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Rortyan Contingency and Ethnocentrism in *Chance*

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CHANCE IS A TRICKY NOTION, suspended between opposing strands of meaning. On the one hand, it suggests the randomness we see in the toss of a coin; on the other, it involves a complex web of causation and contingency. Similarly, chance can conjure up both hope and dread; it can alternately evoke both loss and opportunity. These contradictions make it fertile ground for Conrad's paradoxical narratives, and it is no surprise that Marlow chooses "chance" as his mantra throughout the novel bearing its name. This essay relates these paradoxes to the work of twentieth-century philosopher, the late Richard Rorty, and, in particular, three Rortyan notions: contingency, conversation, and community. It will be argued that the paradoxes in *Chance* reflect a Rortyan sense of the relationship between individual and communal identity, which are conversational because they both internalize contradiction and are contingent upon wider interactions. The device of conversation, it will be suggested, is used in *Chance* (as elsewhere in Conrad's work) not just to enable the novel's complex interplay of narrative voices, but also to shed light on the contingent nature of community - and of identity itself.

For Rorty (1989), language, self, and community are characterized by mutual contingency. His philosophy is anti-realist in that he denies correspondence theories of truth, instead suggesting pragmatically that understanding is constructed through a network of the metaphors we use - what he paradoxically calls our "final vocabulary" - to arrive at a provisional comprehension of the world. This vocabulary is not complete or unchanging, a key feature of Rorty's philosophy being the potential to enlarge this vocabulary through conversational engagement. It is characterized as 'final' because it cannot be defended except through circular arguments. Rorty calls this process of enlargement "redescription" and uses it as the basis for his philosophical method. He believes that by describing things in new ways, the work of previous philosophers, for example, we build new understandings and persuade people to accept our positions. For Rorty, final vocabulary is a feature of both individuals and communities: it is not only the fundamental assumptions that

shape our idiosyncratic perspectives, but also those which underpin cultures, a prime example being the premises and methods of Western rationalism.

Redescription is the primary means by which conversation happens and has both internal and external dimensions. On the one hand, applied to our selves, it is the process by which we negotiate and develop our identities: we tell "stories about ourselves É to tailor a coherent self-image for ourselves and then use it to tinker with our behaviour" (1991: 161-62) - making Marlow's narrative a potential accessory to self-creation. This internal redescription is conversational because Rorty conceives of the self as decentred: for Rorty, our selves are "webs of belief and desire" into which we continually weave "new candidates for belief and desire" (1989: 84), but our unconscious selves are made up of "one or more well-articulated systems of beliefs and desires, systems that are just as complex, sophisticated, and internally consistent as the normal adult's conscious beliefs and desires" (1991: 149). Thus our identities are constructed through the metaphorical conversation between our conscious selves and these other unconscious systems.

On the other hand, when redescription is applied externally - because our "final vocabularies" are necessarily dependent on upbringing and culture - it connects us to our communities, sometimes described by Rorty as our "ethnos," defined as "those who share one's beliefs enough to make fruitful conversation possible" (2010: 235). In this sense we might describe Rorty's philosophy as ethnocentric: for the limits of our vocabulary, contingent as they are upon culture and experience, are also the limits of conversation and community. Rorty's deployment of the notion of ethnos is idiosyncratic: it is implicit that members of a conventionally defined community - such as the inhabitants of a village or Conrad's "fellowship of the sea" - are not members of the same ethnos in every context. Differences will always exist between members' idiosyncratic final vocabularies, and their ability to engage in conversation will depend not only upon these differences, but also upon the specific context in which they converse (1986: 533).

Enlargement is a key notion for Rorty because it constitutes his solution to the problem of difference, both cultural and individual. The desire to enlarge our community and final vocabularies is seen as a validating feature of Western liberal culture. Imaginative engagement with different people and peoples is central to this process of enlargement; and Rorty sees the novel, in particular, as a highly practical means to facilitate this process, as it provides good opportunities for such encounters at reasonable cost in terms of time and capital (1983, 1986, 1989).

Rorty's thought resonates with Chance's complex set of conversational narrators, who dramatize the various levels of communal and individual identity through the blending of their voices with one another and also at times other sources for their

narratives. Consequently, the interpretation of *Chance* in light of the Rortyan notions of final vocabulary and ethnocentrism is productive, particularly in examining the way that the "polyphonic" Marlow (Simmons 2006: 181), like "persons and cultures" for Rorty, is an "incarnated" vocabulary (1989: 80), engaged in a conversation whose terms are defined by community. Rorty's work, like *Chance*, places conversation into the realm of writing and reading, emphasising that contrary to Socrates' assertion that writing is static (Plato 1986: 123-24), a dynamic exchange of meaning necessarily occurs when we create a new narrative from previous accounts or read an existing text from a new perspective.

Chance paints this sense of contingency with finer detail than Rorty's broad philosophical brush strokes can achieve: its framing of self and community within particular conversations and communities enables Conrad to draw distinctions inaccessible to Rorty's philosophical generalization. While Rorty's method is literary in the sense that he uses his philosophical forebears (including Harold Bloom) as characters in his story, Rorty's sense of community is often ambiguous. This leads to the kind of criticism made by Clifford Geertz, who argues that Rorty's ethnocentrism is culturally isolationist. *Chance* presents a subtle exploration of communities founded on the boundaries of conversation, bringing to Rorty's thought Conrad's enhanced sense of the modalities of individual and communal identity.

Fluid Identities: Marlow's Narrative as Redescription

Chance explores the various contingencies that shape textual production and interpretation; the problematic dynamic of authorial intention and reader response is played out in the conversation between narrators and also in Marlow's compromised control of the narrative. He can be seen to author the text in two ways: by controlling the tale's telling and also by intervening at essential points in the story itself, shaping important moments and decisively influencing formative events to alter characters' conceptions of themselves and others.

Ironically however, as a result of the frame narrative, Marlow's narrative itself is both *histoire* and *discours*, and his own voice must be excavated from beneath a level of mediation. This is compounded by the fact that most of the narrative is second hand. Much of the novel consists of Marlow's reconstruction of events; and the second half is almost entirely Powell's, mediated through the two other main narrators.¹ At the level of story, Marlow redescribes the characters he interacts with by providing them with formative interpretations of situation and action that change their stories about themselves and others; at the level of narrative, he writes the story in his representations of these characters and events and his commentary on them. Yet as a character who is himself narrated, Marlow is written by the frame

narrator, who through his exclamatory interventions changes the nature of the text that Marlow has inscribed. Yet the process of writing moves in both directions: Marlow reconstructs events from other characters' accounts, so in a sense, they also "write" him. Their words are inscribed on him, creating a text that plays out the conversational dynamics of narrative and responses that are intrinsic to every act of reading.

Marlow's writing of the other characters can be seen in his interaction with Flora and Fyne. His description of Flora's contemplated suicide at the quarry is an important dramatization of interpretation: Marlow asserts that he saved Flora, that his shout "checked" her; but she shakes her head, contesting his interpretation. For Marlow this is a denial of suicidal intent: "She wants to forget now É to persuade herself that she had never known such an ugly and poignant minute in her life" (201). But later in the chapter, Flora reveals that although "it seemed absurd É It was the Fyne dog" that saved her. She "imagined the dog had become extremely attached to her. She took it into her head that he might fall over or jump down after her" (202). It does seem absurd, and because Marlow has already suggested the interpretation of denial, of the desire "to forget" through self-persuasion, we struggle to accept this unlikely explanation, which seems inconsistent with the sense we have of Flora as almost nihilistic thus far in the novel. Furthermore, on the next page the narrative contradicts her explanation. Marlow describes her telling him, "with simplicity," imagining "herself gone and the creature sitting on the brink, its head thrown up to the sky and howling for hours. This thought was not to be borne." Crucially, Marlow's shout "destroyed her poise -

the suicide poise of her mind" (203). This is inconsistent because "thought É not to be borne" has become the dog's inconsolable grief at her death rather than his co-suicide, and Marlow's voice is the decisive factor that "destroyed her poise." The "simplicity" of Flora's interpretation becomes her selection of a single factor of the many that influenced her choice not to jump: she has a simplistic view of her motivation and the factors that shape agency.

Later it is ironic that Marlow appears to accept her description: "Fyne's dog who had saved Flora de Barral's life is the last dog-friend" he had (258), but doubly ironic, because beneath the layers of humour it is unclear as to whether Marlow does really believe Flora's version: the playfulness of "dog-friend" undermines the sincerity of "who had saved Flora de Barral's life," in a narrative where Marlow's sincerity is often called into question.² He offers no clear comment: the accusation of "simplicity" and assertion of the tale's absurdity are all we have to go on. Crucially, however, it is his "voice" that destroyed her poise, as it is his voice now that describes events so ambiguously, denying us a definitive understanding of Flora's decision not to kill herself. This leaves us with the sense of events as dependent upon a web of

contingencies that can never be fully untangled. Flora's identity fractures into a number of contradictory, internally coherent, selves, and even that Marlow chanced upon Flora when he did is simply one of many factors upon which events depend.

A Dark Inscrutable Spot: Conversation as Confabulation

Chance is a key factor in the novel, emphasized by the fact that Powell shares his surname with the shipping officer who helps him to his first commission: the starting-point for one of the plot's main strands. That names, with their connection to identity, are important is indicative of the novel's concerns, and the interplay of chance and design (at the level of story and narrative, respectively) here is emblematic of the whole. Two Powells is a coincidence at the level of story, but not at the level of plot. This strains verisimilitude and begs the question: Why include the story of "Young Powell and his chance" at all?³ There are more than enough further coincidences in the story to sustain Marlow's thesis that chance is the ultimate cause (99-100). Yet Conrad chooses to strain credulity further with the inclusion of another, unacknowledged, coincidence of moniker: the narrator Powell shares his forename with Marlow (in a neat inter-narrative gesture, one must go to "Heart of Darkness"⁴ to discover this).

The presence of these threats to Chance's credibility signals the constructed and the narrative's intertextual nature. This could be read as a typical Modernist code aimed at the enlightened audience, playing into the tension characteristic in Conrad between the perceived needs of the popular and literary. Alternatively, we can see it as pedagogic and dialogic. Socrates' appearance early on in the older Powell's features is already an indication that Chance's ironies might contain this intention, and spotting the novel's explicit coincidences of moniker does not require a heightened literary sensitivity. Alongside Marlow's clumsy philosophical interjections on the titular theme, the inclusion of coincidences at the level of story that are clearly articulated choices at the level of discourse is an invitation to engage not only with the wider philosophical speculation, but also with notions of contingency and design in narrative itself.

Further invitation to consider the constructed nature of the narrative arrives in the form of Marlow's explicit invention of important sections:

Dark and, so to speak, inscrutable spaces being met with in life, there must be such places in any statement dealing with life. In what I am telling you now É this evening confabulation is a dark, inscrutable spot. And we may conjecture what we

like. I have no difficulty in imagining that the woman--of forty, and the chief of the enterprise must have raged at large. And perhaps the other did not rage enough. Youth feels deeply it is true, but it has not the same vivid sense of lost opportunities.

(101)

Inscrutability gives license to "conjecture what we like," but ironically, what Marlow characterizes as the free play of his fancy strikes his conversational partner "by the absolute verisimilitude of this suggestion." That this procedure is characterized as "confabulation" is felicitous, for it is both a "familiar talk or conversation" and the fabrication of "imaginary experiences as compensation for [the narrative's] loss of memory."⁵ The choice of word is appropriate also owing to its etymological roots in *f?bula*, which translates as "discourse" before "narrative, story, dramatic composition, the plot of a play, a fable" (OED 2011).⁶ Confabulation thus becomes the construction of narrative, story, the limits of truth, and its verisimilitude - at once both the sign of its fiction and the "absolute" inescapability of its truth, because in this "dark É inscrutable space," the degree to which something is convincing is the limit of its truth. This is a communal process - one that happens between narrators - within a bounded community, which excludes the "shore gang" Powell disparages (4). The telling of the tale by Marlow and its reception and judgment by the narrator, and subsequent retelling, gives this "imagining" its authority. Con-fabulation is dependent upon there being an audience to judge and crucially to retell, a dynamic played out throughout the narrative, which sees experiences multiply through various levels of narration, response and judgment before reaching the final unnamed narrator, who through his very lack of explicit identity bridges the gap to the reader. Furthermore, Marlow's imagining blurs the boundary between heterodiegetic narrator, who purportedly reports and interprets events, and author who actively creates them.É

Narrative elicits judgement. In *Chance*, this is augmented by the narrators' own explicit requests, and as observed by Robert Hampson (1996: 143), the novel's reliance on the tropes of detective fiction - it is a "rational linking up of characters and facts" (310). Yet although *Chance* is "explicitly constructed as a series of mysteries: Ôthe affair of the purloined brother, ' Ôthe mystery of the vanishing Powell,' and the Ôpsychological cabin mystery of discomfort'" (Hampson 1996: 143), Marlow's imaginings undermine any sense of an authoritative investigation. Clive Bloom claims that detective fiction is "the only fiction that insists it is dealing with facts" (1988: 14), yet *Chance* undermines this. Furthermore, while detective fiction typically shores up the existing social order, demonstrating "the power of the rational individual to protect us from semiotic and moral chaos" (Kayman 2003: 43), in *Chance* the opposite is true. Interpretations multiply and refuse to cohere, and the

preservation of social order is dependent upon chance and deception: Powell's discovery of de Barral's attempt at poisoning Captain Anthony depends upon "the precise workmanship of chance, fate, providence, call it what you will" (411), and Flora and Captain Anthony's final reconciliation is undermined by his concealment from Flora of the cause of her father's death (435). We are not offered any overarching cause of events: instead Marlow tells his listener: "call it what you will," encouraging us to project our own schema.

We are prompted to name the force at work, but our ability to choose is ironized. Marlow's tone is dismissive; "it" is decisively singular; and his position on the subject is made clear throughout the rest of the novel: chance is the determining factor. Yet we are invited to disagree, and the extent to which Marlow is ironized is also the extent to which our disagreement is given voice. His position is an expression of his ethnos and his ironization strategically opens channels of conversation and debate that would remain closed if he were a more authoritative narrator.

We are invited to judge the ability of both Marlow and his co-narrators to depict the truth. When Powell tells us the story of his first "Chance", the frame narrator feels he must "render the man the justice that he conveyed very well to us the sense of his youthful hopelessness" (9). This anticipates the "justice" of de Barral's trial, which is also judged (as wanting) on aesthetic grounds: "A dull affair. All such cases were dull. No really dramatic moments. The book-keeping and all the rest of them was certainly a burlesque revelation. Dull dog that de Barral--he grumbled" (86). Truth becomes enmeshed with the aesthetic and structural qualities of narrative, where engagement and plausibility are the criteria of judgement. Although this is naturally the case in our engagement with any fictional narrative, owing to the multiple levels of narration, in *Chance* this becomes the case within the story itself. Its characters inhabit a world without direct access to reality: "it is precisely the problematic status of 'actuality' that is the ground for this narrative" (Hampson 1996: 142). The characters consequently fall back on aesthetic and structural criteria of judgement in a world shaped by the affective power of utterance - as evidenced by de Barral's potent "magic word Thrift, Thrift, Thrift" (78). Later, Marlow is profoundly aware of "the might of suggestion" - he tells us that, "we live at the mercy of a malevolent word. A sound, a mere disturbance of the air, sinks into our very soul sometimes" (264), and in this case, the governess's assertion that Flora is "in some mysterious way odious and unlovable" (263) reverberates through the novel and shapes the whole development of Flora's dysfunctional relationship with Captain Anthony.

The way in which words become inscribed on our identities can itself be "burlesque." Burlesque is a recurrent term in Conrad, defined in Lord Jim as "a degradation of funny grimaces" (84), which succinctly indicates the qualities of play, parody, and performance which Conradian burlesque evokes. Thus in Flora's case,

words rarely have their intended impact. Her sense of her own unlovable nature is grotesque and parodic: the governess's words engender Flora who, because of her own insecurities, risks making herself unlovable: she certainly appears so to Marlow on initial meetings and does much to threaten Captain Anthony's love for her. Marlow's representation of Flora is also burlesque. Viewed through the lens of misogyny and his partially erotic attraction to her, what we see of Flora must be a parody or distortion; and Marlow's desire to understand her contains elements of striptease and objectification. Yet the fondness associated with parody is also an essential element of this dynamic, unlike the caricature of the governess's criticism we see in Flora's later actions towards Captain Anthony. Marlow and Flora connect in a way that she and the governess do not, and their interaction moves in both directions.

Thus *Chance* demonstrates the conversational nature of identity in a Rortyan fashion. Its narrative and generic exchanges mirror the dynamic and ongoing dialogue that constitutes our self. It demonstrates the power of redescription, both as a positive process and as an imposition that can be cruel (Rorty 1989: 90). Crucially, this conversation is also a confabulation: it is a process of imagining in a dark, inscrutable spot where the penetrating lights of external reality and reason are dimmed. This is the space, bordering the unconscious, where memories hide and whisper to our conscious minds, and thus the conversation is likewise with those other selves that Rorty places in the unconscious.

But *Chance* also demonstrates how this conversational self is continuous with a community contingent upon time and place - in particular, through the apparently closed narrative circle of sailors who spin the tale. As we shall see, this community is bounded but porous and sounds an additional Rortyan note, which harmonizes with the novel's engagement with women. The exclusively male fellowship of the sea is invaded - much to the chagrin of some of its members - by a woman, but crucially, a Rortyan enlargement of vocabulary allows the misogynistic Marlow to engage with Flora, dramatizing the possibility of conversation across communal boundaries.

Shifting Tides: The Contingency of Community

Contingency of Rortyan ethnos is apparent throughout *Chance* in the narrative exchanges between Powell, Marlow and the frame narrator. They are members of a specific community: sailors, defined in opposition to the "shore gang" (4). This

community is exclusive - as demonstrated by the contrast between Franklin's response to Powell and the de Barrals arriving on the *Ferndale*: for Powell, "settling down was made easy," as Franklin is "tactfully ready to take his competency for granted" (286); whereas Franklin's displeasure at being evicted from the saloon is focused on "that woman," while Captain Anthony remains not "a man to be found fault with" (287), despite it being his decision to exclude the officers. Furthermore at the beginning of the novel, determining Powell's credentials as a "sailor as well as a yachtsman" is the frame narrator's prime concern, achieved when "he addressed the waiter sharply as *Ôsteward*" (3). Appropriately, this shared idiosyncrasy of vocabulary permits recognition and initiates the conversation, which rapidly establishes a distinction between sailors and "people ashore" on grounds of work ethic: "No one seemed to take any proper pride in his work" (4). Furthermore, Marlow and Powell get "quickly in touch" because Marlow also "in his time had followed the sea" (4).

However, in the novel's serial version, the frame narrator is not a sailor but a writer (Jones 2007: 107); and this sense that he is an outsider is maintained in the 1913 version by his position as an observer in the conversation between Marlow and Powell. He defers to their seniority, and we only discover that he is also a sailor of some experience when much later, he informs Marlow that he was "away in the Indian Seas" (69). That the fellowship of the sea is explicitly hierarchical is important because it establishes levels of belonging dependent upon context. Powell on the *Ferndale* does not belong to the same degree as the other sailors, owing to his lack of time spent on the ship. He later further undermines this through his refusal to join the community of dissenters against the de Barrals, yet unlike them he is never fully excluded.

The frame narrator's relationship with his "host and skipper" (3) is hierarchical but also informal and friendly. This familiarity allows them to be always "tilting at each other" (102). In particular, the frame narrator's "chivalrous" (53) nature leads him to joust with Marlow over the question of women, but the results of their disagreements are inconclusive, ending typically in digression or ironic dismissal by Marlow. We are never given the satisfaction of a clear conclusion: the novel refuses to ratify either's point of view. This impasse highlights the limits of their conversational compatibility: shared fellowship of the sea provides the grounds for conversation, the context in which they typically interact, and the basis of their friendship and mutual respect, but their differing attitude towards women, although similarly patriarchal, does not allow them "fruitful conversation" on this issue.

If difference operates within this community, the fellowship of the sea itself also has unclear boundaries. The extent to which any of the narrators is of the sea is questionable: they have a shared history, but also occupy a liminal space at "the

mouth of the Thames" (3); Marlow and Powell are both described as "retired from the sea" (4, 33), Marlow in "a sort of half-hearted fashion" (33); and when Marlow solves "the mystery of the vanishing Powell," we discover that he would sail into the "narrow tidal creeks on the Essex shore" (258). Tidal waterways vary in salinity depending on the ebb and flow of ocean tides, forming a strange and shifting border between land and sea; often they dry up at low tide. This enhances the sense that Powell is between worlds. Furthermore, Flora resides in a village in the adjacent marshes, whose terrain further compounds the sense of being between land and water.

These fluid boundaries are repeated in the community of sailors the sea represents; and like the tide, movement occurs in two directions. For while Marlow and Powell do approach land, Flora goes to sea metaphorically and literally, and joins their fellowship through a more profound means than merely by marrying Captain Anthony - indeed, marriage only provides partial entrance into this male community: the best captains' wives are "a nuisance" (31). Marlow begins to soften towards Flora when he encounters her in "On The Pavement." He sees in her eyes "an expression of dreamy, unfathomable candour," elucidating: "I have seen the sea wear such an expression on one or two occasions shortly before sunrise on a calm, fresh day" (234). Her unfathomability is important, a quality that Captain Anthony also evokes when he bids her trust herself to him and "to the sea - which is deep like your eyes" (227). The extent to which their similar imagery indicates a shared infatuation is unclear, yet for Captain Anthony's simile to be reproduced so rapidly by Marlow is a highly suggestive transfer of vocabulary. But it is at the close of the novel, when Flora herself invokes the sea, that we see the final softening of Marlow's attitude. She says to him:

The most familiar things appeared lighted up in with a new light, clothed with a loveliness I had never suspected. The sea itself! . . . You are a sailor. You have lived your life on it. But do you know how beautiful it is, how strong, how charming, how friendly, how mighty . . .'

"I listened amazed and touched. She was silent only a little while.

(444-45)

Flora appeals to him as a sailor (in the present tense) but in a diction reminiscent of Marlow and his fellow narrators. She is speaking their language, and, without a hint of irony or misogyny, Marlow is "amazed and touched." Typically, the precise nature

of the sea is mystical and unclear. What is apparent is that it has performed a redemptive and validating function, giving Flora a new and positive perspective on life. Her appeal to the sea as a metaphor is also typical in another fashion. Whether it is perilous (4) or a refuge (365), inconstant (288) or unchanging (292), the sea is consistently evoked as a symbol of difference. Even when it defines the fellowship between sailors, it is in opposition to "the shore gang." In Flora's case, however, it casts the familiar in a new light, changing her fundamental view of the world, and as such is analogous to the reformulations of existing ideas and identities which constitute Rortyian redescription.

Light on the Water: Femininity and the Enlargement of Ethnos

Marlow's journey inland to find Powell mirrors his journey in a former life to reach Kurtz, but he also discovers Flora. His attempts to understand her are as unsuccessful as they were with Kurtz, but have a different emotional resonance. Flora's is the most important of the voices which speak through Marlow in *Chance*. Gail Fraser suggests he "mediates between Flora's perspective as an outsider, and 'society's 'safe, established' point of view" (1992: 83), and argues that the novel constitutes a "realistic attempt to explore the feminine perspective" (1992: 88).

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out, however, attempts to retrieve the feminine by "perceiving of the subaltern as a 'sovereign subject' in control of 'her own consciousness, and assuming that the intellectual is a transparent medium through which subaltern consciousness can be made present ' will continue to keep the subaltern as female entirely muted" (McLeod 2010: 219-20). Although the class terms "intellectual" and "subaltern" do not map perfectly onto the male author or narrator trying to speak for Western women, the issue at the heart of Spivak's concern is still relevant. The categories are analogous owing to the parallel relationship in terms of power. It is risky to argue that *Chance* successfully mediates "the feminine perspective" (as if there were only one) when it is so dominated by masculine voices. This is compounded by Marlow's often misogynistic voice, which is dominant amongst the male narrators. As Susan Jones demonstrates, Marlow's mediation does not succeed in representing the feminine (1999: 103). Although Marlow purports to know what femininity and masculinity are, and characterizes Flora and Fyne as "thoroughly feminine" (310) and "purely masculine" (146), respectively, his "polyphonic" voice "destabilizes the oppositions and sympathies that are set up in the narrative" (Simmons 2006: 181). Rather than speaking for women, Jones argues that "Conrad's scepticism appears in his ironic questioning of the narrators' attempts to 'know' the woman, and impose a fixed role on the heroine according to traditional generic requirements" (103).

Generic roles are complicated in *Chance* by its hybridity of genre. Flora's role, for example, shifts throughout the narrative. At times she is cast as the thief in the "affair of the purloined brother" (148), or as the "Damsel" (1) to Anthony's "Knight" (255) of chivalric romance. Jones states that the removal of Marlow's commentary Conrad made in preparing the book version transforms Flora from a more conventionally innocent heroine into a "psychologically damaged woman, who, through experiences of abandonment and betrayal feels both unloved and incapable of expressing love" (2007: 110). This more complex Flora is thrown into further relief by the clash of generic contexts, which destabilizes meaning even on the level of individual words themselves, reminding us of Rorty's contingency of language: what is meant by the "affair of the purloined lover" shifts depending on which generic context we place it in, yet both meanings are appropriate.

The narrative, however, moves beyond ambiguity in this case, adopting a strategy similar to Spivak's own, by marking Marlow's "positionality as investigating subject" (1988: 296). It is crucial that Marlow is never trying to speak for Flora (although the tension in the two senses of representation highlighted by Spivak is still at work here). Every time we encounter the words "feminine," "femininity," or "feminism" in his narrative, their use is mired in negativity. Even what appears at first glance to be a telling exception, when Mrs Fyne recognizes "that small portion of 'femininity,' that drop of superior essence" in him, which he links to "sagacity" (146), is turned on its head. Marlow deliberately frustrates her, and declares in a misogynistic turn: "it's towards women that I feel vindictive mostly" (150). It becomes unclear whether he ever means the compliment - in characterizing femininity as a "superior essence," is Marlow simply sarcastically ventriloquizing Mrs Fyne's own prejudices? Crucially, the narrator also repeatedly questions Marlow's sexism, preventing us from reading the text as unambiguously misogynistic. The narrator, however, is problematic in his own right: his grounds for the defence of women are themselves positioned, this time by Marlow, as "chivalrous"; and thus he places women in an alternative patriarchal system, which limits their role to victim and passive inspiration even as it elevates them.

Although Marlow himself is aware of these "hackneyed illusions, without which the average male creature cannot get on" (86), as Jones argues, Flora becomes a "text", the location of endless interpretations of the "damsel's part" (1999: 160). Yet Flora herself is one of the interpreters. The novel's close enables her redescription - "most familiar things appeared lighted up in with a new light" (444) - creating a new connection with Marlow that leaves him speechless, "amazed and touched." Their bond through the sea is an enlargement that gains Flora access to male fellowship, but it is crucial that she undergo redescription, defining herself in relation to the preoccupations of the male fellowship of the sea, to achieve Marlow's acceptance. Jones's perspective that Flora is constrained within patriarchal definitions stands, but the female protagonist's co-option of the masculinist rhetoric

of the sea mirrors the emancipatory adoption, which Jones observes (1999: 159), by contemporary suffragettes of chivalric tropes undermined by the novel itself.

For the narrative as a whole, the metaphor of the sea has been enlarged to resonate with the experiences of a woman, ironizing the previously masculine fellowship, but simultaneously connecting to it in a sense meaningful to both parties. Tellingly, it renders Marlow speechless. Flora is in control of the dialogue at this point: the silence that interrupts her reverie gives Marlow the perfect opportunity to respond and yet he allows her to continue, only speaking on her invitation: "You like him -don't you?" (445). Narratorial comment in the remaining pages of the novel is uncharacteristically infrequent: they consist almost entirely of dialogue. Marlow seems cowed, and the closing lines in response to his interlocutor's "sarcastic" grin, take the form of a partial retraction, almost apologetic in tone: "Hang it all, for all my belief in Chance, I am not exactly a pagan. . . ." (447).

The end of *Chance*, however, falls short of the naïve suggestion that Flora has broken free of constraints on women. In Marlow's only comment: "in the very voice of the Flora of old days, showing the old mistrust, the old doubt of herself, the old scar of the blow received in childhood, pathetic and funny, she murmured, "Do you think it possible that he should care for me?" (446). It is ironic that the old Flora returns as the conversation turns to marriage and that she should feel the need to appeal to Marlow for an answer. It is clear that personal redescription is itself contingent.

It is also ironic that Flora is in some ways a redescription or confabulation upon Conrad's own earlier work. Most clearly, she echoes Conrad's earlier tragic heroine from *The Secret Agent*, Winnie Verloc, who also breaks free from patriarchal constraints to murder her husband. Yet unlike Flora, Winnie successfully kills herself at the end of *The Secret Agent*, although the narrative of her death is like Flora's, deferred and mediated through masculine voices. Significantly, Winnie's death is not witnessed—there is no Marlow to check her—and the only trace she leaves is her wedding ring, a symbol of the marriage that she has escaped, which ironically comes to represent her. This intertextual focus on the bonds of marriage is enhanced by the relationship between the novel and serial versions of *Chance*. Susan Jones considers this in detail in "Modernism and the Marketplace: The Case of Conrad's *Chance*". The key point that emerges from her argument is the way in which Conrad's revisions and particularly omissions refocus the novel, shifting attention from its self-conscious textuality to "a political discussion about feminism" (2007: 108).

This shift of focus foregrounds Marlow's role in mediating Flora, and although Marlow is not a transparent medium for the representation of Flora, what we do see over the course of the novel is a Rortyan enlargement of sympathy (Rorty 1986:

526). As Fraser observes, Flora begins the narrative as "one of them" (43) but comes to be regarded with an "insider's sympathetic intuition" (1992: 87-88). Fraser does not expand, however, on the intertextual significance of the phrase "one of them," when it is considered in the light of Marlow's repeated assertion, in *Lord Jim*, that the titular character is "one of us." Jim creates a problem of identity for Marlow who struggles to reconcile the Jim who is clearly part of Marlow's moral community and embodies so many of its positive virtues with Jim's actions. Furthermore, Flora's attempted suicide recalls Jim's own death and also his life-preserving leap from the Patna, which ironically destroys his sense of his life's direction. With further irony, the only time Marlow uses the phrase "one of us" in *Chance* is to describe himself and Flora (211) in the chapter "On the Pavement", which itself is the focus of Fraser's examination of Marlow's "sympathetic intuition."

Yet this clash between the communities evoked by Marlow's "us" reminds us of the problematic nature of the sailing fraternity discussed earlier—both in terms of its hierarchy and fragmentation into atomised ship-based fellowships, such as that on the *Ferndale* to which Powell fails to gain entry. It is appropriate that this is yet another site of the novel version's confabulation, its inconsistent recollection of its serial past. Specifically, its omission of the original's didactic valorisation of life at sea (Jones 2007: 109) is only barely remembered in the opening page of the novel, when Powell criticised the "slovenly manner" of landsmen (3).

We return again to the contingent nature of the fellowship of the sea, bracketed by the intertextuality of the novel's characters. If Flora is a text subjected to constant interpretation, so are all the novel's characters, whose voices blend, creating a series of identities dependent upon one another and the words and languages they speak. Rorty's definition of *ethnos* is played out in the dynamics of *Chance*'s narrative conversations. Despite its scepticism and ironies, the novel mirrors Rorty's hopefulness: fruitful conversation is not out of reach, and although Flora remains bound within the frame of a patriarchal world, we see significant shifts in its composition. The novel ends with the suggestion of her impending union with Powell, suggesting an answer to Marlow's question as to whether her story is a "farce" or "tragedy" (55). Although he soon decides that it is neither, at the end of the novel we are reminded of his confusion, recalling Byron's ironic distinction in *Don Juan*: "All tragedies are finished by a death, / All comedies are ended by a marriage" (1973: 159). *Chance* ends with Marlow's anticipation of Flora's impending marriage to Powell, but this news follows the revelation of Anthony's death. And, of course, the novel's climax involves the death of Flora's father. Furthermore, Flora's marriage to Powell is a second marriage, the consummation of a hidden love that germinated when Flora was still married to Anthony. It thus undermines the sense of comic closure to which it also contributes. Like Byron's refrain, the end of *Chance* is deeply ironic. Indeed, one can easily imagine Marlow agreeing with Byron's negative portrayal of marriage, which itself plays on the boundaries between genre and

reality, on a slippage between our knowledge of comedy's generic conventions and a cynical portrayal of the humourless nature of wedlock.

The novel is alive to the potential cruelty of comedy: alongside constraints on women, we also see burlesque - the power of redescription to hurt and objectify. That this is most clearly expressed by the governess's intervention in Flora's character suggests rightly that this is not solely a matter of societal and generic constraints on identity (although these are immense), but also a matter of individual responsibility. Yet personal factors are themselves contingent on societal constraints: the governess's actions are directly related to her position in a patriarchal society. What must be acknowledged, however, is that in the figure of Flora we find a woman similarly constrained who does not then victimise others, and thus the governess's behaviour cannot be excused on the grounds that she is oppressed.

Chance goes beyond a simple exploration of the nature of authorship and textuality towards an engagement with wider notions of identity and its relationship to narrative. For Rorty, "Historical narratives about social and intellectual movements are the best tools to use in tinkering with ourselves, for such narratives suggest vocabularies of moral deliberation in which to spin coherent narratives about our individual lives" (1991: 163). Conrad's redescription of feminism and "discussion of the question of 'being' a woman" (Jones 1999: 161) is situated alongside his engagement with authorship in a wider discussion of the question of being in a community. The male characters are similarly circumscribed by roles that define and limit them but that ultimately cannot fully confine their individuality. The novel's implicit attention to the "relationship between gender and genre" (Ibid.) is part of its engagement with text and identity. The constraints that genre place on text are analogous to those that society places on the individual and the way in which individual texts rework conventions mirrors the redescription of norms that are continually inscribed on our identities.

Examining the narrative of *Chance* in light of Rortyan notions of conversation supports an expansion of Rorty's metaphor of self as story, showing how parallels in genre and intertextuality shed light on the contingency of self and community that underpin his thinking. Whether cast as conversation, redescription, or confabulation, these are communal behaviours, contingent on the shared language in which we imagine them. *Chance* reminds us that perfect reconstruction is impossible, that imagination is inescapable, and that we use an inherited language that bears the traces of past confabulations. It is alive to the gradualism that attendance to contingency necessitates. But it also communicates a sense that the language in

which we create these reconstructions simultaneously defines the audience to whom we can speak.

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1 For a detailed expansion of these themes, see Paul Wake's essay on *Chance* (2007).

2 A telling example arises in the context of Marlow's views on women, when the narrator, shocked at a sexist remark, exclaims:

"Do you really believe what you have said?" I asked, meaning no offence, because with Marlow one never could be sure.

"Only on certain days of the year," said Marlow readily with a malicious smile.
(94)

3 One answer to this question is that Powell's story is left over from Conrad's plans for the original short story that was the basis for the novel. Susan Jones gives a detailed account of the transformations Conrad's work underwent, from its earliest incarnation in his unwritten story 'Dynamite,' via the serial version, and to the novel version of 1914 (1999: 138).

4 Pertinently, it is at one of the few points in "Heart of Darkness" where women are present that Marlow's given name appears.

5 See Oxford English Dictionary (2011b). Although the second sense was not in use until 1924, it can be usefully inform the text, paralleling the overall reading here in light of more recent theoretical notions of self and narrative.

6 Taking Todorov's sense of *f?bula* into account, *Chance's* deconstruction of the distinction between narrative and event is mirrored in its heterogeneous definition. In the conversation about the novel's events, which is in itself a series of events in the narrative, narrative and event, *histoire* and *discours* are elided.
