

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

IRONY AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE READER
IN THREE OF JOSEPH CONRAD'S SHORT STORIES

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH AT
MASSEY UNIVERSITY

LAWRENCE BOURKE

1982

58309 09

INTRODUCTION

As many critics have by now shown, the fiction of Joseph Conrad is particularly significant and interesting with regard to its irony. In their consideration of Conrad's irony most critics have concentrated their attention upon the novels, or upon those short stories generally acknowledged to be masterpieces - namely Heart of Darkness. Also their interest has, for the most part, been in the thematic issues that Conrad's irony involves; studying the work-ethic, romance, nihilism, and so on.

This essay, also, is interested in Conrad's irony. However, here, the interest is in its rhetoric or aesthetic function, the way it involves the reader in a community of experience; and so although there is a thematic concern implicit in the approach the interest itself is not in themes.

There are three stories considered, as this allows through contrast and comparison to highlight the individuality that exists in spite of the common presence of irony; and so indicates in itself that Conrad's interest was not so much in the thematic implications of irony as in its aesthetic function.

Short stories, rather than Conrad's novels, have been studied because they are often overlooked or inadequately criticized; and, also, because in an essay of this length they can be considered with a thoroughness that would be forbid to a reading of the novels.

As regards the structure of this essay, there is first a chapter of theory studying the rhetoric of irony; and then there are three chapters studying the stories themselves; and, finally, a brief concluding chapter.

In Chapter One several aspects of the theoretical background are identified and considered in the sequence that follows: the thematic concern with irony and with Conrad's irony in particular; the formal or rhetorical as opposed to the thematic approach to literary criticism and why, here, it has been preferred to the latter; irony as a literary device; and irony and the actualization of meaning.

Chapters two to four study Typhoon, Falk: A Reminiscence and The Return respectively; all of which employ irony in various ways and with varying success as a structuring principle in the creation of their aesthetic effect. From a thematic perspective they would be versions of the governing ironic pre-occupation, successful or not as they accord with that dominant concern. However, what is most striking is not their similarities but their differences.

There is a "progression" of sorts to the order with which the stories are considered. In terms of orthodox critical opinion the order traces a decline in quality as the treatment of themes, seemingly, becomes more confused. In terms of irony the movement is into increasing instability; that is, any position becomes increasingly vulnerable to ironic undermining. In itself this is neither good nor bad. In Typhoon and even more so in Falk the instabilities involve the reader and a coherent albeit ironic experience is realized. However with The Return it is found that the authorial intention directing the irony is confused; and as a consequence the involvement of the reader in the actualization of a coherent experience is frustrated.

CHAPTER 1

IRONY AS A THEMATIC CONCERN

Irony has been extensively and variously defined. The term in general applies to a perception of incongruity. This perception can be localized where the sense of duplicity is contained within a larger un-ironic framework; that is, it is a 'stable irony'. Or the perception can be universalized until there is nothing that cannot be undermined or qualified; this unstable irony is called 'general irony' by D.C. Muecke. Those critics who see Conrad's work in terms of an ironic vision see it as informed by the spirit of General Irony.

In the context of General Irony human life is presented as irreconcilably contradictory. Muecke diagnoses the condition:

The basis for General Irony lies in those contradictions, apparently fundamental and irresolvable, that confront men when they speculate upon such topics as the origin and purpose of the universe, the certainty of death, the eventual extinction of all life, the impenetrability of the future, the conflicts between reason, emotion and instinct, freewill and determinism, the objective and the subjective, society and the individual, the absolute and the relative, the humane and the scientific. Most of these, it may be said, are reducible to one great incongruity, the appearance of self-valued and subjectively free but temporally finite egos in a universe that seems to be utterly alien, utterly purposeless, completely deterministic, and incomprehensibly vast. The

universe appears to consist of two systems which simply do not gear together. The one functions, and can only function, in terms of meanings, values, rational choices, and purposes; the other seems not to be comprehensible in these terms. And yet, though the two systems are incompatible, they are also inter-involved; the alien system extends its dominance into the very centre of the 'human' system and the 'human' system feels obliged to find meanings, values and purposes in the non-human, in short to reduce the duality to a unity.¹

Conrad in his letters is painfully aware of this view of the human situation. He wrote to Cunninghame Graham:

(Reason) demonstrates ... that ... the fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy.²

The realms of reason and of the heart conflict.

Many critics finding this ironic temperament in Conrad's stories present it as the reason for the stories' being, or at least as the reason for reading them. J. Hillis Miller writes:

Conrad's vision seems to culminate in the recognition of an irreconcilable dualism. Man is the meeting place of matter and spirit, and he is riven apart by their contradictions.³

R.A. Gekoski is another critic who sees the thematic issues of irony as central to an appreciation of Conrad's works. His interest is in the moral ironies:

(Conrad) was deeply attracted by what appear to be contradictory apprehensions about the nature and obligations of human life. The feeling that he is obscure surely arises from this. On the one hand he stresses the private and individual nature of man's existence ... while on the other, he affirms the public and moral obligations of human existence.⁴

Conrad's irony is seen as a recognition and representation of the complexity of experience; and his use of the different technical devices of irony is seen to be governed by his ironic outlook on life. In other words, the irony is considered as the representation of a prior philosophical or psychological disposition, rather than as the presentation of a novel experience.

Preference of the rhetorical to the thematic approach to Conrad's irony.

The thematic approach has proved invaluable in unravelling the complex philosophical and psychological issues dramatized by Conrad's stories. However, as the extracts quoted from both Hillis Miller and Gekoski exemplify, one weakness inherent in the approach is that the focus is shifted from Conrad's works onto an abstract outlook on life attributed to Conrad the man. The literature is displaced by metaphysics or morality etc. Both the underlying assumption and conclusion being, as F.R. Leavis ironically expresses it, "that poets put loosely what philosophers formulate with precision."⁵ The approach tends to an imbalance in emphasis, treating the text as a source for thematic programmes.

It also tends to generalization; a kind of long-sight that blurs reading of the story immediately at hand. Often the themes may subserve some other end. Often the strength or weakness of a story cannot be accounted for in terms of theme or paraphrasable message. Similar thematic concerns obtain in the very dissimilar Typhoon, Falk, and The Return. Nor is the varying success of these stories to be found in the clarity and extent of the thematic development in itself; rather it is in the power of the dramatization, of which thematic concerns are just a part.

The interest of this essay is in the irony of these stories not as it leads the reader from the text to a transcendent and privileged meaning, but as it functions to involve the reader in the actualization of the written world. Before considering this process, it must first be made clear what is being understood by irony as a literary figure.

Irony as a literary figure

Irony can be considered as an attitude to experience; and it can also be considered as a certain manner of holding or expressing that experience. The content is that discussed earlier as the thematic concern. The forms one hold to be examples of irony as a literary figure are many and dependent upon the definition being used.

Cleanth Brooks writes that irony "is the most general term we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from that context".⁶ D.C. Muecke argues that this definition only serves "to finessethe word 'irony' out of useful existence."⁷ However I want to rehabilitate Brooks' definition and answer the criticism of Muecke by attending to the phrase "the kind of qualification" and the term "context".

The phrase "the kind of qualification" is being understood to cover what Muecke identifies as the "three essential elements ... the formal requirements of irony."⁸ These are: the two-fold nature, the contrast or opposition between the constituent elements, and the attitude of "innocence" characteristic of the relationship between the two elements. Muecke writes:

In the first place irony is a double-layered or two storey phenomenon. At the lower level is the situation either as it appears to the victim of irony (where there is a victim) or as it is deceptively presented by the ironist (where there is an ironist) ... At the upper level is the situation as it appears to the observer or ironist ... In the second place there is always some kind of opposition between the two levels, an opposition that may take the form of contradiction, incongruity, or incompatibility ... In the third place there is in irony an element of 'innocence'; either a victim is confidently unaware of the very possibility of there being an upper level or point of view that invalidates his own, or an ironist pretends not to be aware of it.⁹

"Context" is understood to cover both the world of the text and that extrinsic world it imitates. Wayne Booth, discussing how irony is generated from and regulated by contexts both aesthetic or literary and social or historical, writes:

What determines the relevant context out of the infinite number of surrounding details are the author's choices and the reader's inferences about these choices: the relevant

context becomes the picture of a coherent whole, with every detail referring reciprocally to every other in the work. But at the same time it is impossible to say that only what is 'in the work' is relevant context, because at every point the author depends on inferences about what his reader will likely assume or know - about both his factual knowledge and his experience of literature.¹⁰

I am understanding irony to be working, then, when one element in a context that includes the reader's own assumptions and expectations is set in an incongruous or contradictory relationship with another element in that context. The kind of elements and the ways in which the relationship may be set are many. A common distinction is that between simple verbal irony - where the intention is arrived at through reversing or qualifying the ostensible statement - and situational or structural irony. Structural irony can take many forms; its essential duplicity of meaning might be generated by features such as a fallible narrator, the relationship of narrator to narration, the manipulation of generic expectations, character inter-action, episodic and stylistic dislocations and juxtapositions, etc. In Typhoon, Falk and The Return the ironies are for the most part structural. However, as my interest is not in irony itself but in the way it invites the reader to actualize the story, I do not attempt in my readings to identify and classify the various modes it takes.

Irony and the actualization of meaning

Any literary figure involves the reader's competence and creativity but irony demands that involvement in a much more active and personal manner. The reader must recognize the presence of irony and ironic strategies;

consider the deficiency of the immediate feature; judge that against the alternatives, which may have to be supplied from out of the reader's knowledge and experience; and then reconstruct the whole, either closing the gap between the levels or recognizing the levels as mutually qualifying. Wayne Booth writes:

All authors ... invite us to construct some sort of picture of their views and to judge them as in some sense coherent or plausible or challenging. But ironic authors obviously offer that invitation more aggressively, and we must answer it more actively.¹¹

The involvement is also personal. The reader draws the completed intention from his knowledge and experience. It is the reader's response and reconstruction that actualizes the meaning. Unlike the meaning of the 'straight' text, the meaning of the ironic text is not complete in itself; its intention is freed only through the reader's reconstruction. The reader realizes and 'co-authors' the meaning. Wayne Booth writes:

When irony succeeds, somehow the energy our minds put into recognizing this type of conflict (between the levels of irony) and making our choices is transferred to one element or another in the ironic scene: either negatively against the victim ... or affirmatively on behalf of the final reconstruction: having decided for myself that the ostensible judgement must be somehow combatted. I make the new position mine with all the force that is conferred by my sense of having judged independently. After all, I built this superior dwelling place "for myself."¹²

There is a third way in which irony builds a community of experience. The attitude of the author as ironist recognizes the reader as a partner who "knows". This remains true even with unstable General Irony; in this case everyone is equally a victim, the difference is between the knowing and the ignorant victim. In this way Wayne Booth's remarks hold for both stable and unstable ironies:

Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits. The author I infer behind the false words is my kind of man, because he enjoys playing with irony, because he assumes my capacity for dealing with it, and - most important - because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built.¹³

In his 'Preface' to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" Conrad attaches much importance to the concept of a community of experience, where the reader joins the author in the active and creative realization of the intention. Ian Watt argues that a concern with solidarity is central to the 'Preface':

the urgency of (Conrad's) rhetoric on the subject strongly suggests that his deepest interest in the preface was to articulate the hope that his presented vision would "awaken in the hearts of the beholders (the) feeling of unavoidable solidarity."¹⁴

The feeling of solidarity follows upon and is part of the reader's involvement. In the often-quoted proclamation of intent Conrad stresses how he wants through his art to make this involvement active and creative:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see. (N.N.:x)¹⁵

The task is not to present thematic programmes but to involve the reader in a realization of experience which, as the play on "see" indicates, includes themes. The themes however are not the essential concern; they are like the bass-line to a song, in adding resonance and a certain timbre to the work without constituting the whole performance. It is my argument that irony is an important strategy Conrad uses (not always successfully) to invite us "not to 'think about' and judge but 'to feel into' or 'become' - to realize a complete experience that is given in words."¹⁶

CHAPTER 2

TYPHOON

On the whole critics find 'Typhoon' a straight forward story. Jocelyn Baines writes:

Typhoon is one of Conrad's simplest important tales, and has none of the ambiguous moral and philosophical overtones with which 'Heart of Darkness' or Lord Jim reverberates.¹

'Typhoon' opens and closes considering Captain MacWhirr, and while critics argue about the nature of his character they generally accept that he is the central interest of the story. The storm scene and coolie situation have their own interest but their final justification must be the way they animate and illuminate aspects of MacWhirr. Because the intention is centred upon actualizing MacWhirr he is the object of most of the ironies. But in involving the reader in this actualization the ironies also work in a reciprocal manner to question and subvert the reader's expectations and assumptions, particularly about genre and psychological realism.

One way MacWhirr is treated ironically is through contrast and comparison with the implied author. The implied author is the character of the author as embodied in the work. Wayne Booth explains:

Our sense of the implied author includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters. It includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which this implied author

is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form.²

The first thing we confront in Typhoon is a description of MacWhirr:

Captain MacWhirr, of the steamer Nan-Shan, had a physiognomy that, in the order of material appearances, was the exact counterpart of his mind: it presented no marked characteristics whatever; it was simply ordinary, irresponsive, and unruffled. (T:3)

This description introduces not only MacWhirr but also the implied author, and stimulates the first impressions that will colour our view of both throughout the tale.

The grammar and language expresses the implied author's character. The vocabulary is commonplace and straightforward, it has itself no immediately striking characteristics, being for the most part "simply ordinary". The words are from common usage and handled in a standard and correct manner; yet if they are direct they are also directed mainly to abstractions and negations rather than to positive concrete facts. The feeling that there is a pool of experience, a wealth of resources, lying behind the unstrained vocabulary attends the slightly erudite "physiognomy" and the hint of the scholastic doctrine of essence and accident with "material appearances."

The voice is conversational and relaxed, yet it is not chattily colloquial. The tone is authoritative but not despotic. It is not abrasive or supercilious; it is concerned to communicate without imposing itself - except as a modulation towards a mild comic touch.

The syntax, also, observes a fitness in that it is disciplined and ordered but not too much so. The sentence is non-periodic but the clauses are firmly integrated. The introductory remark functions like a proem to introduce MacWhirr together with the Nan-Shan; so immediately bringing together such concepts as identity and function, self and society, appearance and reality. Three repetitions develop the introduction and close with a variant for emphasis and to pre-empt monotony. In each clause the object signifies MacWhirr's face or mind with equal propriety, thus validating the justness of the introductory proposition.

The opening, furthermore, demonstrates the use of contrast for clarification. Opposition and negation are used for definition. Abstract and concrete, appearance and reality form a binate relationship of inter-dependence and independence. The otherwise vague terms ("simply ordinary") attain definition through the context. Similarly MacWhirr, who is himself a direct and simple character, is defined through his relationship with the context; which here is the implied author.

In some ways the implied author is like MacWhirr. He is straightforward and unpretentious, informal and self-disciplined. In other ways the two contrast. As storyteller the implied author joins action with contemplation. Like MacWhirr in his letters home, the implied author offers no comment on his own feelings but sets to describe the object confronting him - here being MacWhirr. Yet unlike MacWhirr the implied author can communicate an object and at the same time predicate some value and judgment upon it. The implied author's description, unlike MacWhirr's, is as much concerned with the essence as the accident - the opening sentence describes MacWhirr's face only as a counterpart to his mind. Unlike MacWhirr, he recognizes abstractions to have some validity. An

obvious difference is between their attitudes to language and knowledge. The implied author enjoys a flexible and wide-ranging vocabulary. At times he might be criticized for over indulging in metaphoric language and purple passages.

It is otherwise with MacWhirr:

Captain MacWhirr wrote home from the coast of China twelve times each year, desiring quaintly to be 'remembered to the children', and subscribing himself 'your loving husband', as calmly as if the words so long used by so many men were, apart from their shape, worn-out things, and of a faded meaning.
(T:15)

The literal minded, methodical MacWhirr has no comprehension of metaphoric language and the range of experience it can communicate. This is brought out in the comedy of his response to Jukes' remark, "I feel exactly as if I had my head tied up in a woollen blanket":

Captain MacWhirr looked up. 'D'ye mean to say, Mr. Jukes, you ever had your head tied up in a blanket? What was that for?' (T:25)

MacWhirr, largely cut off from language, can express little other than "worn-out things, and of a faded meaning"; and consequently his communication with his family and fellow sea-men is on a very basic level. And this is not the more certain for all its simplicity; but is, ironically, characterized by misunderstanding.

The covert ironizing of MacWhirr from the level of the implied author is sounded also through MacWhirr's attitude to books. MacWhirr goes to books for an exact imitation of the world he already knows. When he checks the

International Signal Code-book about the Ship's flag, "to make sure he brought the book out on the bridge for the purpose of comparing the coloured drawing with the real thing at the flag-staff astern." (T:10) He cannot read to discover and learn or to experience. He studies the chapter on storms and rejects its advice because he sees no way to reconcile the described situation with his immediate experienced one, and is unable to imagine how his immediate situation might change to resemble the described one. His comment to Jukes ("you don't find everything in books" - T:34) occurs in the context of a book; and, also, is placed against the fact that if he had read the storm-chapter right he could have avoided the typhoon; if he knew how to find things in books he would not be one of the things found in this book.

Another mode of irony with which the reader responds to MacWhirr is the character inter-action. In Typhoon the irony of the character inter-action arises from the various conflicting and qualifying perspectives the characters bring to the action. The first example of character inter-action is the umbrella performance (T:4). It refers to no one episode; it is voiced in the subjunctive and has a typical rather than particular existence and so provides a convenient model to illustrate the type of inter-action found elsewhere in the story.

The characters are the principal triad of MacWhirr, Solomon Rout and Jukes. MacWhirr is seen going ashore in his 'harbour togs', invariably holding "in his powerful, hairy fist an elegant umbrella of the very best quality, but generally unrolled." The umbrella epitomizes sophisticated and artificial civilization which, as is apparent from his inability to master the furling, is alien to MacWhirr. On the other hand Jukes is pleased to parade his expertise with umbrellas. The description

of him "going through the performance" emphasizes the histrionic nature of the action. The two contrasting attitudes of the un-imaginative MacWhirr and the too-imaginative Jukes comment upon each other and are balanced and seen against the stable level Solomon Rout as a surrogate for the implied author provides. Rout is the mean; by combining MacWhirr's straightforwardness and Jukes' imagination he avoids the danger of excess that is potential in each attribute isolate in itself.

Conrad has been criticized for presenting MacWhirr as a "flat character", "more a symbol than a person";³ and to discuss character inter-action in this way might indicate that it is a valid criticism and MacWhirr represents lack-of-imagination. However this is an inadequate response to MacWhirr and Typhoon. There is no necessary correlation between simplicity of character and flatness of presentation. MacWhirr is not dismissed as a simple buffoon - except by the second mate, and at times by Jukes. In his simplicity, MacWhirr is related to Singleton of The Nigger of The "Narcissus" and to Falk. These figures have a profundity to their simplicity. Conrad's reply to Cunninghame Graham (who wanted to see Singleton educated) also defends MacWhirr; Singleton, Conrad wrote, "was in perfect accord with his life ... he is simple and great like an elemental force."⁴ Beyond the irony of being both simple and great is the irony of the presentation of such a character. The more simple the character is the more he exists only on his own terms, and so will defy the hooks and lines of language; in which case his character may best be suggested by a complex and self-conscious device such as irony. Through the ironies of inter-action, character, although it may be the victim of irony, is not reduced in dimension but rather realized the more for being seen from different perspectives.

Another way MacWhirr is seen through the qualifications of context is in the letters home - which also display character inter-action and develop the theme of language and communication. The three main characters - MacWhirr, Jukes, and Solomon Rout - are the letter writers; in this they are associated in a way with the second mate, who "never wrote any letters, did not seem to hope for news from anywhere" (T:28). To express experience is to place it in perspective and so exercise some control over it. This is comically illustrated in Jukes' letters to his friend in the Western Ocean trade. Jukes presents himself as the hero of his letters, the eastern ocean as better than the western, his captain as a simpleton he could take advantage of but would scorn to, and so on (T:16-18). Experience is manipulated into a congenial form. By contrast MacWhirr's letters are scrupulously "faithful to fact." But the contrast does not necessarily imply that the attitude of one kind of letter is better or worse than the other kind. For human interest, Jukes' self-expressive letters are more interesting and more true. But for an objective account MacWhirr's letters are the more reliable; they also may be preferred in that they do not display the need or the will to bend external reality but can live with it as it is.

Even as with the factual accounts of MacWhirr where the consciousness expressed is minimal, the letter involves a perspective extended beyond immediate actuality. The letter as a medium expresses the sender's concern with and interest in contact with the recipient. That MacWhirr writes letters at all - unlike the second mate - should qualify the reading of him as a literalist with no life other than "the actuality of the bare existence." (T:9). For example, his last letter home reveals that even when most engaged with the storm part of his mind was concerned with his family (T:94). It is ironic that MacWhirr is a letter writer at all. Further ironies are that those

letters so faithful to fact are sent to his wife in ignorance of the fact of her "abject terror of the time when her husband would come home to stay for good" (T:14). Also they are carelessly misread by her and only properly read by the steward. The letters provide the reader with a series of perspectives crossing and inter-connecting to invest the characters and themes with the complexity of irony.

Like the letters, the time-structure of Typhoon (which operates in part from the letters) establishes a more expansive level to ironize the simple view of the immediate and to reveal the space immanent in the surface of character and action. The narrative does not describe an orderly linear temporal progression. The implied-author controls and exploits the time-structure to reveal and explore character, mood, and theme as he wishes. For example, when describing MacWhirr's letter-writing the time encompasses the present and the past informing the present (T:14-15). This enables the reader to see the pathetic inadequacy of MacWhirr's attempts at verbal communication; but furthermore, it establishes an attitude to time that contrasts with that of MacWhirr.

Narrative flashbacks are another technique used to place the present in context with the past. The first chapter moves from the present sailing to describe aspects of MacWhirr's youth, career and marriage. The present voyage of the Nan-Shan is returned to and interrupted to return to an episode when it was newly built. Through the first part of the hurricane the pressure of the immediate is maintained with a constant narrative present. In the final chapter the tension of mood relaxes and the narrative opens out to include a range of perspectives. That the implied author uses these filling-in techniques to complete the presentation of the immediate shows that he feels the significance of the present is best brought

out by reference to its past. Without a past the present is seen to be impoverished and even unintelligible.

This attitude to experience is not reached only through the senses attending to the immediate physical world, it requires an act of imagination; of which MacWhirr has enough "to carry him through each successive day, and no more" (T:4). Yet, as the narrative flow also exemplifies, there is a validity to the opposite view that the imagination can alienate and disorientate and that MacWhirr's kind of contact with immediate actuality is, at times, vital. This is dramatized when in the early stages of the storm Jukes clings to MacWhirr.

The ironies of the time-structure, character inter-action (including the letters) and the implied author qualify and illuminate aspects of MacWhirr; however they also reach out to involve the reader.

The implied author establishes a relationship with the reader. He presents himself as a person of discernment and sanity, experienced in society and the world, aware of moral issues but with a humorous rather than melancholic or cynical understanding. In all, he possesses qualities most readers would recognize as real and to be prized. Wayne Booth, discussing Emma, comments upon the implied author "Jane Austen" as friend and guide in a way that is equally relevant to the implied author of Typhoon:

She is ... a perfect human being, within the concept of perfection established by the book she writes ... The dramatic illusion of her presence as a character is ... fully as important as any other element in the story.⁵

The reader is encouraged by the nature of the implied author to trust him to mediate the story and to value the judgments implicit in his perspective. As a wise and reliable guide he is also a friend. And as such credited with a moral and psychological reality like, if not more developed than, I imagine my own to be. The implied author then can question and exploit assumptions and expectations of genre, character and reality. A sense of self and reality is projected onto the implied author who encourages the reader to find an answering quality within the story. A basic expectation to reading a novel is that in it a world will be found that reconfirms the reader's attitude to his own. Jonathan Culler writes:

More than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which Society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world ... [The] basic covention which governs the novel - and which, a fortiori, governs those novels which set out to violate it - is our expectation that the novel will produce a world. Words must be composed in such a way that through the activity of reading there will emerge a model of the social world, models of the individual personality, of the relations between individual and society, and, perhaps most important, of the kind of significance which these aspects of the world can bear.⁶

The implied author encourages and plays upon this basic expectation. He establishes links with the empirical reality familiar to his readers through the wealth of "irrelevant details" (the term is from Martin Price⁷),

such as the umbrella, the letters, the domestic backgrounds. He presents himself as a rounded character, "a perfect human being, within the concept of perfection established by the book [he] writes," and then presents as hero of his story MacWhirr - who is characterized as seemingly having almost none of the valued qualities of imagination and psychological depth.

The implied author both through presentation and commentary encourages and reinforces the reader's habit or desire to fulfil and justify expectations of character by actualizing a depth to the simple MacWhirr. The incongruity of MacWhirr and the umbrella is one suggestion of an interior life. The conjunction of "hairy fist" and "elegant umbrella" (T:4) is one of diverse realms of experience meeting. It provokes speculation as to how and why MacWhirr has such a thing. On first reading the episode one can only wonder, later it may be inferred to be a gift from his wife; which invites speculation about their relationship; and so leads below the surface to suggest a depth to the character of MacWhirr and his wife.

Incongruity and the hint of an interior life or deeper forces attend MacWhirr in other ways too. There is the mystery of his running away to sea as a boy. By brooding upon it the implied author draws its wonder to the reader's attention. As there was no physical or economic compulsion for such an action it would seem that MacWhirr must have been motivated by reasons of intellect, emotion, or imagination, or something else again:

It was enough, when you thought it over, to give you the idea of an immense, potent and invisible hand thrust into the ant-heap of the earth, laying hold of shoulders, knocking heads together, and setting the unconscious faces of the multitude towards

inconceivable goals and in undreamt-of-directions. (T:4-5).

This explanation that some hidden force intrudes to alter the course of personal and universal history explains all and nothing. An ironic Fate plots MacWhirr's story, which is also the implied author's; it is the implied-author's hand that sends MacWhirr "towards inconceivable goals and in undreamt-of-directions." Therefore the explanation is correct in a way. However if the implied author succeeds in persuading the reader that the presented model of experience is valid and authentic, then, just as MacWhirr is seen to be the victim of the authorial irony, so must the implied author be seen as the victim of the Superior irony of Fate. The more successful he is as the author the more the implied author is seen to be a character in Fate's plot; and so the more his success becomes meaningless, for his intention is determined by Fate. If his version and explanation of the way things are does not persuade the reader, then the greater the autonomous life of his character MacWhirr is; the less successful he is as an author the more successful he is as an author. The irony sets up a merry-go-round involving the reader, who may also be a character. However it is taken, the effect of the explanation the implied author light-heartedly offers is that one may as easily fathom MacWhirr as life; there may be something more than is apparent, or then again ... In the latter case it is our structures of meaning and conventions of psychological complexity that are challenged.

It is not however that the irony here impels consideration of metaphysical issues as such, rather it creates an atmosphere of doubt, investing MacWhirr with the uncertainty of reality. And the expectations and uncertainties can colour the reading of MacWhirr steaming into the hurricane. It might be that he is being tested

by Fate. Or he might be understood as seeking to test and prove himself. Perhaps the adventure or challenge that MacWhirr as a boy thought he could find by running away to sea has eluded him until the coming of the storm. MacWhirr then might be read as risking social responsibility to exercise personal desire. The point is that there is some uncertainty and even perhaps mystery about MacWhirr.

The simple yet great MacWhirr implicitly challenges the validity of our models of significance and our belief in the significance they bear. A developed sense of self and a highly organized sensibility is an important strategy used to assert identity against entropy whether this stable consciousness is assumed for one-self or projected onto a deity. MacWhirr's sense of self and consciousness however seems as immediate and evanescent as the foam cresting a wave. The lack of those qualities which the implied author encourages the reader to value is the source of MacWhirr's strength. When the storm comes Jukes is paralysed by his imaginings until he finds MacWhirr who, spared such anxieties, maintains order aboardship. And yet if Jukes had been captain, if MacWhirr had been less simple the storm could have been avoided.

A further irony implicating the reader is that to judge from appearances would be to consider MacWhirr a fool. He has needlessly risked numerous lives and brought the ship to harbour so battered that, some wit jokes, it is as though "the crowd on board had fished her out somewhere from the bottom of the sea and brought her in here for salvage" (T:91). However to judge in this way and see MacWhirr as a simple unimaginative fool who blunders through is to exercise the unimaginative and unquestioning literalness of such a figure.

To understand the story as MacWhirr's triumph is the reader's triumph as well. There are qualifications to this too. The more we understand and imaginatively apprehend MacWhirr the less we do, for in doing so our understanding and imagination has removed us from him. The complexity found is seen to be a placement. The psychological complexity which we seek to authenticate by reference to others is seen to be the projection and objectification of our fears and desires, testifying to a will for testament. In which case MacWhirr's skepticism about language and 'head work' is sound, for language is caught in its own coils unable to contact the non-verbal otherness. The irony is, of course, that it is through language and headwork that MacWhirr exists, if only in the different versions we each have of him.

The response to Typhoon which does not recognize the ironies of the complexity of the simple MacWhirr is inadequate. Frederick Karl finds:

as possessor of many of the solid virtues, MacWhirr's personality simply cannot engage us; with his lack of imagination, his one-track mind, his ignorance of life, his blind sense of mission and orderliness, he is more a symbol than a person.⁸

This response by Karl leaves too much unaccounted for. An anonymous reviewer for Academy better described MacWhirr with the oxymoron "sublimely unimaginative."⁹ To respond and realize this irony is, I think, the intention of the text. At the end the implied author deliberately steers the reader away from the definitive explanation of MacWhirr which would nail him down to this or that. The reader is left with a number of subjective comments. Closing Typhoon in this way invites us to understand in our own way, and at the same time to recognize the subjectivity and status of this as a reflex of our own character.

CHAPTER 3

FALK: A REMINISCENCE

The question of the subject of Falk

Before discussing the ironies of Falk and how these involve the reader it is necessary to clarify what is taken to be the subject of the story: firstly, because it is around this that many of the ironies will revolve, and secondly, because of the few published accounts of Falk few agree in detail and less in total as to what the story is "about"; and my own reading continues in this tradition of disagreement.

Conrad was the first to raise the question of the story's subject. In the 'Author's Note to Typhoon And Other Stories he wrote:

But what is the subject of Falk? I personally do not feel so very certain about it. He who reads must find out for himself. (T:vii)

The title, often a valuable guide, is, here, an ambiguous help and proposes two candidates for subject: Falk, and (some-one's) reminiscence. The question is, how do these two aspects of the central action (Falk) and the framing action (the reminiscence) inter-relate?

By the time Conrad had written Falk (published in 1903) he had already employed the framing technique with success in a number of his earlier stories, Youth, Heart of Darkness (both 1902) and Lord Jim (1900), and less notably in Karain, a Memory, and The Idiots', both from Tales of Unrest (1898).¹ Although this does not prove anything, it does suggest that by the time Conrad came to use this technique in Falk he was aware of its potential effects

and practised in its employment. The point is made because unlike its presence in the earlier stories the authorial intention behind the framing technique in Falk is not readily evident; and rather than dismissing the frame and narrator-agent as artistic failures I prefer to see how they might be successes.

Unlike Heart of Darkness or Lord Jim for instance, the position of the inner narrator of Falk - a figure of the kind Wayne Booth terms a narrator-agent,² that is, he participates in the action he rehearses - his position in relation to the story he narrates is uncertain. Accounts of the Marlow-type stories invariably point to the identification or ironic relationship of the narrators with their narration; their character is an essential part of the story they tell and vice-versa. Douglas Hewitt writes:

The medium of the narrators' emotions is of the first importance; they are deeply concerned in what they see, emotionally involved. The force of the works comes largely from the conflict between what they observe and the standards which they bring to the observation. At bottom the subject of these stories may be said to be the relationship between the observer and the man with whose experience he is confronted.³

If this is applied to Falk, it may be replied that the darkness of the descent has been confused with the bottom; the relationship between the narrator-agent and Falk is important but is it the whole story?

Stanton de Voren Hoffman approaches the problem guardedly:

the captain-narrator does not seem essential here (he may be, though, because of the peculiarities of his

telling), and this does not appear to be his story - unlike Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim, the emphasis seems placed more upon the man told about (in the sense that the narrator does not consciously feel this is his story in any respect, that he does not point this out to us), and the situation suggested from this.⁴

The reader's problem then is to find out what the narrator-agent feels is his story and how he sees himself relating to it, then to consider whether the reader sees both these things in the same way.

Critical opinion generally favours the opinion of Stanton de Voren Hoffman and considers Falk to be the subject of the story. Edward Crankshaw states this view thus:

Falk, of course, is primarily and essentially the story of the love affair of that strange creature whose life was blighted by the fact that in wholly gruesome circumstances he had repeatedly dined off human flesh. That is the story.⁵

While that is in the story so is a lot more. If Falk is the essential concern then the story must be considered a sprawling failure. The frame and the "secondary action" of Hermann's family life, Schomberg, etc taken as a realistic stage to authenticate the "central action" is uneconomic and unsuccessful, it bulks too large, it misdirects attention, and at times it belittles the onstage action.

Albert J. Guerard goes further to see the subject, as the characters' (and reader's) response to the issues Falk's confession involves:

The gravest issue at crucial moments in Lord Jim and throughout The Secret Sharer is what attitude to take toward one's brother or "double" who has committed a crime. In the diffuse and otherwise uninteresting Falk, Conrad seems to be groping toward this central subject and conflict.⁶

This issue is present in Falk; but if the "central subject and conflict" which the critic is interested in is defined in this way then naturally the story would seem "diffuse and otherwise uninteresting", simply because so much of it lies outside the definition. It considers only a small part of the statement of the story, disregarding Falk's love affair, the whole confused milieu, the narrator-agent, and the framing action with its elaborate web of connections with the inclosed action. Furthermore, Guerard's remark overlooks both the indifference and inadequacy of the characters' attitudes taken toward Falk's "crime", and also the peculiar nature of the "crime" and its confession.

Jocelyn Baines points out:

it is a curiosity of the story that Conrad concentrates on the effect of eating, not killing man. Yet Falk's crime was to kill the carpenter and the others, for Conrad makes it clear that this was not done in self-defence; once the carpenter was dead it would have been foolish for starving men not to eat him. It is impossible to know whether this emphasis was intentional or not. If it was intentional the implication is that Conrad wished to concentrate on the less reprehensible part of the action, or that it was a piece of deliberate irony to show Hermann's misplaced sense of outrage.⁷

However it is not certain whether in the given circumstances the killing and cannibalism is a moral crime (this, surely, is one of the issues involved). The cannibalism is the motive and end for the killings; and, as the more personal and physically committed and involved of the acts, it is the more profound and desperate. If there is an imbalance of emphasis the object of the irony is Falk for his misplaced sense of being cursed for the act rather than Hermann for his outrage (although that is ironized). It is Falk who presents the bare emphasis ("I have eaten man") - Hermann never learns the full story; and the narrator-agent, who is the only one to learn of the killings, passes no judgment upon them. But the main implication of the emphasis, to my mind, is to present cannibalism as the symbolic, emotional and structural heart of the story (and Conrad's employment of cannibalism is, surely, intentional).

The acts of cannibalism involve many of Conrad's thematic pre-occupations: the recognition of the respective and conflicting validities of primitivism and civilization, of the individual and community, and of free-will and the necessities of nature. The cannibalism dramatizes the ironies of human life. Falk's ruthless will for self-preservation is presented as a fundamental principle basic to human nature. Community which is dependent upon self-preservation is, in the extreme situation, destroyed by it. And conversely, the self which is dependent upon community for a sense of place, function, identity and companionship is, in the extreme situation, destroyed by it. Cannibalism expresses a desperate and total commitment to life, and to self-preservation in particular; and is, at the same time, a force for the breakdown of community and the breakdown of meaning. What occurs on the Borgmester Dahl, where "the organized life of the ship had come to an end. The solidarity of the men had gone" (T:231), is a manifestation of the anarchy potential in every community.

A good deal of the imagery is directed towards cannibalism and the associated acts of violence and dismemberment. For example, even the innocuous and "innocent" washing of Hermann's family is facetiously described in this way:

The after-noon breeze would incite to a weird and flabby activity all that crowded mass of clothing, with its vague suggestions of drowned, mutilated and flattened humanity. Trunks without heads waved at you arms without hands; legs without feet kicked fantastically with collapsible flourishes; and there were long white garments, that taking the wind fairly through their neck openings edged with lace, became for a moment violently distended as by the passage of obese and invisible bodies. On these days you could make out that ship at a great distance by the multi coloured grotesque riot going on abaft her mizzen-mast. (T:148-9).

That most communal and domestically sentimental of sights, the family washing, ironically suggests suffering and riot to the narrator-agent. To suggest that this functions to ironically foreshadow Falk's confession, or tautens the disposition of detail, or is a comic touch, or ironizes the willed blindness of Hermann, or ironizes the ironic narrator-agent, or whatever else, is valid; nevertheless the basic point remains, the most heterogeneous of elements - washing and riot, community and anarchy - have been brought together in a way that invites consideration of their inter-action, and of the metaphorical implications of cannibalism.

A similar concern is also implied by much of the selection of detail and situation. Food is a dominant and recurrent motif. The exterior-frame-action is of men eating; the narrator-agent spends his free time between Schomberg's eating house and drinking beer with Hermann in his cabin, which resembles a farm kitchen; an empty beef-tin bounces cheerily through the story; a banana features in a brawl, and so on. These elements both forecast and generalize the significance of Falk's cannibalism. His response to the dilemma to die or kill and live is presented as the extreme expression of the basic will to live which most of us exhibit in the safe ritual of the regular meal.

Cannibalism in metaphoric form is exhibited in the whole spectrum of human activity. It is, essentially, the one in its will for self-preservation consuming the other, whether literally or by appropriating another's livelihood. Falk is described as a "monopolist" both aboard the Borgmester Dahl (T:234) and working as a tug-boat skipper (T:161). The narrator-agent complains of Falk's tariff of towage charges with an image that underscores the essential cannibalism: "He extracted his pound and a half of flesh from each of us merchant skippers" (T:161).

In addition to economic and political cannibalism there is also personal and sexual cannibalism where one person in the exercise of their will usurps the integrity of another. Hermann, for instance, uses the niece as a nurse for the children and companion for his wife; then when these functions are no longer necessary he begrudges the expense of supporting her and financing her return to Germany. Falk's hunger for life is also associated, ironically, with a hunger for the girl and bourgeois respectability. The narrator-agent observes:

He was hungry for the girl, terribly hungry, as he had been terribly hungry for food.

Don't be shocked if I declare that in my belief it was the same need, the same pain, the same torture. We are in his case allowed to contemplate the foundation of all the emotions - that one joy which is to live, and the one sadness at the root of the innumerable torments. (T:224).

The will for self-preservation and the will for society are presented as fundamental to human life and at the same time fundamentally contradictory. Falk exemplifies these contradictory impulses. He feels no guilt for the killings and cannibalism, since it was the natural selection of the best and fittest, and expressed his nature: "He was a born monopolist" (T:234). Yet because of this survival, and at an equally instinctual and natural level, he lives under a curse, manifest in the obsessive gestures, the sleep-talking, the eating habits, and the violent aversion to even the smell of meat cooking.

If cannibalism is the ironic, emotional and symbolic centre of the story, the question remains of how the narrator-agent fits in. This involves the further questions of what he feels his story is about, how he feels he relates to it, and how he is seen to relate to it. I believe the answer involves extending the symbolic significance of the cannibalism and hunger beyond the literal, economic, sexual and societal, to the levels of language and interpretation; that is, to the cannibalism of point of view. Appetite then is seen as a general figure for all attempts to sustain and nourish the self. This wider significance is suggested by the word-play of the exterior-frame-narrator's persiflage:

But the dinner was execrable, and all the feast was for the eyes.

That flavour of salt-water which for so many of us had been the very water of life permeated our talk. He who hath known the bitterness of the ocean shall have its taste for ever in his mouth. But one or two of us, pampered by the life of the land, complained of hunger. It was impossible to swallow any of that stuff. (T:145)

Language is associated with food and eating. At one stage Hermann is described as beginning "to mumble and chew between his teeth something that sounded like German swear-words." (T:164)

Tony Tanner, who studied the association of community, language and food, sees this as the central subject of Falk. He argues:

Narration takes on a special importance in Conrad as part of the constituting process of man. We must eat to live, but we must also narrate to live ... [In Conrad] telling is a crucial component of living, at least living with "a sense of corporate existence."⁸

For Tanner the narrator-agent is a medium who stands between the polarities of the naked elemental force of Falk and the bourgeois sheltered Hermann (and the reader); and who attempts to transmute the experience of the former into the language of the latter, and so re-constitute community. Mr Tanner writes:

The narrator has to 'translate' Falk's unique wordless experience into the vocabulary of people like Hermann, his listeners and ourselves, not just stating facts but creating

a context in which the facts generate meaning ... Falk had to eat the uneatable, and in so doing he discovers the radical relativity of cultural categories; the narrator has to speak the unspeakable, and in so doing he encounters the insoluble problematics of utterance. In these two figures Conrad dramatizes in an extreme form his sense of the profound paradoxes on which human life - itself a shifting and unstable concept - is founded.⁹

The problem with this schema is that the narrator does not 'translate' Falk's experience, at least for anyone in the story. Falk tells his story only to the narrator-agent; who had said in an earlier context that Falk "could talk well enough, as I was to find out presently" (p. 197). Hermann shies away from the story, as the narrator-agent describes:

I assured him that I knew all the details. He begged me not to repeat them. His heart was too tender. They would make him feel unwell. (T:237)

Mr Tanner's reading also overlooks the fact that for an attempt to evoke a desperate and profound experience the narrative is a very qualified success; that is, its temper is often comic and even farcical. Stanton de Voren Hoffman writes:

[In Falk] As in Youth, the experience, and the problem, are held up against, are developed against a reality which emphasizes the incongruous, the highly exaggerated, a context which prevents any development. The world goes by with curtains and bananas, absurd characters, ridiculous words. And whatever

is said, whatever is gathered from the experience must be viewed in the light of that world.¹⁰

What, then, would be a more adequate description for the subject of Falk? The exterior-frame-narrator establishes a general brief by referring to the archetypal nature of story-telling:

When the primeval man, evolving the first rudiments of cookery from his dim consciousness, scorched lumps of flesh at a fire of sticks in the company of other good fellows; then, gorged and happy, sat him back among the gnawed bones to tell his artless tales of experience - the tales of hunger and hunt - and of women, perhaps! (T:145-6)

Story-telling is seen in terms of the traditional aesthetic of mimesis; that is, as a way to mirror and define the experience of the tribe. This suggests that the story to follow will partake of this tradition, in concerning the appetites, activities and inter-relationships that constitute life in society.

This expectation is fulfilled, ironically. The story encompasses the experiences of as diverse a nature as Falk's and Hermann's. All the characters are concerned with self-preservation, feeding their respective hungers and maintaining a belief in their standing and identity in their community.

The narrator-agent begins his story with what seems an announcement of his subject - it is as close as he ever gets to such an announcement; describing the immediate scene, he says, this:

reminds me of an absurd episode in my life, now many years ago, when I got first the command of an iron barque, loading then in a certain Eastern seaport. (T:147)

One might expect the story then to be "auto-biographical" being, as Conrad himself wrote about the story, "an episode in the story of my first command."¹¹ However this expectation must be modified; for, after generalizing the situation and characters ("this sort of thing might have happened anywhere"), the narrator-agent continues, "the absurdity of the episode concerns only me, my enemy Falk, and my friend Hermann" (T:147). That is, he sees his story to concern the interaction of three characters in particular as displayed in one episode.

What Albert J. Guerard calls the central subject and conflict of Falk - "what attitude to take towards one's brother or "double" who has committed a crime" - is seen as one aspect of the broader concern of the story; the problems of interaction. The "absurdity of the episode" follows from the inability of the characters to both protect and fulfil their own needs and identity and to respect and support those of others. Their essentially cannibalistic nature seems to prevent them from taking towards each other a mutually satisfying attitude.

The ironies of inter-action in Falk

Again and again the characters are seen in their ego-centric fog, hopelessly misapprehending what is happening around them. Schomberg takes Falk's avoidance of his table d'hote as a personal insult, an attack upon him and his establishment. He fights back, and responds to this imagined affront by labelling Falk a miser. And considering Falk's exorbitant towage charges this is plausible. However Schomberg knows enough to contra-

dict his own construction. Carried away by his railing he adds that because of peculiar eating habits Falk employs a cook and pays his engineer a monthly bonus. Schomberg's will for self-justification has governed how he sees and relates to Falk. He interacts not with Falk so much as with his subjective and inadequate version of Falk.

With the apparent exception of the narrator-agent the characters live ignorant of the ironies of their world and their inter-action with it. They display little awareness of any difficulty in interpreting and relating to the life around them, they simply accept their version to be the reality. "By pretending hard enough we come to believe anything - anything to our advantage," comments the narrator-agent (T:205). And the characters, in the attitudes they take towards one another, unconsciously create pretences and illusions to comprehend disparities and save meaning. So, to Schomberg Falk is envious of his eating-house but too miserly to come. Johnson thinks himself a gentleman, with "money - and friends" (T:192), after Falk has, in effect, bribed him. The detached observer or reader perceives these attitudes ironically and recognizes them as deceptions. The irony is more acute in that the characters' understanding of both the other and of the self is limited and partial. They remain ignorant of their own ignorance, unaware both of their misprisions of meaning and of the unconscious primitive impulses that motivate those attitudes; for "the logic of our conduct is always at the mercy of obscure and unforeseen impulses" (T:205). This is comically dramatized in the extravagant fury of the constable's response to being hit with a banana. Typical ironic incongruities feature in the description:

I dragged the ex-hussar off. He was like a wild beast. It seems he had been greatly annoyed at losing his free afternoon on my account. The garden of his bungalow required his personal attention, and at the slight blow of the banana the brute in him had broken loose. (T:193)

The narrator-agent assumes an ironic stance toward the world he remembers. His perspective is ironic, as seen with the selection and presentation of incident and detail as for example the description quoted above exemplifies. He also uses verbal irony: for example, Schomberg is described as a "specimen of portly, middle-aged manhood ... of a timid disposition" (T:195-6), then some pages later is described "Schomberg's deep manly laugh." (T:205). Falk's response emphasizes the irony: "That confounded old woman of a hotel-keeper" (T:205).

The narrator-agent is alert to the ironic situations he represents. He presents the ironic juxtaposition of Hermann's "world proof" ship (T:156) which is not so much clean as excessively pure, with the children, the grubby, "sickly" doll (a comically reduced James Wait), the perpetually sorrowing Lena, and Nicholas who looks on "with a cold, ruffianly leer." Then the narrator-agent comments of the ship that it was,

Arrayed - I must say arrayed - arrayed artlessly in dazzling white paint as to wood and dark green as to iron-work [sic] the simple-minded distribution of these colours evoked the images of guileless peace, of arcadian felicity; and the childish comedy of disease and sorrow struck me sometimes as an abominably real blot upon that ideal state. (T:157-8)

The ideal is travestied in the actual; et in Arcadia ego. Furthermore both of the presented aspects, exemplified by the world of the children and that of their parents are fictions. The children's suffering is a game, a "comedy"; similarly Hermann's arcadian refuge is a painted, "arrayed", "old tub" of a merchant ship. Both attitudes are the sentimental excess of one pole of the duality of existence; it is implied that the imbalance occasioned by the adult Hermanns' excessive development of the one is ironically compensated by their children's equally excessive development of the other.

The narrator-agent is not only ironic with regard to the world he remembers he also takes an ironic view of his younger self. The older man ("of more than fifty"-T:147) recognizes his character to have changed; and presents himself as having mellowed and become more philosophical than in his younger days, when he was very insecure being given to self-doubt and worry: "As I was young then - not thirty yet - I took myself and my troubles very seriously" (T:154); and, "I would discover at odd times (generally about midnight) that I was totally inexperienced, greatly ignorant of business, and hopelessly unfit for any sort of command" (T:155).

He presents his younger self as the victim of ironic situations. For example, on the morning Falk was to tow his ship out to the Roadshead, the young captain is described in his cabin listening to the racket which he thinks signifies his imminent departure, but as the narrator knows (and hints) it signifies the opposite:

Altogether that unnecessary uproar was distracting but down there in my cabin I took it calmly. In another moment, I thought, I should be going down that wretched river, and in another week at the most I should be totally quit of the odious place and all the odious people in it.

He complacently begins brushing his hair then a foreign voice calls out "Go ahead":

"Go ahead" are not particularly striking words even when pronounced with a foreign accent; yet they petrified me in the very act of smiling at myself in the glass. (T:169)

The older man's joke is at the expense of the younger self. This example was selected out of many instances because it dramatizes with particular pointedness the complacent self-ignorance that Falk ironizes. The attitude of Schomberg and Johnson is seen to be also that of the young captain.

"The absurdity of the episode" develops out of the participating characters' self-complacent ignorance. Detached from the immediate confusion of the inter-action the reader is free to observe the characters caught in the predicament of their meaning. Their will for survival as individuals dictates and is reflected in the meanings and attitudes they take towards each other; and by imprisoning them in a partial and limited perspective - in a world which is the confluence of many perspectives - this commits them to confusion and uncertainty; which threatens their meanings and sense of order. Objective fact is all but submerged in subjective interpretation; however if the fact is imposing and intransigent enough, as with the irresistible natural force Falk possesses and is possessed by, then the interpretation must either bend or break.

The character inter-action builds to this conflict. The conflict nevertheless arises largely through interpretation, or more accurately misinterpretation. The 'facts' present in the first meeting and subsequent relationship of the captain (the young narrator-agent) and Hermann are few and fortuitous. It is the motives

and interpretations peculiar to each man that extends their chance meeting into a friendship. The captain welcomed Hermann's company as a refuge from his problems of command. Hermann's motives can only be inferred at second hand from the inferences of the others, in particular the captain and Falk. Hermann tells the captain that he has "troubles", he was detained on shore by Falk much against his will, and by his behaviour he shows himself to be impressed by the sum stolen from the captain.

The reader really only learns of Hermann's role in the story through the perspective of either Falk or the captain, and they interpret Hermann's behaviour in accordance with what they want from him. The shadowiness of Hermann's motives and role is deepened further in that the captain is usually ignorant of what is played out between Hermann and Falk. He has to interpret and respond to their interaction without the privilege of knowledge as to their intentions. The first explicit and correct statement about them (that Falk visits Hermann to visit the niece) is, ironically, made by the notoriously unreliable Schomberg. The captain skeptically calls this view a "theory" and adds condescendingly, "Naturally, I did not believe Schomberg" (T:163). Even so, he observes Falk and Hermann together but the significance of their interaction is lost on him:

all I discovered was some impatience on Hermann's part. At the sight of Falk, stepping over the gang-way, the excellent man would begin to mumble and chew between his teeth something that sounded like German swear-words. However, as I've said, I'm not familiar with the language. (T:164)

At the same time as the captain is misinterpreting those around him so is he being misinterpreted by them. He is caught up in an entanglement of misinterpretation without at first knowing either its origin or its meaning. When he learns of the rumour which is seemingly responsible for Falk's refusal to handle his ship, he attributes it to Schomberg; who, as town-gossip, is the logical and likely source:

The conviction that it would end disastrously had been driven into me by all the successive shocks my sense of security had received. I began to ascribe an extra-ordinary potency to agents in themselves powerless. It was as if Schomberg's baseless gossip had the power to bring about the thing itself or the abstract enmity of Falk could put my ship ashore. (T:195)

The captain, already quite insecure, feels himself undermined by a conspiracy of misinterpretation. He fatalistically accepts that no matter how false the rumour may be it yet sets up a reality of its own. In the muddle of social interaction that which is significant and influences subsequent action is not so much what is true, as what is thought to be true. The characters interact not merely with their versions of others but also with the versions others hold of them; it is a kind of shadow-boxing where the shades can throw punches of their own. A more immediate irony is that the narrator-captain's interpretation of the conspiracy of misinterpretation is itself a misinterpretation.

The captain learns this when he takes advantage of a chance meeting to speak to Falk:

and before many words had been exchanged I perceived that the excellent Hermann had been making use of me. That simple and astute Teuton had been, it seems, holding me up to Falk in the light of a rival. I was young enough to be shocked at so much duplication. 'Did he tell you that in so many words?' I asked with indignation.

Hermann had not. He had given hints only; and of course it had not taken very much to alarm Falk. (T:203)

Even Falk, the laconic man of action, reads experience through a subjective haze of suggestion and inference. It is not even certain that Hermann's words to Falk were 'hints'. The captain had been spending much time on the Diana, and Falk being so in love with the niece finds it hard to understand that the captain does not share his infatuation; he is ready to see anyone as his rival for her: "Any man with eyes in his head, he seemed to think, could not help coverting so much bodily magnificance." (T:200).

Falk, understanding the words as hints, was not prepared to question whether they denoted a real situation. The narrator-agent, accepting Falk's interpretation that the words were hints, denies there was any truth to them and goes on to interpret their significance with a reading of Hermann and his behaviour. Interpretation enwraps interpretation and obscures what little amount of 'fact' there is.

As the story is refracted through the consciousness of the narrator-agent the reader must confront and interpret the action in the same way (and so potentially display the same inadequacy) as the characters. As any "fact"

is open to various interpretations depending upon the orientation of the character - for example, whether Johnson is a gentleman or not largely depends upon whether you are Johnson or not - so a similar plurality of meaning seems to inhere in much that the reader confronts. This can be seen with reference to the scene in Mr Siegers' office when the captain complains about Falk:

It came into my head as disconnected ideas will come at all sorts of times into one's head, that this, most likely, was the very room where, if the tale were true, Falk had been lectured by Mr Siegers, the father. Mr Siegers' (the sons) overwhelming voice, in brassy blasts, as though he had been trying to articulate words through a trumpet, was expressing his great regret at conduct characterized by a very marked want of discretion ... As I lived I was being lectured too! His deafening gibberish was difficult to follow, but it was my conduct - mine! - that ... Damn! I wasn't going to stand this. (T:187-8)

Whatever the meaning of this interview might be it is outside the text. It exists in the (withheld) interpretations of the narrator-captain and Siegers, but for the reader its meaning must be actualized through inference and suggestion. What hints or clues there are as to what might be going on are ambiguous. There is a parallel suggested between an earlier occasion when Mr Siegers (Snr.) lectured Falk (which Schomberg has earlier attributed to Falk's conduct with Miss Vanlo). The implication then is that Siegers (Jnr.) having heard the rumour going about is lecturing the captain for his supposed conduct with Hermann's niece. This may explain the phrase, which the change in register indicates to

be Siegers', "great regret at conduct characterized by a very marked want of discretion." But this phrase may, alternatively, refer to the captain's allowing Falk to regard him as a rival; or even to his apparent tardiness in setting his ship in order.

For all that, the parallelism may suggest quite different interpretations. Recalling the earlier occasion may be an example of the wilfulness and arbitrariness of mind; for it came "as disconnected ideas will come." Furthermore it is uncertain whether it is the same room; the narrator-captain may be ironized for seeking to pattern the randomness of experience by looking for (and imposing) parallels and order. The whole tale of Falk and Siegers (Snr.) may be false; and, since it is heard from Schomberg this is a strong possibility. In any case, "the gibberish was difficult to follow." Presumably much of Siegers' message is unintelligible.

Our knowledge of what occurs in the office is limited to what the narrator-agent tells us. What is certain is that he knows his conduct was severely criticized. The criticism and its validity, or whether in fact it was "gibberish", is lost in the fury of his response. The narrator-agent may well claim "no desire to judge" and call it "an idle practice anyhow" (T:199), but judgment is implicit in his selection and presentation of character and incident. That Siegers' criticism is described as "deafening gibberish" and that he is caricatured "trying to articulate words through a trumpet" implies that the narrator-agent has assumed a very definite judgmental stance towards him. The reader has no facts to consider the validity or otherwise of this interpretative attitude, only the recognition that the narrator-agent has presented one more interpretation in a story which shows all interpretation to be suspect and self-seeking.

The captain's inadequacy of interpretation and so his contribution to the absurd confusion is suggested by the enigma of the Hermanns' behaviour. The narrator-agent either interprets inadequately or is blind to the implications of much of their intentions and actions. No authorial hand interrupts the story to sign-post these misunderstandings, and the text itself never clearly exposes and rectifies them; they work, in the same way as the various "irrelevant details" and "clues", to lie as though submerged, suggesting a pattern that is never quite made explicit. This confusion involving the reader is present from the captain's first meeting with Hermann:

Then [Hermann] said to me, 'Everybody had his troubles', and as we went on remarked that he would never have known anything of mine hadn't he by an extra-ordinary chance been detained on shore by Captain Falk. He didn't like to stay late ashore - he added with a sigh. The something doleful in his tone I put to his sympathy with my misfortune, of course. (T:159)

The confusion revolves around the interpretation of tone - the narrator-agent's interpretation of Hermann's voice, and the reader's interpretation of the tone of the narrator-agent's "of course". Hermann's dolefulness may be for the narrator-captain's "misfortune", in which case "of course" merely indicates the expected and the natural. On the other hand, Hermann's dolour may be for his own troubles; how then is the tone of "of course" to be interpreted? It may be an unconscious ironic indicator of the ego-centricity of the narrator-agent in particular and of any perspective in general. The narrator-agent never stopped to consider Hermann's troubles, and immediately assumed his tone to indicate sympathy for him (the captain). Or, "of course" may be the narrator-agent ironically distancing himself from the captain.

This same confusion from the partiality of perspective is found in the two interviews between Hermann and the captain, the first on the night before the towing incident and the second on the day after. In both cases the two characters talk at cross-purposes. Hermann's motives can only be inferred from the inadequacy of the narrator-agent's interpretation.

In the first interview (T:167-8) the captain was about to ask Hermann for his opinion of Falk's behaviour, after Falk has just finished making an unusually intense and odd visit; he is prevented by Hermann starting on about his future plans - selling the ship and financing the travel home to Germany. Hermann emphasizes the fact that he will need to pay for three second-class tickets not counting those for the children. The narrator-agent is a little taken aback because he had not seen any signs of Hermann being miserly, he concludes "it was rather funny", then shortly leaves.

The meaning behind Hermann's enigmatic behaviour becomes more apparent in the second interview in Schomberg's bar (T:182-184). For the captain however it merely becomes darker. He sets to give Hermann practical advice for recovering money for damages from Falk, but Hermann is little interested in questions of money. After some shyness Hermann tries to broach what for him is obviously an embarrassing subject, but the captain remains bluffly impercipient:

It cannot be doubted that the man had been thrown off his balance by being hauled out of the harbour against his wish. His stolidity had been profoundly stirred, else he would never have made up his mind to ask me unexpectedly whether I had not remarked that Falk had been casting eyes upon his niece. 'No more than myself', I answered with literal truth ...

"But you, captain, are not the same kind of man," observed Hermann ...

When the captain asks Hermann about his niece, Hermann seems about to say something then talks of his children:

... This constant harping on his domestic arrangements was funny. (T:183)

To my mind, these interviews suggest that Hermann is using his domestic arrangements as a stalking horse, and that he is really after the captain to declare his romantic intentions towards the niece. Hermann's problems - beyond talking about what for him is very embarrassing - are that there seem to be two suitors for the niece and that he is shortly to sail. The captain's answer that he had been casting eyes upon the niece as much as Falk would reinforce Hermann's impression that the two men are rivals. Hermann's "observation" ("But you, captain...") may be more a question "are you interested in the girl in the same way as Falk is?" Of the two "rivals" Hermann much prefers the captain, but to make the captain declare himself Hermann must stress that there is not much time, he will soon sail and, of course, if the captain were to take the niece off his hands it would save Hermann a good deal of money.

These suggestions are reinforced by the mysterious way in which Mrs Hermann behaves towards the captain after he has taken it upon himself to further Falk's suit; her behaviour excites the captain's curiosity but its meaning escapes him:

She shook her head back at me negatively
[sic] I wonder why to this day (T:221)

And, later, Hermann speaks to the captain:

It was impossible to make out women. Mrs Hermann was the only one he pretended to understand. She was very, very upset and doubtful.

'Doubtful about what?' I asked.

He averted his eyes and did not answer this.
(T:237)

And, finally, the narrator-agent reports:

this good-natured matron gave me a wavering glance, dark and full of fearsome distrust.
(T:239)

Mrs Hermann, it seems, for some reason distrusts the captain. This might be interpreted as the absurdity of Mrs Hermann, of people, of life, (of Falk); or it might be placed in a context of suggestion that implies the presence of a latent pattern; which in this case is the story seen from the Hermann's perspective.

Falk thought Hermann hinted the captain was a rival for the niece. The narrator-agent interprets Hermann's role as the calculated play of an "astute Tenton". This might easily be a misinterpretation, and perhaps Hermann actually felt or hoped the captain was a rival. The narrator-agent points out that there is nothing to distinguish his behaviour from Falk's courting. And he admits to Hermann himself that he has been casting his eyes upon the girl. It is not surprising there is some confusion as to what his motives are. If Mrs Hermann interprets the captain to be Falk's rival, and in fact the preferred one - the narrator-agent says, "I think that Mrs Hermann

from the first looked upon me as a romantic person" (T:160) - then her mysterious glances and doubts can be interpreted. For her, the espousal of Falk's suit is a cynical betrayal of her hopes and conception of the captain's character. He has deceived her, (she has deceived herself) about his character and intent.

These hints and suggestions involve the reader in the confusion of the world of the story and implicate him in the construction of meaning. Other features that work in this way include the imagery suggesting red-shift and universal entropy; such as the sunsets, the Buddhist temple, the mud and refuse, and soon. The significance of each of these is ambiguous. The involvement is from two angles, with that of the narrator-agent parenthetical to the reader's own. In other words we share the captain's view of his world (it being refracted through his perspective) but we are also detached so that we can view the captain ironically, and revise our interpretation of his world.

The captain is a character within the story and his perspective is as limited and inadequate as the other characters. His unreliability is present in little matters. For example, his ego-centric blindness to Hermann's troubles, his blindness to the meaning of Falk's visits aboard the Diana, his mistake in attributing Falk's behaviour to "baseless gossip" heard from Schomberg. To this might be added his insensitiveness towards the Hermanns' behaviour and conversation.

The question becomes how much the captain's unreliability is also that of the narrator-agent. The narrator-agent does treat his younger self ironically, as was seen earlier in the essay, but is the narrator-agent himself treated ironically? Certainly he does not seem to realize

how blind and clumsy he was in his interaction and how much this contributed to the confusion that entangled him.

Once the narrator-agent is considered unreliable then the whole bias of interpretation implicit in his narration becomes problematic and the text becomes open to different interpretations. For example is the story really about the narrator-captain's failure of nerve? The older man wearily observes:

There may be tides in the affairs of men which taken at the flood ... and so on. Personally I am still on the look-out for that important turn. I am, however, afraid that most of us are fated to flounder for ever in the dead water of a pool the shores of which are arid indeed. (T:169)

Extending this metaphor one can see the irony that in manipulating affairs so that his ship is towed out to the tides of the open sea the narrator-captain dammed his emotional flow and so fated himself to flounder subsequently in a stagnant pool. The young captain may have been self-deceived or unwilling to recognize his fascination with the girl as romantic interest. This could then explain the other-wise curious epithet "my enemy Falk", which would seem excessive if the rivalry of the two was nothing more than Falk's misunderstanding. Perhaps the captain sold his own feelings short to save his ship, (or used social responsibility to excuse his betrayal or evasion of private desire). Some such ambivalence lies behind the following remarks:

Now I will merely state that, in my opinion, to get his sickly crew into the sea air and secure a quick dispatch for his ship, a skipper would be justified in going to any

length, short of absolute crime. He should put his pride in his pocket; he may accept confidences; he must explain his innocences as if it were a sin; he may take advantage of misconception, of desires and of weaknesses; he ought to conceal his horror and other emotions, and if the fate of a human being, and that human being a magnificent young girl, is strangely involved - why, he should contemplate that fate (whatever it might seem to be) without turning a hair. And all these things I have done; the explaining the listening, the pretending - even to the discretion - and nobody, not even Hermann's niece, I believe, need throw stones at me now. (T:196)

This apology arouses more speculation than confidence. It very easily yields ironies undermining the narrator-agent's ostensible attitude and intention. After all, why need to justify the action, and at such length too. Has he gone "to any length, short of absolute crime"? Is the intensity of his emotion (his guilt, perhaps) in excess of his behaviour? What, or perhaps more accurately, when is "absolute crime"? Are murder and cannibalism ever justifiable? What is the "absolute" doing in a story where all seems relative to the individual will for self-preservation? What is concealed in the phrase "horror and other emotions"? Perhaps the level of emotion indicates the narrator-agent's feeling of having done something serious in betraying or disowning his "other emotions"?

The phrases concerning the girl ("and if the fate ...") can also be interpreted in such a way as to undermine the narrator-agent's ostensible intention. He first

attempts to avert attention and avoid owing to his infatuation by seeking refuge in a rather portentous circumlocution, introducing the concept of fate as an extra buttress to relieve him of any responsibility and hence guilt. However the strategy is not wholly successful and his mind momentarily circles around the "magnificent young girl" before he can return to the justification. The extract arouses further questions also: what might the terrible fate be? marriage to Falk? Why should that bother either the narrator-agent or the girl? And why should the narrator-agent feel guilty and fear the resentment particularly of the niece? Perhaps he believes his action frustrated an attachment between him and the niece, an attachment that existed if not mutually then at least on her side. The narrative might then be considered as the narrator-agent's exorcising of his ghosts; the dramatic monologue of a Gerontion-figure justifying his past and character to himself and the niece (synecdoche for that "tide" or "important turn" that he missed, the potential he never dared realize). One might then regard the comic element, the grotesque and the exaggerated, as the narrator-agent's belittling of the experience and people which bettered him in the past.

The question arises as to how radically the explicit statement is undermined. Is there a point at which the ironies stabilize and where we can say the narrator-agent is unreliable so far and no more? Wayne Booth, discussing the question in general, concludes tentatively:

Where then do we stop in our search for ironic pleasures? Where the work "tells" us to, wherever it offers us other riches that might be destroyed by irony.¹²

Where does Falk tell us to stop and what are the riches it offers which are more important than the anarchy of unstable irony?

The tenor of this essay is that Falk dramatizes many literal and metaphoric acts of cannibalism motivated by a common will for self-preservation. Not least of these is the act of narration itself; the degree to which the story is refracted and distorted is of secondary interest to the fact that it is, and so enacts in itself the condition it sets forth. That the narrator-agent is the victim of this ironic situation does not invalidate his own use of ironies directed against the other characters; instead he is seen to share with them in their common condition.

The riches Falk offers are many and depend upon critical perspective, those of concern here regard the realization of the subject and world of the text. The reader, like the characters, confronts in Falk a reality of problematic meaning, containing the potentialities of disparate readings; for example the double aspect of the full title Falk: A Reminiscence, or what attitude to assume towards the central act of cannibalism. In interpreting and coming to a meaning the reader imitates the process, if not the inadequacy, that the characters exhibit in their will for meaning. The narrator-agent's ironies expose the inadequacy of the interpretations and interaction of the characters (including his younger self). His inadequacy of interpretation is exposed by the ironies of which he is the victim. The irony as well as exposing that which leads to the confusion of the "absurd episode" establishes an atmosphere of ambivalence and duplicity. This atmosphere involves the reader actively and treacherously in the process of interpretation. Treacherously because any interpretation is caught between the incongruities the story presents.

In Falk Conrad's pre-occupations are brought into balance and left there. On one hand there is the challenge and romance of command in an exotic capital; the community

of the sea-life; the narrator-agent finds that even the English words that signify it are good:

The alliteration is good, and there is something in the nomenclature that gives to us as a body the sense of corporate existence
(T:147)

And on the other, there is the dramatic irony, the black joke of the narrator-agent's double entente.

CHAPTER 4

THE RETURN

Of those who comment upon Conrad's short stories few critics find The Return satisfactory. Conrad himself was uncertain about the quality of the story. In the 'Author's Note' he apologetically calls it "a left-handed production", and says:

I don't want to talk disrespectfully of any pages of mine. Psychologically there were no doubt good reasons for my attempt.
(T.U:viii)

The story is open to criticism on several counts: the unevenness of distance and sympathy, the heavy handed satire and characterization, the mannered rhetoric and purple prose, the unremitting use of abstract nouns and superlative adjectives, the vague and contradictory symbolism, the extravagant metaphors and generalizations, the drawn-out inconclusive treatment of the subject. The following passage is illustration of this criticism:

While he groped at her feet it occurred to him that the woman there had in her hands an indispensable gift which nobody else on earth could give; and when he stood up he was penetrated by an irresistible belief in an enigma, by the conviction that within his reach and passing away from him was the very secret of existence - its certitude, immaterial and precious! (T.U:176)

Confronting a passage like this out of context raises the central question of the intention or direction of the irony. The faults of this passage are also those

for which Hervey is treated ironically. If this passage is considered to be in Hervey's voice or in some way part of his consciousness then the stylistic awkwardness and ugliness is justified as an ironic rhetoric; that is, it communicates and implicitly undermines Hervey's dullness, his prolixity and pontification. Out of context it is impossible to determine the intent of the passage, whether it is ironic or straight. However the problem remains much the same even when placed in context, for the intention of the orientating context is, in The Return, equally ambiguous.

The problem of the indeterminacy of intention arises from the uncertainty of the authorial irony. There is no consistency to the ironic temper of The Return; the ironies shift suddenly and unannounced between voices or perspectives, and from stable to unstable ironies. Nor can one argue convincingly that the indeterminacies subsist a coherent ironic intention; for there are, in The Return, attempts to assert certain stabilities which can be attributed only to the author.

The ironic atmosphere is created early in the story and this raises expectations of reading irony throughout. The Return opens with the detached critical perspective of the omniscient implied author. At first the irony is stable, there is an implied corrective and normative attitude. For example:

Outside the big doorway of the street they scattered in all directions, walking away fast from one another with the hurried air of men fleeing from something compromising; from familiarity or confidences; from something suspected and concealed - like truth or pestilence. (T.U.:119)

The irony implies both that these people are wrong for not facing truth and for not making meaningful intercourse and, quite obviously, that it is good to be otherwise.

Here the irony is directed against the victims and is stabilized against the attitude of the implied author. Sometimes the narrative shifts into Hervey's voice (not only in reported speech) and then ironically undercuts that by shifting back into that of the implied author; for example:

He considered himself well connected, well educated and intelligent. Who doesn't? But his connections, education and intelligence were strictly on a par with those of the men with whom he did business or amused himself. (T.U.:119)

The first sentence is from Hervey's perspective, the last from that of the implied author. Again the ironic intention can be reconstructed with some assurance, Hervey's pretensions are undercut by revealing how limited his experience and knowledge is.

Often the shift between voices or perspectives is not as clearly signalled as in this example ("He considered"), or does not shift so clearly into one or other voice. The reader confronts something that is neither the direct speech or thought of either the implied author or the characters, but something in between. The technique is not dramatic monologue or stream of consciousness but style indirect libre; which Martin Price describes as, "indirect discourse that catches the idiom of a character but may compress his reasoning, as a speeded up film mechanizes motion, "(hereafter called the oblique voice.)¹

In The Return the ironies of the oblique voice are sometimes apparent, as in the following extract:

He had married five years ago. At the time all his acquaintances had said he was very much in love; and he had said so himself, frankly, because it is very well understood that every man falls in love once in his life - unless his wife dies, when it may be quite praiseworthy to fall in love again. (T.U.:119).

It is plain that Hervey's consciousness is refracted through an oblique voice and that the conceptions of love and fidelity expressed here are superficial. Furthermore if one were to quarrel with the idiom the quarrel would not be with the implied author, for it obviously is being sent up.

However as the story runs on the intention is often not so evident. Often the narrative shifts into and out of the oblique voice so readily and unobtrusively that its presence and tenor become problematic. For example:

He woke up to an amazing infinity of contempt, to a droll bitterness of wonder, to a disenchanted conviction of safety. He had a glimpse of the irresistible force, and he saw also the barrenness of his convictions - of her convictions. It seemed to him that he could never make a mistake as long as he lived. It was morally impossible to go wrong. He was not elated by that certitude, he was dimly uneasy about its price; there was a chill as of death in this triumph of sound principles, in this victory snatched under the very shadow of disaster. (T.U.:140)

This passage is opaque; the abstract nouns, the repetitions, the oxymorons, the images strive for a significance at the expense of meaning. The question is: upon whose head should this criticism be visited, Hervey's or the implied-authors? Does this awakening of Hervey's have authorial sanction? The passage may be in the oblique voice; after all, the perspective centres around Hervey ("He woke ... He had a glimpse ... he saw etc"). If this is the case then presumably the passage is ironic; Hervey is (projecting his own barrenness onto her, and is making a moral mistake in attempting to wring from the circumstances a psychological victory. It is no 'born again' experience; instead it is more of the same, the pompous Hervey ironized earlier in the story for yearning "unaffectedly to see morality (in his person) triumphant before the world" (T.U.:132-3)

The problem of determining the intention of the text is more acute with Hervey's later revelations, for the response to these determines whether or not The Return is read as tracing some sort of victory. In reply to Edward Garnett's criticism Conrad set out his reading of Hervey and the story:

My dear fellow what I aimed at was just to produce the effect of cold water in everyone of my man's speeches. I swear to you that was my intention. I wanted to produce the effect of insincerity, of artificiality. Yes! I wanted the reader to see him think and then to hear him speak - and shudder. The whole point of the joke is there. I wanted the truth to be first dimly seen through the fabulous untruth of that man's convictions - of his idea of life - and then to make its way out with a rush at the end.²

Conrad, I think, confuses rather than clarifies. If "everyone" of Hervey's speeches and convictions are presented ironically then Hervey leaves the story pretty much as he enters it, his revelations of a "universe of moral suffering" and so on are psychological strategies with no other validity or authority. Then what makes "its way out with a rush at the end" is, presumably, the reader's recognition of this continuing process of evasion and self-deception. Or is Conrad overstating the case? Are all the speeches and convictions intended ironically? Or just those before the revelations and reversals of attitude and belief? If "at the end" anything emerges through the thickness of the confusion it cannot be said to rush, in which case it would be apparent, but to dribble.

One critic writes:

the reader is not altogether sure whether the wife has triumphed in her contempt for Hervey's bourgeois ideals or whether the husband gains in the end through moral understanding.³

The problem is more complicated than that. The story might be: the wife validly rejecting the moral and emotional sterility of Hervey and Hervey's response claiming for himself a morally superior position - which may or may not be ironically undercut; or, the wife projects her moral and emotional sterility onto Hervey who finally recognizes her nullity and makes a valid rejection of it; or, both partners project their nullity onto each other and make what may or may not be a valid rejection.

This indeterminacy can be seen with reference to Hervey's revelation which crystalizes his repudiation of his earlier attitudes, or perhaps is further delusion and evasion:

He seemed to have forgotten himself in a meditation so deep that on the point of going out she stopped to look at him in surprise. While she had been speaking he had wandered on the track of the enigma out of the world of senses into the region of feeling. What did it matter what she had done, what she had said, if through the pain of her acts and words he had obtained the word of the enigma! There can be no life without faith and love - faith in a human heart, love of a human being! That touch of grace, whose help once in life is the privilege of the most undeserving flung open for him the portals of beyond, and in contemplating there the certitude immaterial and precious he forgot all the meaningless accidents of existence: the bliss of getting, the delight of enjoying; all the protean and enticing forms of the cupidity that rules a material world of foolish joys, of contemptible sorrows. Faith! - Love! - the undoubting, clear faith in the truth of a soul - the great tenderness, deep as the ocean, serene and eternal, like the infinite peace of space above the short tempests of the earth. It was what he had wanted all his life - but he understood it only then for the first time. (T.U.:177-8)

The level and authority of the voice is problematic. At times the consciousness seems to be that of Hervey refracted through the oblique voice ("What did it matter what she had done..."). At other times it is doubtful ("That touch of grace ..."). Is this rapture the truth rushing out or evasion and delusion? Jocelyn Baines considers that it is the former, "the ice has in fact broken," and then adds of this change "this is perhaps implausible."⁴

One might however argue the other side, and claim that the change is implausible and intentionally so. The ponderous and pompous rhetoric is, perhaps, Hervey's communicated through the oblique voice. As corroboration there is the force of much of the earlier and more apparent ironies where Hervey is observed assuming an hieratic role; self-dramatizing the importance of the situation and his response; revelling in his ability to construct self-justifications buttressed with the respectable abstract nouns, love, faith, duty - for example:

The sound of that sentence evidently possessed some magical power, because, as soon as he had spoken, he felt wonderfully at ease; and directly afterwards he experienced a flash of joyful amazement at the discovery that he could be inspired to such noble and truthful utterance. (T.U.:149)

The context also may qualify the authority and validity of the revelation. Hervey's marriage has fallen apart through a lack of mutual and sympathetic contact and understanding. The revelation of the importance of faith and love is a barrier rather than a bridge. Hervey is entranced in his solipsistic vision, "it was what he had wanted "; so much so that he is oblivious to his wife and surroundings.

Another possible qualification arises if we consider the story's structure. There is, in The Return, a good deal of recurrence of actions, motifs, imagery, situations and phraseology. The plot out-line of the story returns upon itself: Hervey returns home to find his wife has left him; the wife returns home and Hervey leaves her. The descriptions of the return of the wife and Hervey's departure are almost identical (T.U.:137-8, 186). Perhaps the parallelism is supposed to suggest the return of

a cycle, in that just as Hervey's wife returns home changed yet essentially the same so he is changed but not essentially. Perhaps it is significant that the train in the opening sentence of the story is on the Circle Line (T.U.:118); and that the Hervey's busy themselves "in enlarging the circle of their acquaintance" (T.U.:120), which may be associated with the emphasis on mirrors in the story.

Many of the images, phrases, and attitudes of the passage describing Hervey's revelation can be traced from earlier in the story where the irony and the oblique voice are more apparent. In the passage Hervey is imaged as an adventurer or discoverer ("on the track of the enigma"); who has an experience of profound spiritual significance ("that touch of grace"); who comes to a new knowledge, like a mystic communion (the opening of "the portals of beyond"); a knowledge which brings a contempt of the world that is perhaps a death-wish ("the infinite peace of space above the short tempests of the earth"). Earlier, Hervey has been ironically treated for dramatizing himself as a visionary (T.U.:135), and a high-priest (T.U.:155-7). He has been implicitly likened to "a solitary adventurer in an unexplored country" (T.U.:173) - however whether or not this indicates an ironic intent is uncertain. The "portals", in addition to the hieratic aspect recall the number of gates and doors found in the story: in particular, the implied gates of Eden (T.U.:134), and the "closed doors and curtained windows" (T.U.:135) suggestive of seclusion and repression, which prefigure Hervey's thought that the doors of his house are as "impenetrable to the truth within as the granite of tombstones" (T.U.:180). What is beyond the doors is ambivalent, it may be a lost paradise or death and corruption. In the passage describing Hervey's revelation these aspects merge; the "certitude immaterial and precious" and oblivion in the "infinite peace of space" are presented as being the one and the same end of Hervey's desire.

A further suggestion that the consciousness of the passage is Hervey's rather than the implied-author's is seen in the presence of repeated phrases. The most obvious is "the certitude immaterial and precious" which occurs elsewhere in the oblique voice of Hervey (T.U.:176, 179, 180, 182). This suggests that the oblique voice obtains in this passage too.

For all that, the opposite view that the passage is the implied author describing Hervey's real change (which may however destroy any verisimilitude given the type of character Hervey is) must be seen as a possibility every bit as strong; even if for no other reason than a reversal at the end is a conventional pattern for short stories; and is one which is hinted at in The Return. This can be seen by the dropping of the detached ironic perspective of the omniscient author at the end; if there is irony in the final pages (which is uncertain) it is irony of self-betrayal, the characters giving away more than they intend.

This pattern can also be seen with reference to shifts in sympathy towards Hervey and his wife. In so far as one can be certain of the intent, the positions of Hervey and his wife are reversed. At first she appears the vital and passionate one and he the nullity, but at the end she is seen to be false and even satanic while he is vital. This can be set out most clearly and economically in table-form:

	She	Hervey
p 141	emotive, suffering, honest	empty, passionless, self- dramatizing
p 152	honest, perceptive	obtuse, self-deceiving
p 161	willing to go, honest	using "duty" to evade "the terror of forces that must be ignored"

p 171	submitting to Hervey's need for deception	becoming unsatisfied with deception
p 181	uncertain, willing to accept evasion	certain, rejecting evasion and deception

If it is decided that the revelation is not in the oblique voice of Hervey then the faults of the passage - the prolixity, the nihilistic yearning - must be the implied author's. Furthermore, what the passage seeks to affirm - faith and love - is undercut by the general irony that imbues other parts of the story. Early in the story the implied author presents Hervey's marriage proposal ironically:

She appeared to him so unquestionably of the right sort that he did not hesitate for a moment to declare himself in love. Under the cover of that sacred and poetical fiction he desired her masterfully, for various reasons; but principally for the satisfaction of having his own way. He was very dull and solemn about it - for no earthly reason, unless to conceal his feelings - which is an eminently proper thing to do. Nobody, however, would have been shocked had he neglected that duty, for the feeling he experienced really was a longing - a longing stronger and a little more complex no doubt, but no more reprehensible in its nature than a hungry man's appetite for his dinner. (T.U.:120).

It is plain that the irony is directed against Hervey's conception of love in particular, because it is superficial, self-centred and an evasion of a basic impulse. But in its archness and desire to shock the bourgeois the irony also undermines the concept of love in general.

It is presented as a fiction (the tenor of "sacred and poetical" is cynical); an illusion to conceal a primitive appetite.

The general irony is manifest in the expressions of skepticism about language and the presentation of conscious action as determined and motivated by the unknown and the unconscious; for example:

the tricky fatality that lurks in obscure impulses spoke through Alvan Hervey's lips suddenly. (T.U.:143-4)

and

then she also became the mouth-piece of the mysterious force forever hovering near us; of that perverse inspiration, wandering capricious and uncontrollable, like a gust of wind. (T.U.:144)

The implied-author's irony not only subverts the action and behaviour of Hervey and the wife, it also subverts the claims of certitude and hope with which the story strains to end. The general irony contradicts the ending read as a victory.

Other contradictions are with Conrad's use of symbolism and the psychological models he employs. The imagery is predominantly of the light/darkness dichotomy and associated with this are the images of fire. Most of the time darkness is associated with the unconscious, primitive impulses (e.g. T.U.:123), but it is also associated with universal entropy (T.U.:181), the satanic (T.U.:176), deception and bourgeois security (T.U.:154), and a space in which to move to individuation (T.U.:183). Conversely light is associated with passion and spontaneity (T.U.:140), and with hypocrisy and covetousness (T.U.:184).

The contradictions of the psychological models mar The Return in an even more serious way. On the other hand there is the image of skaters on ice - there is a hidden flow "the stream of life, profound and unfrozen" (T.U.:123), but it can be disregarded. And on the other, there are the images of uncontrollable, irrepressible power, storms, volcanoes and so on - the flow cannot be disregarded and in fact shapes the configuration of the conscious mind. Both views serve the story in their own way. There is the need to motivate Hervey's psychological realignment and the need to show why this is necessary and desirable. The problem is that the two conflict, resulting in the conclusion (Hervey's rebirth) collapsing under the pressure of the ideas earlier developed.

The conclusion, it seems, attempts to present Hervey's recognition of the existence and pre-eminence of desire for love and faith as a good in itself and as a movement toward self integration. The qualifications are: that Hervey is divorced from his society - which is fabricated of evasions and repressions; and that love of or faith in another involve no certitude, for the self can never fully know the other. Undermining this are the notions of psychological determinism and the alienation of the self from the self. Hervey motivated by anxiety unconsciously seeks to vent his frustration and dominate his wife by using the language of ethics. For his own selfish purposes (of which he remains ignorant) he accuses her of acting selfishly. While the immediate focus of the story is upon how value systems or languages are manipulated for private psychological reasons, this in effect, calls the authority and validity of these structures into question. The ultimate reality of all social codes and of the individual consciousness, may be an ego-centric complex of amoral anxieties. The resounding acclamations of Love and Faith ring hollow, for they can be nothing other than the self-centred cry of the anxiety ridden ego.

The irony fails to provide a coherent perspective for the reader to actualize the psychological action. The abstract nouns (Love, Faith), for the reader remain abstract and divorced from any experience to test and realize them. The irony ends up like the serpent devouring itself. At first the author employs irony to detach himself from his victims and to expose their failings. For this purpose, if the attitude held by the implied author is to be valued and sought, the irony must be stable, there must be some values it does not undermine. This however is not always the case in The Return. The destructive general irony introduced into the story to savage the bourgeois also attacks the affirmations of the author. It is as though with these muddied affirmations the text is embodying the irony of which Hervey was the victim, that is, that the productions of the conscious mind are in reality answering an imperative of a hidden anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Within Typhoon, Falk: A Reminiscence, and The Return similar themes obtain. In each of these stories there is a variant on initiation, concern with the individual in society, concern with the relationship of the primitive and the civilized, experience and expression, and a concern with breakdown and devolution on the levels of the private, social, and universal.

In Typhoon, Falk, and at times in The Return, these thematic concerns are manifest in a context of ambivalence, of general irony, where no one view is conclusive and definitive. Even though MacWhirr and Falk are the heroes of their stories they provide no models for the reader to follow; their victories are over particular circumstances and hedged around with qualifications. MacWhirr can triumph over the storm because he is so unimaginative and stolid, lacking the qualities the implied-author encourages the reader to value. Falk may stand "for the male"¹, he does get the girl; but this happens as a result of a chance meeting in a context of confusion and misunderstanding. The narrator-agent imagines Falk leaving town like a Jim always fleeing the memory of his crime against Society. The Return is the only one of these stories which, apparently, attempts a conclusive and affirmative ending. And ironically this is as ambivalent as the endings to the other stories, and more confusing.

For all their similarities of irony and theme the experiences that inform each of these stories are very different. The irony is not so much the end as the means with which the reader is invited to realize the experience of the story. This experience often proves to be of an ironic nature; as seen with MacWhirr, the doubt as

to his running away to sea, his profound unimaginativeness, the cannibal Falk aching for bourgeois respectability; the narrator-agent blindly contributing to the confusion he seeks to extricate himself from; the primitive base to Hervey's social codes. However rather than constituting or pointing to meaning in itself, the irony is, I think, significant for the way it invites reader involvement in the particular experience of the story one immediately confronts.

The ironies, on a general level, expose ignorance and undermine complacency, to reveal a mystery and ambivalence in the human condition; a sense of it as at once tragic and comic. This function of irony to, in the expression of Kenneth Burke, "humanize the state of doubt"², was seen by Keats to be a quality essential to the "Man of Achievement especially in Literature."³ Keats calls this quality Negative Capability. In the Bloom and Trilling edition Romantic Poetry and Prose this doctrine is described in a manner directly relevant to the reader's response to Conrad's successful ironic stories:

Although our moral sensibilities have been deeply engaged, we do not make moral judgments at all ... We feel that the events we have witnessed do indeed convey a significance, one that is beyond any practical moral conclusion, but we cannot formulate what it is, and with this "half knowledge" we "remain content"; we find ourselves in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" and take pleasure in being there.⁴

Typhoon and Falk are, to my mind, stories where the ironies generate this experience of resting content with uncertainties triumphantly. In these stories the reader is invited to realize an experience that is articulated

finally not in any abstractable meaning but in the full performance of the story. In both these stories for all the uncertainty and mystery that attends the ironies, the ironies nevertheless do serve a coherent intention. In Typhoon the reader is invited to actualize MacWhirr; and then, by being brought up against the paradox involved in doing so, is invited to realize something of the mystery and richness of character. In Falk the interest is in character inter-action, rather than in character in itself; that is, in the cannibalism of social interchange. The ironies lead the reader to experience the dilemma and confusion involved in taking up an attitude toward another.

The Return, even though it shares with these stories many thematic concerns and a common presence of irony, lacks their success. The similarities only highlight the differences and emphasize how little each story can be appreciated or criticized through attending to their ironies from a thematic approach. The Return lacks the coherence of Typhoon and Falk; within it the uneven handling of the irony frustrates reader involvement and prevents the actualization of a community of experience.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. D.C. Muecke, Irony pp. 67-8 (Methuen, 1970)
2. Quoted in Ian Watt, Conrad In The Nineteenth Century (Chatto & Windus, 1980) p. 153.
3. J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality (Harvard University Press) pp. 57-8.
4. R.A. Gekoski, Conrad The Moral World of the Novelist (Paul Elek, London, 1978) p. 8.
5. F.R. Leavis, The Common Pursuit (Penguin, r.p. 1969) p. 213.
6. Quoted in D.C. Muecke, The Compass of Irony (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1969)
7. Ibid., p.13.
8. Ibid., p.19.
9. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
10. Wayne C. Booth A Rhetoric of Irony (The University of Chicago Press, 1974) pp. 99-100.
11. Ibid., p. 41.
12. Ibid., p. 41.
13. Ibid., p. 28.
14. Ian Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century p. 87.
15. Joseph Conrad, 'Preface' to The Nigger of the "Narcissus" (John Grant, London, 1925) p.x.
All quotations from Conrad's fiction are from The Works of Joseph Conrad, Vol. One Almayer's Folly,

Tales of Unrest, and Vol. Three The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Typhoon, published by John Grant, London 1925. Quotations are accompanied by the abbreviated title and page number, for example (N.N.:X), or (T.U.:X).

16. F.R. Leavis, The Common Pursuit pp. 212-3.

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER 2

1. Jocelyn Baines Joseph Conrad A Critical Biography (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1960) p. 258.
2. Wayne, C. Booth The Rhetoric of Fiction (University of Chicago Press pb. 1961, 3rd Imp 1963) pp 73-4.
3. Frederick R. Karl A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 1969) p. 144aa
4. Quoted by Avrom Fleishman Conrad's Politics p. 26
5. Wayne C. Booth The Rhetoric of Fiction p. 265-6
6. Jonathon Culler Structuralist Poetics Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975) p. 189.
7. Martin Price "The Irrelevant Detail and The Emergence of Form" Aspects of Narrative ed. J. Hillis Miller Columbia University Press, N.Y. & London, 1971 pp. 69ff.
8. Frederick R. Karl op. cit., p. 144aa
9. Academy, 9 May 1903, quoted in Heart of Darkness and Typhoon (Pan Classics 1976, 3rd printing 1980) p. 185

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER 3

1. The chronology is taken from Jocelyn Baines Joseph Conrad A Critical Biography, see p. 261.
2. Wayne C. Booth The Rhetoric of Fiction pp. 153-4
3. Douglas Hewitt Conrad A Reassessment (Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa N.J., 1st pb. 1952, 3rd ed. 1975), p. 43
4. Stanton de Voren Hoffman Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad (Mouton, Paris 1969) pp. 107-8
5. Edward Crankshaw Some aspects of the art of the novel (Russell and Russell Inc., N.Y., 1st pb. 1936, reissued 1963) pp. 92-3.
6. Albert J. Guerard Conrad The Novelist (Harvard University Press, Cam., Mass., 1958) p. 20
7. Jocelyn Baines op. cit., p. 264
8. Tony Tanner "'Gnawed Bones' and 'Artless Tales' - Eating and Narrative in Conrad" Joseph Conrad A Commemoration ed. Norman Sherry (The Macmillan Press Ltd., London 1976) p. 35
9. Ibid pp. 35-6
10. Stanton de Voren Hoffman op. cit., pp. 110-1
11. Cited in Jocelyn Baines, op. cit., p. 261
12. Wayne C. Booth The Rhetoric of Irony (University of Chicago Press, Chicago pb. 1974, 2nd imp 1975) p. 190

FOOTNOTES
CHAPTER 4

1. Martin Price, *op. cit.*, p. 72
2. Cited in Jocelyn Baines *op. cit.*, pp. 191-2
3. Paul L. Witey Conrad's Measure of Man (Gordian Press, Inc. N.Y. 1966) p. 26
4. Jocelyn Baines *op. cit.*, p. 193

FOOTNOTES
CONCLUSION

1. Richard Curle Joseph Conrad A Study (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1914) p. 126
2. Cited in D.C. Muecke The Compass of Irony p. 236
3. John Keats "To George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27 (?), 1817" Romantic Poetry and Prose ed. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 1973, 7th printing, 1978) p. 768.
4. Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, *op. cit.*, p. 766

BIBLIOGRAPHY

TEXT:

CONRAD, Joseph. The Works of Joseph Conrad. Vol. One Almayer's Folly, Tales of Unrest, and Vol. Three The Nigger of the "Narcissus", Typhoon London: John Grant, 1925

CONRAD CRITICISM:

BAINES, Jocelyn. Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1960.

CRANKSHAW, Edward Joseph Conrad: Some aspects of the art of the novel. New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1st pb. 1936, Reissued 1963.

CURLE, Richard Joseph Conrad: A Study. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1914.

FLEISHMAN, Avrom. Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1968.

GEKOSKI, R.A. Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist. London: Paul Elek, 1978.

GUERARD, Albert J. Conrad The Novelist Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1966

HEWITT, Douglas Conrad: A Reassessment, third edition. New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975

HOFFMAN, Stanton De Voren. Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad. The Hague: Mouton, 1969.

KARL, Frederick R. A Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

MILLER, J. Hillis. Poets of Reality. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965.

TANNER, Tony, "'Gnawed Bones' and 'Artless Tales' - Eating and Narrative in Conrad" Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration ed. Norman Sherry. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1976.

WATT, Ian. Conrad in the Nineteenth Century. London: Chatto and Windus, 1980.

WILEY, Paul L. Conrad's Measure of Man. New York: Gordian Press, 1966.

GENERAL LITERARY CRITICISM:

BLOOM, Harold and Trilling, Lionel (ed.) Romantic Poetry and Prose. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

BOOTH, Wayne C. The Rhetoric of Fiction (3rd Imp.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963

BOOTH, Wayne C. A Rhetoric of Irony (2nd Imp.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975.

CULLER, Jonathan. Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975.

- LEAVIS, F.R. The Common Pursuit (reprint). London: Penguin, 1969.
- MUECKE, D.C. The Compass of Irony. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1969.
- MUECKE, D.C. Irony. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1970.
- PRICE, Martin "The Irrelevant Detail and The Emergence of Form" Aspects of Narrative ed. J. Hillis Miller, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.