

Lord Jim's Progression Through Homology

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JOSEPH Conrad seems to leave the telling of the story entirely in the hands of his narrator Marlow who explains and comments on Jim's actions and motives in his own way. But the author has conceived the other male protagonists in such a way that most of them serve as illustrations of a Jim that might have been or would have become. The novelist uses juxtaposition to sharpen the reader's perception of different facets of Jim's personality. They are projected, become independent entities, and Jim is often confronted with them. Thus the reader looks at the original and at his replica which emphasizes or distorts some of his characteristics, takes them out of context, tests them in a slightly modified course of events. This method provides an almost scientific approach to the difficult task of assessing Jim's merits and faults. Jim himself easily discerns the deficiencies of his counterfeits but he invariably fails to recognize his own traits. This is his tragic flaw: his critical judgment cannot turn on himself, as the following example shows. Jim speaks about Jewel without noticing the dramatic irony of what he says: "It seemed impossible to save her not only from that rascal [Cornelius] but even from herself!"¹ This sentence defines Jim's situation even more accurately than that of the girl. Jim sees his own reflection in other persons but he cannot identify the original. He is unable to read the signs, to relate his understanding of life to himself. He suffers from moral dyslexia.

Jim's irregular progression towards a final, if ambiguous catharsis is suggested by the setting of his long confession

to Marlow. Conrad introduces the tourists who move about in the background as an allegorical reference to his inward journey. These tourists and their trunks "would be labelled as having passed through this and that place. . . . They would cherish this distinction of their persons . . . as the only permanent trace of their improving enterprise" (p. 63). *Mutatis mutandis*, the same may be asserted concerning Jim whom "some conviction of innate blamelessness" (p. 64) prevented from assimilating his experiences and developing accordingly. In a way he resembled one of them, "a pale anxious youth" who had been cheated and who phrased Jim's feelings in the form of a question: "Do you think I've been done to that extent?" (p. 71). Jim "had been tricked" by fate that caught him unawares, that did not give him a fair chance to become a hero. This limited kind of juxtaposition, i.e. superimposed scenes and conversations, crystallizes, as it were in an ironic echo, key words or subconscious motifs in Jim's monologue. Conrad discredits the searching inspection of Jim's soul by the anticlimactic juxtaposition with other pilgrims who take their trivial concerns as seriously as he does.²

In another use of juxtaposition Jim extrapolates, without realizing it, all the elements of the death of the third engineer that are relevant to his own destiny. George died of excitement and over-exertion. His "weak heart" was the real cause of his death. Jim commented: "May I be shot if he hadn't been fooled into killing himself! . . . If he had only kept still. . . . If he had only stood by with his hands in his pockets and called them names! . . . Weak heart! . . . I wish sometimes mine had been" (pp. 85-86). Each of these sentences sooner or later applied quite literally to Jim's own life. If he had only kept still, not only on the ship but also in Patusan where his native friends wanted to get rid of Brown's gang. If he had only stood by with his hands in his pockets and called them names, his fellow officers as well as Brown and his men. But he did not have the guts. His heart *was* weak in many ways, in spite of his renewed assertion: "There's

nothing the matter with *my* heart' . . . and the blow he struck on his chest resounded like a muffled detonation in the night" (pp. 102-3). This blow on his chest has a multiple resonance in the novel, and different overtones cluster around it as we hear it again and again. First the French lieutenant points to his heart to indicate Jim's weakest spot. "The fear, the fear — look you — it is always there!' . . . He touched his breast near a brass button on the very spot where Jim had given a thump to his own protesting there was nothing the matter with his heart" (p. 113). His boast is recalled to the reader's mind when Jim discovers Jewel's love: "It was as if he had received a blow on the chest" (p. 225). His heart was too sensitive and wavering. Thus his sentimental indulgence for Brown and his self-destructive feeling of guilt led up to the last muffled detonation in the night of Doramin's court. His rhetorical wish came true. He was shot. He had been fooled into killing himself. In the third engineer Jim diagnosed his own errors but he could not convert this external perception into self-criticism. Conrad uses here juxtaposition to make of Jim, ironically, a tragic hero: without knowing it, Jim pronounced his own verdict.

Juxtapositions on a larger scale bear on Jim's entire personality. Many descriptions and comments referring to other characters can be applied to Jim without the slightest modification, which shows that they correspond to him in structure, quality, and human relations. They are the objective correlatives of Jim's narcissistic visions, just as all the world around him served only as a mirror "to the youth . . . looking with shining eyes upon that glitter of the vast surface which is only a reflection of his own glances full of fire" (p. 101).

Big Briery stood for all that Jim had always dreamt of achieving: "He had never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident, never a mishap, never a check in his steady rise, and he seemed to be one of those lucky fellows who know nothing of indecision, much less of self-

mistrust. . . . He had saved lives at sea, had rescued ships in distress . . .” (pp. 48-49). Both men exasperated Marlow by their apparent imperviousness to public opinion. “The sting of life could do no more to his complacent soul than the scratch of a pin to the smooth face of a rock” (p. 49). Soon, however, Marlow came to understand that their impassive faces covered an excessive sensitivity. Brierly committed suicide for an unknown reason that “was no doubt of the gravest import, one of those trifles that awaken ideas — start into life some thought with which a man unused to such companionship finds it impossible to live” (p. 50). Later the same kind of thought made Jim commit suicide at Doramin’s hands,³ but at this point of his life the ideal, perfect, successful man Jim would have liked to be, had to judge him. This is virtually an allegory: his actual self was measured by his ideal standards and aspirations. The trial meant for Jim above all the obligation to face his real character and his failure. But he rationalized whatever he had done. Therefore it could not be a purifying process. He was condemned to live in ignominy, with the knowledge of his shortcomings. The real Jim was given another chance to see and accept himself as he was, and to start a new life accordingly, whilst the personification of his illusions found himself unfit to cope with the imperfections of human nature. In other words, even if fate had offered Jim all the requisite opportunities, he would have been doomed to be unhappy because he could not accept the limitations, the flaws inherent in the human condition.

After Jim and the other officers had abandoned the Patna, a French lieutenant remained thirty hours aboard while the ship was being towed to a port. He faced the permanent danger stolidly and did not make a fuss about it afterwards, simply because “one does what one can” (p. 109). “He looked a reliable officer,” (p. 108) and Marlow even discovered physical traces of his past bravery, but he was not particularly impressed by him: “Time had . . . overtaken him and gone ahead” (p. 111). He had

"taken the succession" of the deserters on the ship, had done his duty and was no longer interesting. In fact he was no more than "the raw material of great reputations . . . buried . . . under the foundations of monumental success" (p. 112). Conrad's perversion of values emerges here. Paradoxically he attributes infinitely more importance to Jim who has failed and is yet, as Marlow repeats again and again, "one of us," i.e. the select few who had "known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much — everything — in a flash" (p. 111). Jim hovers ever on the brink of this moment, but he never quite gets through to it. That is what makes him so fascinating in Marlow's eyes. The French officer is a projection of a Jim who would have done his duty without romanticizing his actions. "The iron-grey hair, the heavy fatigue of a tanned face, two scars, a pair of tarnished shoulder-straps" (p. 111) and a certain immobility of body and mind would be the boring attributes of that Jim grown old. Neither the narrator nor his listeners could care for such a morally admirable, dull protagonist.

Fictional technique requires the narrator to remain within the limits of carefully balanced opinions and moral judgements. If he did not, the reader would be too strongly solicited by the task of reassessing continually the narrator's position and objectivity towards the protagonist. Were Marlow himself firmly to adopt the point of view that Jim had lost his honour, no plausible basis for his continued respect and friendship for Jim could be provided, and the emotional tension of the story would collapse. Therefore Conrad uses the French officer to impersonate an attitude towards Jim which Marlow cannot assume but which, the reader feels, is the most natural reaction Marlow should have. The Frenchman, as "the mouthpiece of abstract wisdom" (p. 114), admits that "there is a point-for the best of us . . . when you let go everything. . . . And even for those who do not believe this truth there is fear all the same — the fear of them-

selves" (pp. 113-14). He can go even further and show up Jim as a foolish coward. The narrator himself could not do this, since a "coarser nature than Jim would have remained invulnerably ignorant and completely uninteresting" (p. 136). The Frenchman may be considered as voicing Conrad's view on one particular point: "But the honour . . . that is real. . . . And what life may be worth . . . when the honour is gone . . ." (p. 115). Marlow was distressed that this officer "had pricked the bubble" and discouraged because his inverted hero-worship seemed to be left without a hero. The Frenchman exemplified his own unavowed dissatisfaction at the unattractive results of professional efficiency and rectitude as opposed to Jim's rich career of glorious failure and frustration.

Captain Robinson is an inverted parody of one of Jim's personae. Really shipwrecked, he went through the deserted island adventure that Jim cherished in his imagination. He did not get along with his shipmates either, but his position may have been opposite to Jim's: "Some men are too cantankerous for anything — don't know how to make the best of a bad job — don't see things as they are — as they *are*, my boy! And then what's the consequence? Obvious! Trouble, trouble; as likely as not a knock on the head; and serve 'em right, too. That sort is the most useful when it's dead" (p. 126). This referred evidently to some members of his crew who, like Jim, disagreed with the captain's way of handling things. Therefore Robinson presumably killed those who grumbled, and ate them, too. "He didn't allow any fuss that was made on shore to upset him" (p. 126). This absolute emotional stability allowed him not only to survive but to make a success of life, on his own terms. There was "no superior nonsense" (p. 128) about him. A man who takes things to heart is no good — this is the motto of Robinson's satellite Chester who does all the talking. The two of them are the negative print of Jim and Marlow, a Marlow who felt depressed and frustrated at the end of the trial and deep

down wanted to say to Jim: "If you only could see a thing as it is" (p. 130). He went even as far as admitting to himself that Jim's condemnation was "an empty formality" (p. 133).

On the other hand he could understand why somebody was really upset about missing an opportunity of becoming rich. He felt of "the inaccessible guano deposit" that "one could intelligibly break one's heart over [it]" (p. 133). Two causes of grief and frustration are juxtaposed. Jim's is "the utter disregard of . . . plain duty" (p. 124) and Chester's is the loving vision of guano, of excrements, which seem in the present context to rank higher than the loftiest concept of human thought. Marlow's common sense had been repressed all along by the paternal sympathy addressed to the youngster "you like to imagine yourself to have been" (p. 100). The situation after the trial called for decisive, realistic action. This need or Marlow's second thoughts found their expression in Chester whose sound ideas he felt inclined to adopt. "Maybe, he really could see the true aspect of things that appeared mysterious or utterly hopeless to less imaginative persons" (p. 132). After the French officer's intervention Conrad again uses juxtaposition to put the failure of a weak personality in perspective, and to question the credibility of the narrator's interpretation.

Then the author takes the reader again to the opposite side and confronts his protagonist with his ideal come true on a mythical scale. Stein represents an aged, entirely satisfied Jim, who enjoys the respect and love of all who know him, who has accomplished the perfect harmony of romanticism and material success. The starting-point, the motivation and, up to a point, the phases of his development are homologous to Jim's. After his participation in the revolution of 1848 Stein was obliged to run away. He wandered from one employer to another and from country to country. He prospered as the only white man and trader among natives. His friend, the sultan Bonso, was assassinated. Stein himself nearly lost

his life in an ambush. But he dissembled and killed. He had adapted to life, he could suspend his romantic view of the world long enough to act ruthlessly when there was a need for it.

The verbal and symbolic parallels between two similar situations in their lives strike the reader as intentional. The same pattern underlies the crucial scenes where Stein and Jim respectively had to face death and found a kind of happiness. Their enemies had laid an ambush, several men tried to shoot them. When Stein became aware of it, his reaction was: "This wants a little management" (p. 160). He played their game and pretended to be dead. He killed some of them when they were off guard. He even fired "at a man's back" when he was running for his life. Jim, on the contrary, walked openly up to the hidden enemies, shot one when he could not help it, "experiencing a feeling of unutterable relief, of vengeful elation" (p. 227). Just as Stein, he held his shot till the last second, not in order to be absolutely certain of his aim but "for the pleasure of saying to himself, That's a dead man!" (p. 227). Then he asked the next one: "You want your life?" (p. 228). He allowed the three survivors to return to his mortal enemy, who had sent them to murder him. His heroic attitude, his romantic pose prevailed over common sense. The second part of the scene contained in both cases the emotion which was lacking in the first. Jim's "heart seemed suddenly to grow too big for his breast and choke him in the hollow of his throat" (p. 229) when he became aware that the girl loved him, that he loved the girl. "He trembled" when it dawned upon him that he had found something essential which had been lacking throughout his life. Stein also "shook like a leaf with excitement" (p. 161) when he caught at last what he had in vain pursued for years. Each of them could say, "I had greatly annoyed my principal enemy; I was young, strong; I had friendship; I had love of woman" (p. 161).

Fulfillment had arrived together with the threat of

death, the butterfly throwing "a faint shadow" (p. 160) over the enemy, and the girl's torch illuminating the murderers in the night. The symbolic value becomes obvious. The butterfly casts its shadow on the defeated danger, concentrates Stein's attention on his own pursuit. The girl, the only light in the night of Jim's loneliness from which "there was no refuge . . . except — in her" (p. 226), served a purpose, she showed him dangers, she was a helpmate, a moral support. But she could not make him forget himself, his own ambitions, and replace them by the unselfish enthusiasm for an ideal. He remained a romantic egoist. Stein, too, had lost many dreams (p. 166) but "whatever he followed it had been without faltering, and therefore without shame and without regret" (p. 164). Jim was a prisoner of his dreams, but he was unable to realize them. Defeat paralyzed him, "he stood still — as if confounded" (p. 11), when the moment of decisive action came. He remained a velleitarian, occupied with permanently renewed rationalizations of his failures. Stein, on the contrary, had found and realized the only way. "To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream — and so — *ewig — usque ad finem*" (p. 164). Stein was a Jim that "did not let the splendid opportunity escape" (p. 166). He was not tainted by introspection, he combined idealism with realistic efficiency.

Stein came to the conclusion that Jim "wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil — and every time he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow — so fine as he can never be" (pp. 162-63). Jim's father, the parson, trusted "providence and the established order of the universe, but [was] alive to its small dangers and its small mercies" (p. 257). This "easy morality" did not enable Jim to cope with major ethical problems, but it was strong enough to prevent him from outgrowing an adolescent view of life. One is tempted to define Jim's later conduct as the Freudian phenomenon of self-punishment which he inflicted upon himself in order to forestall his father's blame. He kept his last letter as an admoni-

tion. It is at the same time a symbol of his permanent dependence which resulted in a syndrome of failure. Thus he tried to propitiate a hostile fate. His father's sermons and "a course of light holiday literature" (p. 11) had produced his conscious and lasting desire to be a saint, or at least to be acknowledged as such. Yet the excessive nature of his ambitions, his lack of humility, together with "a strange vengeful attitude towards his own past, and a blind belief in the righteousness of his will against all mankind" (pp. 278-79) put him on the same level as Gentleman Brown. Again the author carefully insinuates their kinship through the analogy of the situations that had marked them, certain features of their characters, and through verbal formulae which they both used.⁴

What distinguished each from the average person was "the arrogant temper of his misdeeds and a vehement scorn for mankind at large and for his victims in particular" (p. 265). This definition concerns Brown but it equally fits Jim's behaviour and attitude on the Patna and during his trial. At that time he also felt "a contempt, a weariness, the desire of life, the wish to try for one more chance" (p. 285) which describes Brown's frame of mind in Patusan. Jim as well as Brown was "moved by some complex intention" (p. 265), Jim's fairness, which had become proverbial in Patusan, was matched in a perverted way by Brown's earnest intention of giving his victims a chance by making them fight him in a duel (p. 265). Both men were individualists, urged by the desire to accomplish something unique, to compel general awe. Brown as well as Jim was at all times undeterred because of "his ruthless faith in himself" (p. 282). Whilst Jim tried to get away from his reputation and gradually moved east, Brown shifted further west as "the South Seas were getting too hot to hold [him]" (p. 216). "At last he had run his head against a stone wall" (p. 282), i.e. against Jim, his counterpart with the inverse scale of values and qualities. They were "standing on the opposite poles of that conception of life which includes all mankind" (p.

286). Therefore they were bound to bring about their mutual downfall, their complete, irrevocable failure. They had started their journey from morally opposite points but their essential identity drew them inevitably together as the positive and negative faces of the same human archetype. Whereas Jim had become more than ever the slave of a self-developed set of values, Brown had liberated himself completely from moral restraints. He was very similar to Kurtz, a being to whom one "could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. . . . There was nothing either above or below him He had kicked himself loose of the earth."⁵ Brown faced life and admitted his shortcomings: "I've lived — and so did you though you talk as if you were one of those people that should have wings so as to go about without touching the dirty earth. Well—it is dirty. I haven't got any wings. I'm here because I was afraid once in my life" (p. 288). Jim might have said this, had he been prepared to face facts, to admit that he was neither better nor worse than most other people. Brown admitted to being the devil that Jim's upbringing had repressed.

There is little external evidence to show Jim's potential cruelty. Only Jewel claims that "the curse of cruelty and madness was already within him, waiting for the day . . . he was made blind and deaf and without pity" (p. 262). And why should we discount more easily the intuitive knowledge of a woman in love than Marlow's prejudiced interpretation? On the Patna he smashed a lamp in the face of a native begging for water. An act of panic. But Jim was capable of it. And on the other hand there is no evidence anywhere that he could be unselfish, charitable, altruistic. He left several of his benevolent, appreciative employers ruthlessly in the lurch, at a moment's notice, as soon as his sensibility was exposed to a sudden shock. He used Jewel and the whole population of Patusan as ointment on his wounded self-respect, and finally as a wager in a desperate bid against fate. He had the same purpose as Brown who "balanced his account with the

evil fortune" (p. 304). This was the chance he had been waiting for. It brought out his essential nature. Marlow's reflection defines Brown's as well as Jim's monomania: "Certain forms of evil are akin to madness, derived from intense egoism, influenced by resistance, tearing the soul to pieces" (p. 259). Both were, in their own ways, on the same level of "mad self-love" (p. 288). They knew "only one of the rules of the game" (p. 66) and never outgrew the fascination of their dreams. This restriction to one human dimension, projected into despicable misery or enlarged into mythic size, precluded Jim from integration in the adult world of multiple interactions.

In spite of their extreme difference they are only two facets of one human complexity: "Is not mankind itself, pushing on its blind way, driven by a dream of its greatness and its power upon the dark paths of excessive cruelty and of excessive devotion?" (p. 263). The reader is shocked at Brown's character and actions. Yet "even in this . . . awful outbreak there is a superiority as of a man who carries right — the abstract thing — within the envelope of his common desires. It was . . . a retribution — a demonstration of some obscure and awful attribute of our nature which, I am afraid, is not so very far under the surface as we like to think" (p. 304). The last sentence implicitly suggests that Jim might easily have changed into a Brown. They are akin in spite of their differences: "There ran through the rough talk a vein of subtle references to their common blood, an assumption of common experience; a sickening suggestion of common guilt, of secret knowledge that was like a bond of their minds and of their hearts" (p. 291). Fate alone decided which of the potential personae would prevail.

NOTES

- ¹Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 219. All subsequent page references are from this edition.
- ²Albert J. Guerard comments as follows on this scene: "Such sudden corrective juxtaposition is at once the novel's characteristic way of redressing a balance of meaning and its chief way of moving us emotionally. It may operate in both directions, of course: correcting an excessive austerity of judgment or correcting an excessive sympathy." *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965), p. 154.
- ³Charles C. Clark elaborates the correlation between the two suicides in his article "The Brierly Suicide: A New Look at an Old Ambiguity," *Arlington Quarterly*, 1:2, Winter 1967-68, 259-65.
- ⁴Cheris Kramer believes that Jim saw the parallel between Brown and himself and reacted accordingly. "Parallel Motives in *Lord Jim*," *Conradiana*, 2:1, Fall 1969, 58.
- ⁵Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dell, 1969), p. 110. Paul Kirschner feels that "Jim's finest achievement springs from the same source, but the difference is that Brown can form no viable dream (significantly, his one sentimental ideal—a missionary's wife—was already dying when he carried her off)." *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), pp. 55-56.