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READING JOSEPH CONRAD: RHETORICAL AESTHETICS/AESTHETIC RHETORICS

The evocative capacity of words whether spoken or written—that is, the *power* of words to make of audiences *spectators* of and *participants* in the materiality of the world—is something at which Joseph Conrad excels. This is particularly apparent in the openings of his stories and novels, where he is staging a scene of telling or a scene of action (e.g., *Heart of Darkness* in the former instance and *Almayer's Folly* in the latter). As a student of rhetoric, my engagement with art has always had a rhetorical aspect to it, though not so much in the suasive sense of Aristotelean instrumental rhetoric.¹ While there is always an element of suasion on both sides of the production-reception couple through which we experience art, my particular interest in the field of rhetoric centers on audience reception of evocative discourse. Aristotle calls attention to this evocative power in his *Art of Rhetoric*, particularly in Book III where he introduces and expands upon the idea of *bringing-before-the-eyes* of an audience: “I mean that things are set before the eyes by words that signify activity.”² I suggest that this might be better interpreted as setting the action, and characters, of interest before-the-senses of the audience, recognizing that our perceptual awareness of activity or persons is not limited to our visual capabilities. Conrad makes this explicitly clear in the Preface to his novel, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*: “My task which I am trying to

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¹ Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1926), 15. Also, Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese, rev. Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 15. The translations are essentially similar but the latter makes more clear the propositional character of Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric and explicitly connects it to ‘seeing’ the available means of persuasion.

² Aristotle (2020), *Rhetoric*, 405.

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*.”³

The sensory appeals—to hearing, feeling, and seeing—in this statement of artistic purpose have attracted a great deal of critical attention; but, most critical capital has been coined about Conrad’s intended meaning for ‘see’, particularly in light of the way he (typo)graphically emphasized it in the text. After taking note of and citing this phrase from Conrad’s Preface, Ian Watt observed, “The force of the word ‘make’ is worth noting; one of the characteristics of Conrad’s fiction is the sense we get of a steady narrative pressure to make us look at the situation from a particular point of view.”⁴ And it is here that Watt draws on what he calls “the cumulated connotations of the word ‘see’” to suggest the play available in a many layered meaning.⁵ This certainly includes sight as perception but not simply of the visual; it also includes the grasping of ‘ideas’, of memory material and mental processing working together with sensory information to enable one to ‘see the point.’ It involves the phenomena of experiencing both the visualizing and the visualized scene as brought-before-the-senses of readers through Conrad’s art.

What is it about Conrad’s writing that it ‘works’ to ‘make’ readers hear, feel, and see? Consider, briefly, the opening lines of Conrad’s short story, “The Secret Sharer.” With the first words of the story, “On my right hand [...],” whether readers physically move to look to their right, or *feel* as though they do so, Conrad prompts a particular bodily orientation, a turning to ‘the right’, in order that the reader observe through and with the narrator.⁶ At the suggestion that there is something off to one’s right worth noting or observing, there is a perlocutionary affect-effect couple that produces a ‘sensation’ of and demands such a turning. And, the idea of movement is invoked again with the beginning of the next sentence: “To the left [...].” Here, the subliminal instruction to turn to the other side of one’s body to look at what Conrad describes is more insistent. But, with

³ Joseph Conrad, “Conrad’s ‘Preface,’” in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, ed. Cedric Watts (London: Penguin Books, 1989), xlix. Italics in the original. The Preface was originally cut from the initial publication of the novel and was later reprinted multiple times variously as “The Art of Fiction,” “His Literary Creed,” “Fiction as an Art,” or “The Task of the Artist” (see the website *Conrad First: The Joseph Conrad Periodical Archive* at <http://www.conradfirst.net/view/volume-id=23.html>).

⁴ Ian Watt, “Conrad’s Preface to ‘The Nigger of the “Narcissus”,’” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7 (1974): 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer,” in *The Secret Sharer*, ed. Daniel R. Schwarz (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1997), 24. All subsequent citations in this paragraph are from the opening paragraph of this edition of “The Secret Sharer,” pages 24 and 25.

the third sentence, “And when I turned my head [...],” bodily motion is literally invoked and—whether or not it is a consequence of what neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese calls mirror mechanisms, a key component in his theory of embodied simulation—some readers now feel compelled to ‘turn’ and look for the departing tugboat.⁷ Then comes the moving of the eyes to scan the horizon: “Here and there gleams as of a few scattered pieces of silver [...],” and “My eye followed the light cloud of her smoke [...].” This produces an effect not unlike that experienced by the reader at the opening of *Heart of Darkness* in which the reader can feel their eyes reacting as the frame narrator describes the scene of narration. It is likely here that neuroaestheticians would suggest that the act of visualization, of image-making, is a multi-modal perception that supports situating us ‘in’ the spaces imagined.⁸

My thoughts about the aesthetic affects and effects of reading Conrad considered here emerge from the intersection of what I am characterizing as rhetorical aesthetics, or attending to the ways language can evoke and induce sensations, feelings, and affects, and aesthetic rhetorics, that is, the way our sensations, feelings, and affects can serve as a kind of suasive discourse that moves us. It is in the space between these two perspectives that I experience the artistic affects of my response to the opening words of Conrad’s works. In this brief look at Conrad’s art, I am not trying to forward any special theory of the aesthetic appreciation of literature. Nor am I consciously working with, or performing, reader-response criticism, though I can see how it might appear that way. Rather, I set out to describe, comment on, and perhaps extend some personal observations about the phenomenology of reading descriptions, in general, and experiencing the art through which Conrad *immerses* his reader in a scene.

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⁷ Vittorio Gallese, “Visions of the body. Embodied simulation and aesthetic experience,” *Aisthesis* 10 (2017): 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

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