Marlow’s Autobiografiction: Revisiting Joseph Conrad’s *Porte Parole*

Przemyslaw Pozar
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Supervisor: Irina Rasmussen
Goloubeva
Abstract

The role of Charles Marlow has often been misinterpreted in terms of its relation to Joseph Conrad’s life. Previous research rendered this connection misleading and schematic. Bearing in mind the impressionistic qualities of Marlow’s narrative, the aim of this essay is to prove that Marlow’s stories in *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* are self-reflective, which means that they possess an autobiographical quality. To provide reference I will bring in recent a discussion on modernists’ autobiographies by Max Saunders. Contributing to the dispute on life-writing between 1870 and 1930, Saunders argues that the autobiographies of Conrad, Ford, James and others can be read as part of their fictional oeuvre. This argument provides the theoretical background for reading Marlow’s stories as autobiographical or, as proposed by Saunders, *autobiografictional*, which points to the malleability of the genre of autobiography. Furthermore, I will use the work of John G. Peters concerned with literary impressionism and self-reflectiveness in order to widen the scope of my analysis. The main purpose of such interpretation is to elevate Marlow’s role as a self-reflective character whose narrative shares the impressionistic qualities of self-reflectiveness, thus enabling for an analysis that pertains to Saunders’ *autobiografiction*.

**Keywords:** autobiography (autobiografiction), Charles Marlow, Max Saunders, literary impressionism, self-reflectiveness
Trying to find biographical traces of Joseph Conrad in his novels, many investigators turned their analyses towards exploring Conrad’s experimental porte parole—Charles Marlow. According to Zdzisław Najder, Marlow is a personal narrator whose function has been often misinterpreted “in terms of the author ‘distancing’ himself from the narrative point of view, or ‘placing a screen’ (in form of a teller) between himself and the written text” (24). Present in several of Conrad’s novels, Marlow, especially in Lord Jim (1900), possesses as Sally Feldman claims in her thesis, “a more complicat- ed and subtle function than he had hitherto attempted” (38). It is not until the end of the fourth chapter of that novel that Marlow takes over the storytelling duty from the omniscient narrator; from then on, the reader is presented preponderantly with Mar- low’s point of view. Marlow’s perspective dominates the narration and often leads the reader towards some interesting ambiguities. Drawing on the aesthetic movement of impressionism which explored the subjectivity of one’s recognition, Conrad renders Marlow an allusive observer whose narrative “take[s] a form of impression rather than facts” (Feldman 50). Feldman’s argument renders Marlow’s story of Jim open to an analysis of the ways in which Marlow’s observations are shaped.

While Conrad’s works are replete with examples of literary impressionism, one example may give the reader a sense of what kind of ambiguities Conrad’s writing method produces. For instance, in the midst of Marlow’s story the reader is presented with such a reflection. Marlow shares with his listeners his impression of Jim’s yearnings: “I seemed to perceive dimly that what he wanted, what he was, as it were, waiting for, was something not easy to define […]” (LJ 171). The key words in this passage are “seemed” and “dimly” as they cause in the reader not so much a doubt as a sense of an evocative recognition. Sally Feldman points to the fact that in Marlow’s story of Jim there is also a story of himself (43). Weaved in the novel as an eager
troubadour retelling deeds of young Jim, “as though his spirit had winged its way back into the lapse of time” (LJ 27), Marlow may also be reflecting upon his own life.

This claim merits further attention. The question this thesis will explore is whether Marlow’s stories may give rise to some additional clues to Marlow’s own course of life. This seems particularly fascinating as there are no explicit facts about his life available to the reader. What one knows about Marlow from his narrative are scattered details of his deeds and characteristics. Najder points out that “if we try to recapitulate what we know about him [Marlow], we find that it does not amount to much. He comes to life through the story he tells and the way he tells it […]” (28). While Najder strives principally to prove in his article that Marlow is not Conrad’s way into the novel, the present essay aims to show Marlow as a complex narrator who not only presents the reader with peculiar reportages, but also, by structuring his narratives as his impressions, gives an account of himself. Marlow along with his narrative and his self-narrative will constitute the axis of my analysis. Although my main focus will be put on Marlow’s part in Lord Jim, I will also analyse Marlow’s account from Heart of Darkness (1899). With a view to the purpose of this essay, I want to propose a reading of Marlow’s function as bearing on the epistemology of the self.

In order to render my claims plausible I will draw on a recent study conducted by Max Saunders, Self Impression. In his work Saunders investigates autobiographies of late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers and argues that these works can be read as a part of the fictional oeuvre of authors such as Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, Joseph Conrad and others. Saunders delineates his arguments by beginning with the history of the area of life-writing. He admits that “this study [Self Impression] comes out of a sense that criticism has not adequately described the relations between modernism and life-writing” (“Introduction”). The term life-writing is explained by Saunders with help of Hermione Lee who notices a discrepancy in its usage in literary criticism: it either helps to summarise the various ways of relating a life story, or to make intentionally the distinction between autobiography and biography vague. Saunders makes use of this ambiguity to support his case: “the distinction between autobiography and other forms such as biography or fiction is thus always blurred” (ibid). Consequently then, Self Impression plays on these ambiguities of genres. Moreover, Saunders draws on Jacques Derrida’s The Law of Genre and states after the French philosopher that “texts ‘participate’ in genres to which they cannot ‘belong’. So it is with autobiography and the novel” (ibid). Considered in reference to
the age of modernism, this statement finds its genuine examples in the modernist developments of genres. Saunders mentions the emergence of *Künstlerroman* (a novel whose main theme is the development of the artist) “which coincides with the new kind of experimentation combining the fictive and the auto/biographical constituting the subject of this book” (ibid). The scope of this study is the period between 1870 and 1930 which according to Saunders is representative of the process of “a variety of forms evolv[ing] very rapidly, but shar[ing] a fascination with the fictional possibilities of life-writing-forms” (ibid).

While neither of Conrad’s novels in question is proved to be autobiographical, it can be argued, as stated above, that Marlow’s tales are examples of a fictional character’s self-narration. What is meant here is that Marlow’s stories can arguably be read as an autobiographical creation, thus making an apt example of Saunders’ theory. This is not to say that due to Marlow’s self-narration there occurs a shift between genres. Rather, it is to present Marlow’s narration against a heterogeneous generic background. Hence, Saunders’ study will serve the purpose of a theoretical frame of reference.

It is also crucial to acknowledge Conrad’s writing technique as that of a literary impressionist. Ian Watt explains in his critical essay that it was Ford Madox Ford who propagated the view that he along with Conrad carried on the tradition of literary impressionism. Although it is not until Ford publishes his memoir of Conrad in 1924 (*Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*) that one can fully appreciate the author of *Lord Jim* as literary impressionist, Ford’s account poses a problem of its reliability. The statements proposed in the publication cannot be deemed credible since one is not able to verify whether or not Conrad would have confirmed them1. However, Watt mentions that “Joseph Warren Beach and Edward Crankshaw applied the term [impressionist] to Conrad, and he is now ensconced in literary history as an impressionist” (354). Intriguingly, Conrad was at least uncertain of whether that term applied to his works, “he thought of impressionism as primarily concerned with visual appearances” (354). Yet, Watt points to “Conrad’s insistence in the preface of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* that art depends for its success on an ‘impression conveyed through the senses,’ [which] is to that extent wholly consistent with impressionist doctrine.

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1 Joseph Conrad died before Ford’s publication.
So, indeed, is much of the narrative itself, whose technique constitutes an original kind of multiple visual impressionism” (355).

In addition, I want to turn to Jakob Lothe who argues that Lord Jim is a novel that combines “the distinctive features of subgenres” (236) and claims that the impressionistic features of the novel refer to the genre of sketch. What bears a significant role in Lothe’s investigation of sketch in relation to Saunders’ Self Impression is the conclusion he arrives at:

If the impressionist paintings of a visual artist such as Monet problematise the relationship between the sketch and the finished product, Marlow’s sketchlike impressions of Jim further a new kind of fiction in which subjective, inevitably incomplete narratives attempt to render through language what cannot be clearly seen. (253)

Furthermore, Lothe states that the novel’s modernist character is achieved as a result of “combining, and contrasting, these features with constituent elements of several subgenres of narrative fiction” (252). This definition of Lord Jim as a modernist novel will be helpful for two reasons. Firstly, it provides room for further investigation in the field of subgenres since not all of them have been explored. Secondly, Lothe hints at impressionistic qualities of Lord Jim which are indispensable when it comes to the discussion of Saunders’ arguments.

The subgenre I want to add to the discussion with reference to Lord Jim is fictional autobiography. In Self Impression, Saunders claims that autobiography is the genre that “no genre can escape” (“Introduction”). After discussing Nietzsche’s philosophical debate, Saunders makes a crucial assumption: “If discourses of impersonality such as criticism or philosophy can be read as autobiography, then all writing, all art, is equally susceptible” (ibid). Later on, Saunders brings into question the reliability of autobiography and shows to what extent it may appear as not entirely trustworthy. Most important conclusion he arrives at is that the contrast between “autobiography and other forms such as biography or fiction is always blurred” (ibid). To put it simply, autobiography can be read as fiction and, most importantly for my thesis, fiction can be read as a mode of autobiographical writing. In terms of Marlow’s narrative, this claim seems exceptionally significant. If the reader were to study Marlow’s story as fiction or as an attempt to portray Jim’s life, it would be equally credible to read it as autobiography. However, Saunders distinguishes the act of reading a work as an autobiography from an autobiographical perusal and states that the latter’s “dimension can be covert, unconscious, or implicit” (ibid). The ambiguity that comes from this
distinction is rebutted by Saunders’ newly coined term—autobiografiction. He argues that it emphasises the relationship “between fiction and self”’s autobiography, rather than that between fiction and a self” (ibid). It allows then for a considerably broader perspective of analysis since the genre of autobiography (as opposed to “self”) remains open to debate. This essay then, will put its main emphasis on ‘autobiografictional’ qualities of Marlow’s narrative in *Lord Jim*, but also in *Heart of Darkness*.

It is hard to overlook all those instances in *Lord Jim* when the reader, often suddenly, gets to know something about Marlow. For instance, when Marlow tells the story of Stein or relates his meeting with the Frenchman, he makes interesting remarks about their language. Whether German or French, it can be thus concluded that Marlow not only knows these languages, but also has an ear for them as he is able to retell both Stein’s and Frenchman’s nuances in their respective way of speaking. However, when one talks about autobiografiction, these instances seem irrelevant as it is taken for granted that there are some pieces of information available to the reader that can be derived from the plot. The focus of the present paper will be placed on all those examples that do not bring in any straight-forward facts into the characterisation of Marlow. The aim is to extract information about Marlow from his narrative’s equivocations which arguably reveal Marlow’s self-referentiality.

Going back to Lothe’s definition of *Lord Jim* one can see that it deals with impressionistic qualities of the novel. Saunders’ work also touches upon impressionism. Important to the analysis of Marlow’s narratives is how Saunders sees this technique. According to Saunders, it “is a particular challenge to the concept of the self and its representation” (“Introduction”). Similar is the case of literary impressionism which is for Saunders the tool by which autobiographies can turn into autobiografiction. What is given main attention by Saunders here is the way in which autobiography is being transformed by its engagement with impressionism. Modernist literary oeuvre is thus re-read by Saunders “as a series of responses to impressionism’s challenge to subjectivity—to the experience of perception, the experience of time, and intelligibility of the self” (ibid). Such will also be the focus of this essay except, unlike Saunders, the object of analysis is not the author of an autobiography, but a fictional character whose narrative displays impressionistic qualities, thus rendering Marlow’s stories apt for juxtaposition with Saunders’ *autobiografiction*.

Placed in the beginning of chapter five in *Lord Jim*, the following passage brings the reader anew into the story. The omniscient narrator leaves only a trace of
himself and the tale is continued by Marlow, who is introduced in the previous chapter as one of the spectators, now retells the events from his own perspective:

‘Oh yes. I attended the inquiry,’ he would say, ‘and to this day I haven’t left off wondering why I went. I am willing to believe each of us has a guardian angel, if you fellows will concede to me that each of us has a familiar devil as well. I want you to own up, because I don’t like to feel exceptional in any way, and I know I have him — the devil, I mean. […] He is there right enough, and, being malicious, he lets me in for that kind of thing.’ (LJ 28)

The opening, “Oh yes…” may indicate that Marlow utters a response and that this utterance is an answer to a question to which the reader has no access. Subsequent lines, however, show that it is not the stern type of inquiry that Marlow is being the subject of; rather a leisurely conversation that allows sharing anecdotes and impressions. From the fact that he “[hasn’t] left off wondering” one may draw a conclusion that he justifies his urge to share his account. Moreover, this may be read as a display of the complexity of the storyline. Because the story the reader is about to witness is still so vivid in Marlow’s mind, it can be assumed that it has not been provided with any solution yet. Additionally, the reader does not get to know who the other interlocutors are, a frame narrative where Marlow is in the centre of the storytelling as its only overseer. This fact along with beginning the story anew, in medias res, may suggest that Marlow enjoys being in the heart of a gathering with the others focused on his narrative. According to John G. Peters’ arguments in Conrad and Impressionism, this technique’s purpose “is to demonstrate that phenomena filter through a single consciousness” (25).

On the other hand, Marlow presents himself as an everyman, who “[doesn’t] like to feel exceptional” and admits he is aware of those spiteful forces that would steer him. Whether deliberately trying to diminish himself in the eyes of his audience or unconsciously expressing solidarity with the “fellows,” Marlow might also be spontaneously foreshadowing the novel’s theme. By juxtaposing two contrary powers of “a guarding angel” and “a familiar devil,” the narrator sketches a simplified setting of the story. It can be argued that not only is the plot outlined here, but the narrator’s conflict as well, thus providing the reader with the first hint of the novel’s autobiographical feature. Especially the adjective “familiar” used to describe the “devil” calls for the reader’s attention. Is the demon that Marlow possesses merely his usual companion or is Marlow versed in the ways of the evil spirit? This passage then is not solely an introduction. It creates a background and gives the narrating voice a peculiar
tone. In other words, it familiarises the reader with the narrator, thus positioning Marlow as his own sculptor who shapes his own characteristics and makes himself conversant as the story-teller. Looking for autobiografictional qualities of Marlow, familiarisation is particularly crucial because of the way in which it makes him notable to the reader through his self-narrative.

Peters’ argument mentioned above yields an important clue for further reading. He writes about “single consciousness” which inevitably prompts an association with the word subjectivity. Throughout the novel Marlow is the dominating voice of narration and all the reader is able to see is filtered through Marlow’s point of view. When he speaks about others, or more interestingly, when he reports others’ utterances, we hear it through his statements. For instance, in the beginning of chapter ten Marlow describes the sea scene using Jim’s comparison: “The sea hissed ‘like twenty thousand kettles’. That’s his simile, not mine” (LJ 95). What is fascinating here is that Marlow emphasises the fact that he borrowed the simile from the protagonist of his story. It can be seen as a deliberate isolation, a division between Marlow and Jim as if to help distinguish their utterances. Moreover, this remark poses some thought-provoking questions. If he draws attention to the fact that the simile is not his own, then how can the reader be certain of the rest of his reports? Is Marlow making other parts of the story up? Furthermore, there is no information about Marlow being there with Jim when he jumped from Patna. Yet, Marlow’s reports on that instance are rich in details as he describes Jim and the other members of the crew: “[…] they were blinded and half drowned with rain” (95). This particular remark may make one wonder whether court coverage has been so meticulous or Marlow so imaginative.

Earlier in the novel Marlow gives the reader a crucial indication as to how one ought to treat his reports: “[…] since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions” (LJ 40). Again, Peters provides an insightful comment on how Marlow’s interpretation can be read.

Knowledge becomes an individual phenomenon rather than a universal one. Each person gains knowledge through interaction with objects of consciousness, and one person’s knowledge is never exactly the same as another’s, nor even exactly the same as one’s own at a different point in space and time. (4)

In addition to that, Peters discusses how literary impressionists focused their attention on the assumption that “reality comes through the medium of human subjectivity” (13). Such may be the case with Marlow’s story of Jim: the only reality the reader is
presented with is that of Marlow’s and, according to impressionistic principles, it is the only means by which the author is able to convey authenticity.

But how is this connected to autobiografiction? The starting point in Conrad’s case for Saunders is the fact that Conrad was much aware of literary impressionism and that he was one of the writers whose autobiographical works bear resemblance to fiction (see Chapter Six, “Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). While explaining literary impressionism, Saunders invokes Jessie Matz’s arguments and suggests that Conrad’s literary rigour “represent[s] a specific paradigm, which corresponds to the new way of thinking about how the mind works; about the experience of knowing, and the relationship between perceiving and understanding” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). Saunders furthers the discussion on Conrad’s artistic philosophy:

Conrad’s celebrated credo—‘it is, before all, to make you see’ is doubly ambiguous. Does ‘before all’ mean before in time? (first you see the visual perceptions, then you work out what they are; what Ian Watt called ‘delayed decoding’). Or does it mean ‘above all’: in other words, that it is less important to struggle to understand: you should just have the impressions, the sensations, the experience […] The second paradox is that while Conrad’s art renders the visible universe as a way of revealing the secrets that lie beneath it, what it finds is precisely that they are secrets—enigmas, mysteries. They elude rational ‘seeing,’ and remain recalcitrantly bewildering phenomena. (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”)

According to Saunders, it is thanks to these impressionistic ambiguities that Conrad’s autobiographies can resemble autobiografiction. What is more, Saunders argues that impressionist autobiography “like autobiografiction, is, precisely, a story of attitudes connections, correlated sensations”; “the story of your subjectivity” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”).

It is undoubtedly the case that Conrad’s credo and Marlow’s “effect of visual impressions” coincide with each other. Let us look at an example of how picturesque-ly Marlow describes a room in a hospital while visiting chief engineer of Patna: “the afternoon breeze swept impetuously over the row of bedsteads […] The soft wind of the tropics played in that naked ward as bleak as winter’s gale in an old barn at home” (LJ 44). This remark is made just after Marlow retells engineer’s story of pink toads swarming upon the deck of the sinking ship. Interestingly, while introducing this story, Marlow shares with his interlocutors the fact that he was asked by the engineer to look under the bed and tell what he could see. Marlow replies—“‘Nothing,’ I said,
feeling awfully ashamed of myself” (LJ 43). What is striking here is the juxtaposition of engineer’s hallucinations with Marlow’s impression of the room they sit in. It is as if Marlow wanted to work on an illusion of his own since he could not see anything under the bed. Nor could he believe in the existence of pink toads. Moreover, Marlow thinks that the engineer is deranged, he does not try to understand him, and he runs away. And yet he mentions his own impressions that render a plain room the place where contradicting powers of tropical warmth and winter winds abut. Therefore, Marlow’s may be seen to convey precisely how subjective one’s ways of perceiving are and that each impression remains a secret, available only to its beholder. Furthermore, the riddle behind the impression, the recalcitrance of the “bewildering phenomena,” beset Marlow. He is unable to communicate, to disclose the source of chief engineer’s feverish impressions.

Undeniably, the most significant relationship in Lord Jim is the one between Marlow and Jim. It is crucial to look into it for traces of autobiografictional features. Marlow is curiously involved in Jim’s life. It is to such an extent that one may wonder why an old captain is so dedicated to the young sailor. Shortly after one of the court inquiries is over, Marlow and Jim have their first close and unpleasant encounter. Already then Marlow displays his commitment to the youngster. Describing Jim’s angry expression was for him “like watching a darkening sky before a clap of thunder, shade upon shade imperceptibly coming on, gloom growing mysteriously intense in the calm of maturing violence” (LJ 59). It is clearly an example of an impressionistic regard betraying Marlow’s intimate, subjective associations. They do not just enhance both Marlow’s and reader’s experience of Jim, but also point to the subject-object relation between Marlow (the subject) and Jim (the object). Peters pays much attention to this relation with regard to literary impressionism. He makes use of W. S. Sichel’s arguments and says that:

Sichel correctly argues that impressionism represents the artist’s subjectivity, but impressionism does not simply present the artist’s emotional response to an object. Instead, subject and object are linked, and their relationship is uniquely contextualised—an individual experience that connects subject, object, and surrounding circumstances in an interdependent event. (18)

In the end of chapter six, Marlow succinctly summarises his observation of Jim: “The views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog—bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the gen-
eral aspect of a country [...] Upon the whole he was misleading” (*LJ* 64). This comment combined with what has been said about subject-object relevance shows that Marlow is well aware of the barriers of subjective perception. Probably that is the reason why he so painstakingly tries to convey his own impressions. Peters provides an apt explanation for this phenomenon: “[i]n fact, impressionist representation lies neither solely with the subject nor solely with the object but rather in the space between the two” (18). Marlow can also be seen to create that space between himself and Jim. His story circulates in the room where his interlocutors are gathered, thus bestowing an impression upon the listeners. However, more importantly, the space is provided by the lingering absence of Jim: “detached from his surroundings […] like a ghost without a home to haunt” (70). Hence, although there would be no story of Jim without Marlow, Jim’s absence determines Marlow’s existence, and at the same time allows Marlow for his self-portrayal.

In chapter three of *Conrad and Impressionism*, Peters undertakes the topic of epistemology of subjectivity. The critical discussion is split between two concepts and their relation to Conrad’s novels. The first concept, other-like-self “defines what the self is” (64) by the relationship with the self. As Peters argues, Marlow makes the character of this relation clear in *Lord Jim* by referring to Jim as “one of us” (*LJ* 36). Interestingly, Feldman’s argument may also support this claim: “[Jim] pleads ‘I would like somebody to understand - somebody - one person at least.’ And he picks on Marlow, for Marlow is prepared to recognise himself in Jim” (43). Of course, Jim’s plea cited here by Feldman is uttered by Marlow and this fact puts forward additional intriguing questions. As we have seen in the discussion above, Marlow admits using a simile not of his own. Consequently, this utterance of Jim may be seen as entirely fabricated by Marlow. The reader cannot know whether Marlow has not added some dramaturgy to that scene. Moreover, Marlow’s account of Jim’s plea ends with a rather desperate question: “You! Why not you?” (*LJ* 68). It undeniably emphasises Marlow’s role or, rather it is Marlow himself who can be seen as drawing attention to his role in Jim’s life and its tragedy. Later on, Marlow furthers his comment on Jim’s appeal: “It was solemn, and a little ridiculous too, as they always are, those struggles of an individual trying to save from the fire his idea of what his moral identity should be […]” (*LJ* 68). Feldman’s statement seems to provide an explanation of what measure Marlow is undertaking here: “If Jim, through talking to Marlow, involves him in his guilt, Marlow is in turn involving his listeners and, implicitly, the
reader” (44). The subject-object relationship is thus distorted. Firstly, because, as mentioned above, it is not Marlow’s perception of Jim, but of what “Jim let [Marlow] have of himself” (LJ 64). Hence, both the subject and object here are the space in-between being rather than two separate entities. Secondly and more importantly for present discussion, the story narrated by Marlow is not solely based on subject-object relation. Consciously or not, Marlow is giving an account of himself by pointing to and emphasising the fact that he has been chosen by Jim as his confidant. Referring once more to Peters, “[b]ecause Jim is ‘one of us,’ knowledge of him can lead to knowledge of westerners in general and of Marlow in particular, and this is precisely Marlow’s interest in him” (69).

But why would Marlow emphasise his role so eagerly? He is already in the middle of a crowd that listens to his tale not interrupting him a word. What is more, every record of others involved in the story of Jim is filtered through Marlow’s narrative, thus undermining the account’s authenticity and stressing the role of Marlow as the only story-teller. One way to explain this may be to describe Marlow as attention-seeker or imaginative fabulist. However, the reason for that may not be as plain as it seems. Saunders quotes a fragment from Conrad’s preface to A Personal Record (1912) and notes that it demonstrates the author’s doubts

about the dangers of self-delusion that beset anyone who approaches autobiography impressionistically: ‘the danger lies in the writer becoming the victim of his own exaggeration, losing the exact notion of sincerity, and in the end coming to despise truth itself as something too cold [...]’ (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”)

In the light of this scepticism, Marlow can be considered as trying to avoid overemphasising his own involvement in the account by intertwining his story with the story of his object, Jim, and therefore rendering the purity of his tale, to invoke Conrad’s terminology, consistently aglow—living not within one entity, but throughout the entire tale, as Peters claims, in “a form of self-preservation, since the boundaries between Marlow and Jim have blurred” (70). Additionally, the malleability of the dividing lines between the story-teller and the story’s object functions as an invisible mirror for Marlow. Not only is he able to preserve himself within the object, but also to hide behind the object’s reflection.

In Heart of Darkness the vaguely shaped boundaries between the subject and the object are also apparent. Already in the beginning, while introducing the story to his interlocutors, Marlow says that he “[doesn’t] want to bother [them] much with
what happened to [him] personally” (HD 7). However, he also claims that in order to comprehend the object of his tale and its meaningfulness, “[the interlocutors] ought to know how [Marlow] got out there, what [he saw]” (HD 7). Although Marlow himself did not at first recognise the importance of his subjective point of view of the story (and the wilderness, the darkness as its objects), he nevertheless admits that in the end it felt as if “a kind of light” has been thrown “on everything about [him]—and into [his] thoughts” (HD 7). What the reader may obtain from this passage, then, is the sense of Marlow’s narrative being comparable with the impressionistic approach, namely that the subject and object are intertwined. Stating that he does not want to trouble his listeners with his own story, Marlow realises the inevitability of his involvement with its objects. It is also important to look at the verb Marlow uses. The interlocutors should know what he saw, not what he, for example, went through or endured. Aforementioned credo of Conrad’s comes into sight again: “it is, before all, to make you see.”

The relation between the other-like-self and the self, mentioned in reference to Jim and Marlow, finds its precedent also in Heart of Darkness. Before the venture with the Company, Marlow strives to see himself as one of the elements that belongs to a bigger, purposeful whole: “It appears however I was also one of the Workers […]”; “Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle” (HD 12). Later on, Marlow mentions also being “a part of the great cause” (HD 16). While ironic in their nature, all these remarks nevertheless coincide with Marlow’s comments about Jim’s being “one of us” (LJ 36). Because Marlow is ‘one of them’, whether an apostle or a crusader, he identifies with the group of venturers. The purpose of this identification process can be read as two-sided—it helps both to establish who Marlow is and who he is not. On his way to the Inner Station, Marlow discovers gradually how mistaken he was to reckon Company’s members as any sort of missionaries. In the beginning of his tale he admits that it was not until “several months later” and “a thousand miles farther” into his journey that he discovered “[h]ow insidious” was the devil that he expected to “become acquainted with” (HD 16). This remark provides the reader with a clue, namely, that only in the end of the journey and after Marlow’s confrontation with the wilderness, was he able to realise what he had encountered. Therefore, Marlow’s primary assumptions that he belongs (or has to belong) to the community he ventures out on this journey with comes to naught.
expects to bring light into the heart of darkness and, subordinating himself to this endeavour, he realises the other workmen do not share his attitude.

Interestingly, assuming the position of a light-bringer, Marlow familiarises himself eagerly with the ‘objects’ of his mission who, according to Marlow’s aunt, were supposed to be “ignorant” and in need of weaning “from their horrid ways” (HD 12). Even though Marlow sees their “horrid faces,” he nevertheless perceives in them the human beings they are: “what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate up-roar” (HD 36). This comment stands in opposition to what the other Western merchants said about the inhabitants of Congo: “There had been enemies, criminals, workers—and these were rebels” (HD 58). It is then during Marlow’s fulfilling his obligations that he comes by this notion of the cognisance of the locals. He suggests earlier in the novel that it is thanks to work that one can have knowledge of oneself: “but I like what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself—not for others—what no other man can ever know” (HD 29). Again, Marlow provides an insight into the method of self-recognition through the relation between the subject and the object. Whether the latter be the other workmen whom Marlow feels not alike with, the homogenous locals or the work as a medium, it is undoubtedly the case that Marlow makes use of the impressionistic features just as he does in order to derive himself from Jim. Furthermore, Marlow’s use of work brings in another aspect of the object, namely, that the object can be handled as a device in the process of self-identification.

In order to characterise the way in which the reader unwraps Marlow’s impressions in *Heart of Darkness*, Ian Watt coined the term delayed decoding. Saunders mentions this term in his discussion of Conrad’s credo and explains it briefly: “first you see the visual perceptions, then you work out what they are” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). However, in reference to his examination of impressionistic autobiographies, it seems that Saunders did not pay enough attention to Watt’s terminology. In the article, “Impressionism and Symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*,” Watt examines delayed decoding with regard to slowing down the process of perception: “to present a sense impression and to withhold naming it or explaining its meaning until later; as readers we witness every step by which the gap between the individual perception and its cause is belatedly closed within the consciousness of the protagonist” (Watt 356). As the readers of Marlow’s story, we are conscious of “the
gap between impression and understanding” (356). Watt exemplifies the term by referring to the passage in *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow’s steamboat is being attacked by Kurtz’s local worshippers. What interests Watt most is the way in which Marlow describes his first visual conception of the “little sticks” that were “flying about” above and onto the ship and how Marlow is simply surprised that the fireman “ducked his head” (*HD* 44). The way in which this observation of Marlow’s is being gradually unravelled amidst “an apparently gratuitous change in the normal order of things” (356) is for Watt the essence of delayed decoding. Although this example may prove Saunders’ simple explanation correct, I would like to propose some additional points (both an example and an explanation), which will support this essay’s main argument. Delayed decoding will be considered in reference to Marlow’s fictional perception, and furthermore, to Marlow’s unravelling of intuitive remarks.

To put it simply, delayed decoding consists in that the “physical impression must precede the understanding of the cause” (Watt 357). How then should we approach the analysis of the relation between Marlow and Kurtz? The very first of Marlow’s perception of Kurtz occurs after his arrival to Congo when the rumours about the chief of the inner station—that “Mr. Kurtz, was ill” (*HD* 22)—irritate Marlow and make him despise the object of the gossips. Marlow ignores Kurtz at first, shuns talking about him, and even admits: “Hang Kurtz, I thought” (*HD* 22). However, when relating the account of Manager’s spy utterance who mentions the opinion that Kurtz was “a prodigy,” “an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else” (*HD* 25), Marlow’s attitude changes. Although, it alters suddenly rather than successively, nevertheless, it is still the process of perception, for all that takes place still before Marlow’s and Kurtz’s first meeting. To use Watt’s terminology of delayed decoding, this foreshadowing of Marlow acquaintance with Kurtz would be “to put us into intense sensory contact with the events” (357). Five pages after wishing Kurtz’s death by hanging, Marlow admits that he lied for the chief of the inner station and says that “[he] had a notion it somehow would be of help to that Kurtz whom at the time I did not see” (*HD* 27). Yet again, word “see” supplies the reader with a hint. This time, however, with regard to Watt’s delayed decoding, it is the fact that Marlow has not seen Kurtz yet. To put it differently, it is the mind’s eye with which Marlow perceives Kurtz: “It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation” (*HD* 27). Feldman points out to that futile effort and claims that “[i]n
"Heart of Darkness" Marlow moves from a world of facts, in which he can be detached from Kurtz, to a world of illusion, where he identifies with him” (57). Hence, from this point of view delayed decoding begins with an illusion rather than with an unrecognised object. Moreover, it is an illusion which lingers on throughout Marlow’s story until its very end.

Whilst stuck on his way to the inner station, Marlow “seemed to see Kurtz for the first time” (HD 32). He also says about this vision that “[i]t was a distinct glimpse” (HD 32); however, Marlow’s previous remark on the purpose of work in one’s life might shed some light on Marlow’s first “glimpse” at Kurtz. It is while the Manager and his uncle are strolling and having a chat under the steamboat that Marlow hears a story of how Kurtz “after coming three hundred miles[,] had suddenly decided to go back” (HD 32). Connecting together Kurtz’s retreat with Marlow’s opinion about work and its purpose, one might come closer towards understanding why Marlow “[saw] Kurtz for the first time” just then. Marlow might be seen to identify Kurtz with “the chance to find yourself” (HD 29). Even though Kurtz brought in “[i]vory […] lots of it” (HD 28), he does not relinquish the opportunity to gain, in Marlow’s understanding, self-knowledge. Marlow’s later remarks only affirm this view. “[T]he wilderness,” Marlow observes, “had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude” (HD 57-58). Thus, the illusion gradually starts to take shape through Marlow’s consciousness and the process of Watt’s decoding is in progress. Not only does Marlow identify his opinion with Kurtz’s retreat, but also familiarises himself with the chief of the inner station.

The working out of what the perception is, as Saunders names the final process of delayed decoding, with regard to the relation between Marlow and Kurtz starts when Marlow mentions “be[ing] loyal to the nightmare of [his] choice” (HD 64). Still oscillating in the world of dreams, Marlow finds the embodiment of his “nightmare” and, moreover, claims he ought to remain faithful to it. Although he does not break that vow, Marlow nevertheless breaks the illusion that coiled around Kurtz when he finds him creeping in the bush: “I tried to break the spell, the heavy mute spell of the wilderness that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts” (HD 65). The final decoding is encapsulated in Marlow’s following observation: “There was nothing either above or below [Kurtz]—and I knew it” (HD 66). The process of decoding is thus complete.
To consider autobiography is in most cases to analyse a written material. Obviously, the reader of Marlow’s stories, whether in *Lord Jim* or *Heart of Darkness* faces text. However, it is a text shaped according to the practice of yarns. At first it might seem that this mode of retelling a story cannot be considered credible in regard to autobiography. In other words, one expects an autobiography to be written, not retold. Edward Said problematises the matter of Conrad’s narrative in his essay and argues that:

> The presence of spoken words in time mitigates, if it does not make entirely absent, their written version; a speaker takes over the narrative with his voice, and his voice overrides the fact that he is absent (or unseen) to his listeners as he speaks; Conrad’s goal is to make us see, or otherwise to transcend the absence of everything but words, so that we may pass into a realm of vision beyond the words. (120)

Although thanks to the spoken words “the ghost of a fact […] can be put to rest” (Said 120), Marlow’s utterances nevertheless bring forward the discrepancy “between intention and actuality”; “between hearing on the one hand, and seeing and comprehending on the other” (Said 129). This disparity leads to the urge to convey something of use, a functional story. Whether the inquiry in *Lord Jim* or a “methodical quest” (Said 121) in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s narrative oscillates around these central points just as “a told narrative” is a tool for “reaching that centre,” be it the final judgement of Jim or disclosing Kurtz’s identity. According to Said, this can only be achieved through the negotiation of a verbal narrative. More importantly, the defeated heroes of *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness*, even though they are fated to vanish in listeners’ imagination, are reshaped by Marlow’s memory and speech “in all its splendour and youth”; “[t]hat this takes place only in ‘the lapse of time’ and because the speaker’s words are being written does not diminish its achievement except as words diminish, without actually delivering, a man entire” (Said 132).

The lack of correspondence between the fictional facts of Marlow’s story and the vocal representation of Marlow’s objects can be seen as bearing resemblance to what Saunders lists as three different types of this kind of disjunctions in reference to impressionistic autobiographies of Conrad, James and Ford. The first disjunction, forgetting, allows for invention, an “imaginative opportunity” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”) by creating a void in memory. This void becomes then a motor of creativity for the writers as they fear “the destruction or loss of the self” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). In *Heart of
Darkness, Marlow seems to be aware of that loss and to prove it he quotes his Russian fellow worker who says about Kurtz that “[he would] forget himself amongst these people” (HD 56). Kurtz loses himself, abandons the world of facts and what is left of him is only “A voice! a voice!” (HD 60). By examining the case of Kurtz, Marlow resists forgetting himself. However, the case of forgetting seems more problematic in Lord Jim. When leaving Jim at Stein’s station, Marlow advises the youngster to forget everything that happened, “me too—if it would help” (LJ 202). Thus, according to what happens in Marlow’s tale, forgetting is for Jim precisely the “imaginative opportunity.” Although, as Marlow seem to warn his interlocutors, the “extraordinary success” (LJ 360) of Jim’s forgetfulness is occupied by absence, by being “inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven” (LJ 360). Hence, the gulf left by Jim could serve as the stimulus for Marlow to retell the story.

Another impressionistic disjunction mentioned by Saunders is the process of evading. The “effacement of the artist” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”) is one of the cardinal features related to literary impressionism. Direct statements are not uttered because, according to impressionism, sense and intuition precede the facts. In that way of understanding, impression represents the actuality more authentically than facts. Thus, the artist’s goal is to “liberate mind and imagination” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”) from factuality. How then is this method practised by Marlow? In Heart of Darkness such examples are many, however, there is one which appears as most prominent. As Marlow states, the last words uttered by Kurtz are “The Horror! The Horror!” (HD 69). While reflecting upon them afterwards, Marlow evades providing an exact answer as to what meaning they might convey. In a sense he liberates Kurtz’s final cry from transparency, leaving only an ambiguous comment: “After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper,” and most importantly “it had the appalling face of glimpsed truth” (HD 70). Marlow does not explain “The Horror!” of Kurtz and therefore draws attention to his own impression that the face of this utterance was “the strange commingling of desire and hate” (HD 70). Such an evasion is also presented to the reader in the final paragraph of Lord Jim where Marlow wonders whether Jim is now satisfied. There is no definite answer either; there is however, wavering between what can be only described as Marlow’s impressions: “Now, [Jim] is no more, there are days when the reality of his existence comes to me with an immense, with an overwhelming force;
and yet upon my honour there are moments too when he passes from my eyes like a disembodied spirit astray amongst the passions of this earth” (LJ 360).

The last of Saunders examples of the disconnection between factuality and impression in autobiographies in question is the procedure of distorting. This process deals with the inaccurateness of autobiographical constructions. However, the question of what is an accurate autobiography is raised by Saunders: distorted constructions “might be sufficient to the writer’s sense of self, or for the impressions of the self they want to present” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). Furthermore, even if the case seems “sufficient for the author [it] might seem merely inaccurate to the reader, to whose criteria a published autobiography also becomes subject” (“Literary Impressions and Impressionist Autobiographies”). Thus, the problem of distortion appears as particularly fascinating in case of Marlow’s stories. In both tales the reader is presented preponderantly with both Marlow’s observations and his reports of others’ utterances. Marlow quotes the objects of his stories, however, those objects are unable to express their disagreement or dissatisfaction with what Marlow puts into their mouths.

The contribution of Saunders’ discussion transpires to be twofold. Not only have Saunders’ arguments allowed for such examination of Marlow’s self-narrative, but they simultaneously undermined Marlow’s credibility as the narrator, thus leaving space for further interpretation. Acknowledging how vast, ambiguous and problematic the genre of autobiography in modernism is, Saunders complicates it even further by arguing that an element of fiction is crucial for both its authors and readers. What this analysis of Marlow’s accounts in Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness adds to is the following question: To what extent ought the reader believe in Marlow’s stories in the first place? If the story of Jim functions as a mirror for the story-teller, then perhaps the tale of Heart of Darkness is just another method with which Marlow discerns his own self?

Thus, the presented analysis of Marlow as an autobiographical creation brings in several important insights. Thanks to their impressionistic features, Marlow’s utterances are not only recreations of events from a subjective point of view. Marlow comes to view as a person with an urge to know himself. His accounts reveal also how substantial is the relation between the subject and objects of the stories with reference to literary impressionism. The objects serve as a mirror for Marlow, thus enabling him to portray himself. Furthermore, Marlow’s reports bring forward the signifi-
icance of the credibility of one’s perceiving for storytelling. Again, the way in which Marlow perceives the objects of his stories provides an interesting quality of Marlow’s life-writing, namely, that these objects are closely interwoven with Marlow’s existence. As exemplified above, it is thanks to Marlow’s account of Jim that the reader is able to discern Marlow’s personal characteristics. Moreover, the discussion of the other-like-self and other-unlike-self in relation to the moral clash in *Heart of Darkness* furnishes the analysis with a thought-provoking perspective on why Marlow ventured to Congo and, later on, to the inner station.
Works Cited


