of his single perspective. His story, in other words, is mere testimony.

Like the literary modernism it helped to inaugurate, Conrad's fiction frequently presents itself as the testimony of locatable human agents, as opposed to an omniscience whose narrative purportedly is not subject to the disputability that testimony implies. Whether chiding or championing it for doing so, literary criticism takes it as a given that modernism is interested in testimony because it raises questions about our access to truth and reality. As it examines the epistemological assumptions behind such criticism, this book will demonstrate that they belong to a much broader intellectual orientation, maintained in cultural institutions beyond the literary, that degrades the authority of testimony in general. It will become clear, for instance, that Conrad's famous break from prevailing narratological norms is inextricable from his explicit loathing of the progressively more powerful institution of

the press. With its increasingly non-localized and omniscient posture in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the newspaper situated both the politics and the metaphysics of what might be called anonymous versus testimonial authority. Conrad's novelistic theatre, in which all social and even juridical narratives are carefully *located*, and where no interrogator escapes visibility or responsibility, is deliberately opposed to an increasingly influential power of anonymous authority at the turn of the century. In the 'irresponsible paragraphs' of the daily press, anonymity had become a tool for, not against, 'commercial and industrial interests.' The British Board of Trade, for instance, was 'free in this world and the next from all effective sanctions of conscientious conduct.' Its corporate anonymity allowed it to operate as a 'ghost,' according to Conrad, 'a mere void' without 'a shadow of responsibility' ('Some Reflexions' 305-7, 309).

Suspicion of testimony in the novel – and to some extent in public discourse in general – is the product of an ongoing cultural reaction against literary modernism, one that emerged long before that term was coined. The epistemological problems that testimonial narration purportedly brings in its wake are usually said to be part and parcel of modernism's penchant for obscurantism. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as anonymous omniscience came to represent a reader's unfettered access to the truth of the diegetic world, testimonial narration could be perceived as an obstacle to truth. Although part of the purpose of this book is to investigate how and why literary modernism came to be peculiarly associated with a blinkered and truth-denying subjectivity – a charge that has been passed onto post-modernism as well – one could argue that it is difficult to conceive in any other way a body of work whose peculiar name is identified with contemporaneity in general. It is not wholly facetious to suggest that our conception of literary modernism is partly governed by the fact that, wherever and whenever critical consciousness exists, 'the new generation' is always accused of an awkward self-awareness, stylistic obscurity, and corrosive irony, in contrast to the old days when sincerity and transparency prevailed. As Borges suggests in his famous 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,' the contorted self-consciousness that critics perennially attribute to their contemporaries is more likely to be a projection of the sophisticated readers themselves. Menard, we may recall, is a writer who manages to recreate, miraculously, huge portions of *Don Quixote* by synthesizing within himself Cervantes's personal and historical consciousness. Borges's academic narrator

compares the authors' works. On the subject of 'truth,' Cervantes writes that its 'mother is history,' which the critic sees as 'mere rhetorical praise of history.' But when that same line emerges from the modern Menard, the narrator is staggered by its implications. 'Historical truth, for Menard, is not "what happened"; it is what we *believe* happened' (94). Borges's satire is but a small exaggeration of an intellectual habit that persists long after his *Ficciones*. Fredric Jameson, for instance, insists that when Conrad's *Lord Jim* is presented as the testimony of the fictional Charlie Marlow, who in turn communicates Jim's narrative, this 'elaborate narrative hermeneutic' demonstrates an 'ideology of the relativity of individual monads' (222). Yet no critic would ever perceive such knotty 'ideological' demonstrations in, say, Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela*, despite the fact that the narratological structure created by Pamela's reiteration of Mrs Jewkes's narrative is identical to that in *Lord Jim*.

The post-poststructuralism that Jameson represents, however, has been superseded by a reconsideration of modernism that, as a necessary response to long-standing critical blind spots, has become almost exclusively the purview of postcolonial criticism. Conrad has remained the central embodiment of modernism in postcolonial studies, however, not simply because his subject is Western imperialism – and he its subject – but because his definitively modernist narrative technique is readily conceived as saturating the deep weave of a given work with any and all colonialist ideologies that modernism has been said to instantiate. Narrative structure is said to 'speak' a colonialist ideology, however conceived, independent of any particular discourse in the work. The poststructuralist critique I bring to bear on such narratological assumptions clears the way to a coherent vision of modernist testimony in its colonial milieu. The final chapter of this book takes advantage of this new perspective by anatomizing an overlooked historical lynchpin in Conrad's work: a prolonged reference in *Heart of Darkness* to the New York *Herald* and its production of an African drama that enraptured the globe.

Most contemporary critical approaches, it is true, have moved away from defining modernism primarily in terms of its formal innovations. Yet they continue to ascribe to Conrad far-reaching epistemological and philosophical assertions because they suppose them to be necessary, structural consequences of his testimonial narrative techniques. If the critical survey in this study seems at times weighted toward 'narratology' – a term that necessarily encompasses not just its 'classical'

instantiations, but its multiform contemporary hybrids as well – it is not because narratological readings have been especially influential in crafting our understanding of Conrad, testimony, and modernism. I examine the formulas of narratology solely because that is where the enabling terms and concepts of these erroneous structural premises have been fostered. From Marxism to cosmopolitanism, new historicism to ‘new modernism,’ literary criticism persists in rendering questions of testimony with narratological tropes of ‘embedded’ narration, ‘filtering consciousness,’ and the various guises of ‘external focalization.’ Such are the figures by which we have come to understand, with Jameson, that Conradian narrative and the modernism it heralds are primarily concerned with an ahistorical psychic interiority, the limits of subjectivity, and an ‘ideology of the relativity of individual monads’ (222).

When Conrad was hoping for a wider distribution of his own works in the United States, he seemed to anticipate that critics would project difficulties, which the general reader had not yet been taught to perceive, onto a narrative technique that takes a ‘purely human’ point of view. In a 1913 letter to Alfred Knopf, hoping to sustain the publisher’s interest in the nearly finished novel *Chance*, Conrad writes:

I stand much nearer the public mind than Stevenson, who was super-literary, a conscious virtuoso of style; whereas the average mind does not care much for virtuosity. My point of view, which is purely human, my subjects, which are not too specialized as to the class of people or kind of events, my style, which may be clumsy here and there, but is perfectly straightforward and tending towards the colloquial, cannot possibly stand in the way of a large public. (*Collected Letters* 5:257–8)

To a modernist of this period, as Patrick Collier reminds us, the ‘public mind’ did not denote ‘a narrow, bourgeois audience,’ but ‘something much closer to universality . . . unified only by the common denominator of literacy’ (20). Conrad’s diagnosis of his narrative technique in relation to the ‘average mind’ was apparently correct. *Chance* exploded the author’s previous sales record, and the obscure artist’s writing finally achieved popularity. Yet literary criticism has insisted for decades that he was, in fact, wrong – that *Chance* represents an apotheosis of convolution and self-involvement in Conrad’s narrative art, and is all but intolerable to anyone other than literary critics and narrative theorists. As Norman Page writes:

[T]he popular success of *Chance* is surprising, since the novel is far from being an easy read on account of a mode of narration that has been variously described as cumbersome and absurd. Marlow, who tells the story to the narrator, himself reports much of it at second or third hand. The general verdict has been that the gain in subtlety or dramatic effectiveness is so slight as hardly to justify such lengths of elaboration. (112)

Just as it would probably have bewildered the 12,000 people who bought *Chance* less than two months after its release, this 'general verdict' among literary authorities has long mystified me as reader. Like most people, I suspect, who read *Chance* or *Lord Jim* for the first time – another novel whose narrative 'entanglement,' according to Gérard Genette, threatens 'the bounds of general intelligibility' (*Narrative Discourse* 232) – the stories somehow unfolded for me in a perfectly 'straightforward' way, as Conrad had anticipated. Of course one can make a strong case that the high modernism of Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce 'constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion' directed particularly against 'an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture'; but despite Andreas Huyssen's formulation, that phenomenon can hardly be attributed to 'modernism' *tout court* (vii). As Mark Morrisson demonstrates throughout *The Public Face of Modernism*, avant-garde writers before the First World War were eager 'to bring modernist literary experiments into broader public discourse' (16). It is not simply the case, however, that the early experimentalists have been inappropriately lumped in with the later ones under the too-broad heading of modernism. The literary-historical narrative that had once enabled this broad brushstroke, now supposedly discredited, is that modernism displaced a realist narrative technique that was not formally complex, self-referential, or experimental, but rather a transparent window onto truth and reality. What will become clear in the following pages, however, is that this story has in fact been maintained in the deep weave of literary criticism by broadly accepted narratological premises, acknowledged or unconscious, about testimony.

One such classic assumption is that the testimonial intervention of a Charlie Marlow, the primary narrator of *Chance*, creates clutter among the normal or proper 'material' of a novel. This would probably come as a surprise to the general reader, who, as we shall see, has been perfectly comfortable with the notion that Marlow is an important subject of Conrad's tales, not just a narrative apparatus. Conrad's fabula, with its 'purely human' point of view, easily jibes with the historical fact

that the daily 'colloquial' practice of storytelling almost always takes the form of first-person testimony. This conflict of perception between lay and professional readers is part of a larger and perhaps more familiar theoretical argument about how people use and perceive ordinary language in general. In a typical exchange, for instance, between Paul de Man and Meyer Abrams in 1983, de Man argues that the 'popular uses of language' are 'infinitely theoretical, constantly metalinguistic,' and that they are eager to 'theorize' and 'turn back' on themselves (De Man, *Resistance* 102). Abrams, on the other hand, takes the position that theories of language are conceived and pondered only by professionals. The corresponding premise in literary criticism – still prevalent, especially among narratologists – is that any novel that draws attention to its narrative condition thwarts the average reader's expectations and threatens to undermine her understanding and reception of the work.

In his 1988 book *Le Différend*, Jean-François Lyotard maps out one of the powerful logical paradigms that, historically, has removed epistemological authority from testimony. Even when it is taken for granted that all historiography ultimately hangs on testimony – individual or collective – this logic emphasizes the possibility that any one such statement is, if not a lie, corrupt because it is biased, or 'interested,' or sees only 'one side' of the event in question. If the witness to an event 'claims to see everything,' Lyotard writes, 'he or she is not credible. If he or she is credible, it is insofar as he or she has not seen everything, but has only seen a certain aspect' (45). The contemporary inquiry that draws Lyotard and others to this problem reveals the potential stakes of the debate. The never-adequate testifier is the witness to mass executions in Nazi concentration camps who has now been called back to the witness stand by scholars contesting the historicity of the Holocaust. This inquiry is often made possible by an apparent movement of 'zooming out,' to borrow the photographer's term: a reframing of the testimony from the purportedly wider scope that is the scene of inquiry itself – a scene of deposition that seems to encompass or comprehend the testimony. Before the reframing, the object of inquiry had been the 'content' or scenario depicted by the statement; now the object of inquiry is the statement as such, its content bracketed. Before, there was no other authority, no authoritativeness outside the testimony; but now the testifier is inescapably suspect, and final authority can reside only in an imaginary comprehension effected by the new scene of deposition. This comprehension purportedly escapes the limitations of testimony and takes on the capacity to 'see everything.'

The reframing that puts testimony under suspicion is a movement that takes place within the histories of both literary criticism and journalism. Late in the nineteenth century, the public histories-of-the-now moved into the 'new journalism.' The series of long testimonials that had once constituted the newspaper were now sifted, readily paraphrased, and framed with commentary, as Harold Herd writes, to 'help [the reader] in absorbing the news' (223). 'The journal' was thus elevated more distinctly above its constituent elements and attained an effectively extradiegetic purchase from which it could claim 'comprehensive coverage of . . . modern life' in general (223). As we will see, the promise of complete comprehension that came to be demanded of the newspaper would also be demanded of the novel.

Lyotard's writing on the witness has come under the consideration of Shoshana Felman, who offers a compelling argument that the Holocaust brought about a 'historical crisis of witnessing' and inaugurated our 'contemporary Age of Testimony.' Faced with the Holocaust as 'an event eliminating its own witness,' Felman claims that 'the cryptic forms of modern narrative . . . bear[] testimony, through their very cryptic form, to the *radical historical crisis in witnessing* the Holocaust has opened up' (*Testimony* 200–1, Felman's emphasis). It is precisely this picture, however, of modern narrative embracing the condition of the witness because of its inadequate comprehension that I would like to revise. Felman's portrayal of modernist narrative as a cryptogram, which presupposes a hidden but determined comprehension that such narration deliberately withholds or evades, contradicts without comment the modernist challenge to the very notion of comprehension beyond testimony. This ubiquitous and uncriticized metaphor of cryptography, I hope to show, has severely distorted our understanding of narrative in general. The criticism that compulsively attaches this metaphor to modernism in particular usually begins by pointing to the pre-war work of Conrad. For Conrad, the 'problem' of the witness is not that she cannot survive to tell the tale, or that she cannot perceive the facts, but rather that her report, as Lyotard suggests, is said to fall short of an imaginary narrative that would depict the event in its comprehensive entirety, beyond her mere 'perspective.' If there is an 'age of testimony' contemporaneous with literary modernism, as Felman suggests, it is one that grows out of a mounting tension at the fin de siècle between testimony and an anonymous authority to which the masters of public discourse increasingly appeal. My opening chapter takes a look at a few of these late nineteenth-century gatekeepers of public

discourse, such as William Archer, L.F. Austin, and even Bernard Shaw, as they engage in a contentious debate about anonymous authority in the press. The larger part of that discussion, however, surveys and critiques the twentieth-century's reception of Conrad's narrative method, as articulated by critics from Henry James to Genette to Jameson. Dispelling the epistemological clouds these figures have gathered around Conrad's testimonial project, I go on to look at the crucial scene of public inquiry in *Lord Jim* in the clearer vision that emerges.

Another major objective of this book is to demonstrate that the very intelligibility of the novel as a cultural artefact is dependent on the question of testimony. In England, especially, and instantiated in fictions as diverse as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Clarissa*, the phenomenon of the novel is of a writing that emerges as the true testimony of a potential neighbour – the personal account of a historical contemporary, not distant in time or space, no matter if the narrative itself is exotic. Even when the dust settled on the question of whether these eyewitness accounts described historical realities, the constraints and the freedoms created by their rigorous testimonial structures are what made the novel what it was, distinguishing it from ballads and every other 'romance' that had circulated hitherto. That the modernist novel has, in literary studies, borne the brunt of its turn against testimony is evident in the fact, suggested above, that critics have never looked at the early novel's epistolary narrator with the epistemological suspicion that they have directed at a storyteller like Marlow. It is a critical inconsistency that fails to discern within modernism the vital legacy of epistolary and sentimental fiction, whose strategies of testimonial narration were so crucial to the novel's development. The second and third chapters of this book read the birth of the modernist novel, as embodied in both Conrad and Henry James, in the context of this sentimental ancestry. It will become clear that testimonial narration is indispensable to the major political task of the sentimental novel, which is to create and disseminate a conception of privacy acceptable for public consumption. The scrupulous use of testimonial arrangements in the early novel, with their complex machinery of letters, 'found' diaries, and exposing editors, is a reflection of a mimetic project that required the novel to depict the real-world conditions of personal narrative. But this reality puts an obstacle before another of the sentimental novel's primary goals: to confirm the inner sincerity of its letter-writing heroes and heroines, which may be hidden beneath the self-interest that could motivate any personal testimony. The early novel attempts to skirt this obstacle in at least two

ways: rhetorically, by valorizing 'confession' as if it were not testimony, as if its claims of transparency and sincerity preclude the possibility of conscious self-representation and negotiation with the other, and structurally, by developing complicated scenarios wherein the protagonist's private testimony has been unexpectedly 'diverted' into the public sphere, or 'overheard' by third parties, thus mitigating the spectre of self-interested exhibitionism that inevitably haunts the very concept of testimony. One of the primary reasons omniscient narration comes to displace epistolarity over the nineteenth century is that it has the power to reveal a character's sentimentally appropriate interiority without requiring her to perform the self-interested act of articulating it herself.

When Conrad revives testimonial fiction at the dawn of the twentieth century, he therefore receives a dual inheritance: a well-developed strategy of sympathetic portraiture, on the one hand, but also a demanding ideal of sentimental accountability that, over the course of the preceding century, had merged with a moral injunction in Anglo-American society against any interiority or privacy that refuses to be accessible to public view. This particular moralism, however, suffers a distinct backlash in many nineteenth-century novels. Writers from Melville to Trollope to James react strongly against the perpetual personal transparency that sentimentalism seems to advocate, and they transform the formerly heroic agent of sympathy into one of the novel's primary antagonists. Sentimentalism becomes increasingly associated with mushy-headed social reform, a moon-eyed philanthropism, and feminism. Despite the generally condescending tone of the Victorian critique, it ultimately infuses sentimentalism with a dangerous political and social power, just as the concept of 'petticoat rule' would come both to ignite and assuage social-revolutionary fears. The nineteenth-century novel frequently portrays sentimentalism at the heart of a disciplinary nannyism that seeks to penetrate and bring order to both house and mind.

The rhetorical and narrative strategies by which Conrad and James render the disciplinary injunctions of sentimentalism will lead me to an extended reconsideration of influential literary criticism inspired by Michel Foucault. In its attempt to diagram what Mark Seltzer calls 'a continuity between . . . the social technologies of power' and 'the techniques of the novel' – specifically, the self-authorizing techniques of an external narrator 'seeing, knowing, and exercising power' over its diegetic world – this criticism posits precisely the operations of ideological representation and identification that Foucault attempted to think

beyond (57). The novel's uncharted disciplinary function, I argue, will have to be found not in the mere 'political dream' of Bentham's panopticon (Foucault, *Discipline* 205), but where the document, literary or otherwise, exerts itself: at the multiform apparatus of registry that render the subject intelligible as such and affix the body to that subject with the lynchpin of the proper name.

At the apex of the novel's backlash against sentimentalism, Henry James joins Conrad in insisting on the prerogative of the individual to speak as a testifier as opposed to a confessor: to speak as a representative or 'ambassador' for the self in a culture with ever-increasing 'incitements to discourse' and an ethos of confessional transparency; to speak as one who maintains the 'space' or possibility of a personal reserve. Like his nineteenth-century models, however, James continues to let omniscient narration carry out the intrusions he claims to eschew, penetrating his subjects' psyches and policing their sentimental sincerity. Conrad's artistic method is thus unique within the general reaction against sentimentalism in its rigorous devotion to the real-world testimonial realities that sentimentalism tried to keep in view. It is a key element of the peculiar naturalism that carries his modernism away from that of James, distinguishing it even from the American master's new 'centre of consciousness' technique. The literary struggles Conrad and James undertake – sometimes together, sometimes in contest – will emerge in readings of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, *Lord Jim*, *Notes on Life and Letters*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Reverberator*, and *The Ambassadors*, among several other stories and essays. Although the argument implicit within James's fiction vehemently insists on the prerogative of the individual to represent oneself as a testifier, the author firmly rejects personal testimony as a vehicle for artistic, philosophical, or historiographic knowledge. In the realm of literary criticism, in fact, I argue that it was James who first crafted the vocabulary that would forever put Conradian narrative under an epistemological cloud. As James, in an essay of 1914, ultimately dismisses Conrad's work precisely because it does not pretend to speak from a comprehension that would transcend testimony, the American creates a treatise praising the authority of the unlocated voice that belongs to no privacy and no testimony. This voice had already achieved cultural ascendancy in the anonymous yet colossal stance of the nineteenth-century newspaper.

In his fiction, Conrad scrutinizes the masterful comprehension of the press most explicitly in *Heart of Darkness*. Surprisingly, the mountains of criticism evoked by this tale have overlooked one of the primary

targets of its satire: the 'newspaper stunt,' as Conrad once called it, perpetrated by the New York *Herald* in the 1870s, when the paper sent its travelling journalist Henry Morton Stanley on a sensational hunt into central Africa to find Dr David Livingstone. Revealing how *Heart of Darkness* conflates the seeker and the sought of this episode into the figure of the journalist Kurtz, the final chapter of this book returns to the broader context of nineteenth-century journalism. As we will see, the 'Herald expedition,' as Stanley's venture was called, helped to grease the political wheels of the Belgian machine that would soon devour central Africa. The profit of Stanley's expedition was not only increased sales for the *Herald*, but the inflation, in print, of an 'African darkness' that the comprehensive light of the press would theatrically penetrate. *Heart of Darkness* recalls the powerful transformation, accomplished largely through the Anglo-American newspaper, by which the 'hidden' Livingstone became the hidden truth of Africa itself. The novella demonstrates, moreover, how such a theatre of exploration, incursion, and discovery effectively occludes its own stage management. If a drawn veil always exposes a once-hidden truth, even a purely staged motion of unveiling – a journalistic performance of 'eyewitness penetration' into the heart of darkness – will seem to guarantee the advent of truth. Through the comprehensive posture of the *Herald*, Stanley's apologies for colonial violence were suffused with a historiographic authority that transcends the 'mere testimony' of the adventuring witness.

1 'Speech Was of No Use': Conrad and the Critical Abjection of Testimony

Although the English novel began to strike out on its own in the eighteenth century, diverging from its travel-writing and printed 'newes' parentage, it maintained a protocol shared by all of these genres that required an open portrayal – or at least some account – of the narrator or witness who made the narration possible. Even the most fantastic tales in the novel's ancestry could not universally take for granted the premises of what we now call omniscient narration. The printed ballads of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries habitually took the form of a first-person testimonial. An important part of their drama, in fact, would often include the spying activities that had been required of the narrating witness to get the story. Even where we seem to see omniscient narrators in the seventeenth century, they were usually born within the *conte* as an actor within the fiction itself.¹ The narrator was one who had won his story by successfully penetrating a private or otherwise circumscribed space. The attainment of this unobserved omniscience, whether by supernatural or covert means, was an element of the plot. The appearance of the narrator within the narrative is historically no more of an innovation to fiction than is the 'third-person' narration that does not account for itself as either testifier or witness.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, the testimonial protocol fell away, for news as well as for its cousins in fiction. Even more, the acknowledgment within a narrative of its testimonial nature became an admission of a fundamental unreliability, a renunciation of epistemological and historical authority. This new conception became fairly explicit in the British and American press. By the end of the nineteenth century, the personal accounts that had formerly constituted