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# 'LORD JIM': THE ROMANTIC FEELING OF REALITY

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"...The romantic feeling of reality was in me an inborn faculty. This in itself may be a curse, but when disciplined by a sense of personal responsibility and a recognition of the hard facts of existence shared with the rest of mankind, becomes but a point of view from which the very shadows of life appear endowed with an internal glow. And such romanticism is not a sin. It is none the worse for the knowledge of truth. It only tries to make the best of it, hard as it may be; and in this hardness discovers a certain aspect of beauty."

(Joseph Conrad, Preface to **Within the Tides**, 1915)

"He is romantic — romantic," he repeated. "And that is very bad — very bad ... very good, too," he added. "But is he?" I queried.

"Gewiss," he said, and stood still holding up the candelabrum, but without looking at me. "Evident! What is it that by inward pain makes him know himself? What is it that for you and me makes him — exist?"

(**Lord Jim**, Chapter 20)

Both Conrad and Stein, the character he created in *Lord Jim*, agree that the "romantic feeling of reality" can be both "very good" and "very bad". This double perspective, of the "curse" and "the blessing" of romance in human life, together with the tragic dilemma it involves for Jim and perhaps for all men, underlie the major themes and concerns in *Lord Jim*.

In what way is the "romantic feeling for reality" a curse for the "hero" of the book, Jim? In chapter 1 the young Jim on his training ship is presented as a romantic dreamer, continuously indulging in heroic reveries where "he saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane ... always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book."

These heroic pretensions are soon shaken, though by no means shattered, by the storm that hits the training ship. Jim is then "confounded" by "the brutal tumult of earth and sky", and "stood still", while his young sea mates act quickly to lower the cutter and save two drowning men. So much for Jim's romantic daydreams. He has had a first taste of "the hard facts of existence" — two of them in fact, namely, nature's malevolence towards men and men's own paralyzing fear when confronted by this 'unintelligent brutality of existence'. Yet instead of letting such 'hard facts' check or discipline his excessive romanticism, Jim represses the insight they afford. He deliberately forgets his fear ('he could detect no trace of emotion in

himself") and foolishly dismisses 'the menace of wind and seas' as 'spurious'. His incorrigible romantic fantasy again takes over and completes his self-deception as 'he exulted with fresh certitude in his avidity for adventure and in a sense of many-sided courage'.

In Chapter 2 we are told that 'Imagination is the enemy of men, the father of all terrors'. Jim's undisciplined romanticism is a double curse — it not only deceives him about himself but also about the nature of external reality, exaggerating both his dreams and his terrors. Jim proves this only too well in the Patna incident. Faced by the possibility of the ship sinking with over 800 unsuspecting pilgrims on board, the oncoming squall which threatened the already damaged hull of the Patna, and with the morally corrupting example of his fellow crewmen, Jim once more stands still — his will and action paralysed. By what? Again it is the 'curse' of an uncontrolled imagination, that after having been nourished for so long by untested dreams of romance and adventure, turns treacherously against Jim and blows up out of all proportion the terrors and hopelessness of the situation. 'His confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic, the trampling rush, the pitiful screams, boats swamped — all the appalling incidents of a disaster at sea he had ever heard of'. (Chapter 7). Later on Marlow understands that Jim "was a gifted poor devil with the faculty of swift and forestalling vision. The sights it showed him had turned him into cold stone from the soles of his feet to the nape of his neck; but there was a hot dance of thoughts in his head, a dance of tame, blind mute thoughts — a whirl of awful cripples.' (Chapter 8) After the jump from the Patna, which for Jim mean the fall from his ideal of honour, he 'had an unconcious conviction that the reality could not be half as bad, not half as anguishing, appalling and vengeful as the created terrors of his imagination.' (Chapter 10) But by then such a recognition comes too late — he was already in that 'everlasting deep hole' of lost honour.

Such is the 'curse' that an undisciplined 'romantic feeling' can bring with it. However, in *Lord Jim*, we are also shown the other side of the coin, namely the abiding necessity of romantic ideals in human life, in spite of the illusions and dangers that an excessive romantic imagination is prone to. Elsewhere Conrad stressed the necessity: 'Imagination, not invention, is the supreme master of art as of life'. When the 'imagination' is not disciplined by the hard facts of life and a related sense of personal responsibility, it degenerates into 'invention' or reverie, an irresponsible faculty that caters exclusively for the impotent and self-deceiving fantasies of the mind, as in Jim's case. On the other hand, Conrad maintains that the romantic imagination that is restrained by the reality it perceives, that does full justice to the truth, can in turn discover for men 'an internal glow' and an 'aspect of beauty' even in the hard facts of life. Conrad beleives that it is the imaginative people, *initially* like Jim, rather than the dull and the prudent, who can feel the 'intensity of life', who have the essential vitality and drive to approach life with a sense of wonder and adventure,

and who find in themselves the enthusiasm necessary to grapple with harsh reality in an effort to realize their ideals. This is why in *Lord Jim*, Marlow repeatedly contrasts the romantic feeling of reality to the matter-of-fact, cautious and ‘dull’ attitude:

‘My last words about Jim shall be few. I affirm he had achieved greatness; but the thing would be dwarfed in the telling, or rather in the hearing. Frankly, It is not my words that I mistrust but your minds. I could be eloquent were I not afraid you fellows had starved your imagination to feed your bodies. I do not mean to be offensive, it is respectable to have no illusions — and safe — and profitable — and dull. Yet you too, in your time must have known the intensity of life, that light of glamour created in the shock of trifles, as amazing as the glow of sparks struck from a cold stone — and as short-lived, alas!’ (Chapter 21)

Marlow himself is struck by Jim’s youthful resilience, his irrepressible romantic hopes that even after the humiliation of the Patna episode and the ensuing inquiry save Jim from despair. Though Marlow’s ironic scepticism and his mature realism make him aware of the great measure of illusion in such hopes, yet they strike a sympathetic and ever latent chord in him — ‘He was a youngster of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been; of the sort whose appearance claims the fellowship of those illusions you have thought gone out, extinct, cold, and which, as if rekindled at the approach of another flame, gave a flutter deep, deep down somewhere, gave a flutter of light... of heat.’ (Chapter 11) Marlow often describes Jim with his youthful hopes and dreams, as a point of light amidst an all-encompassing darkness, suggesting perhaps that Jim’s idealism, defective though it may be, is the last ‘flutter of light’ in a nihilistic world dominated by ‘dark powers’, a world which knows of no human ideals, which negates them repeatedly until they are made to appear to man himself as mere ‘illusions’. Jim’s stubborn clinging to his ideal of honour despite his unforgettable disgrace gave him, in Marlow’s eyes, symbolic status. His youthful, even if perhaps ‘blind’ faith in romantic values make Jim a representative of mankind in its struggle to raise itself above the misery, evil and failures that are the inescapable conditions of the human lot in the world:

‘He was like a figure set up on a pedestal, to represent in his persistent youth the power, perhaps the virtues, of races that never grow old, that have emerged from the gloom. I don’t know why he should always have appeared to me symbolic. Perhaps this is the real cause of my interest in his fate!’ (Chapter 26)

In *Lord Jim* Conrad clearly shows up the dangers and illusions that an excessive romanticism can involve — Jim’s self-deceptions, his ‘selfish idealism’ are too glaringly obvious to be missed. And yet it also Jim’s obstinate refusal to abandon his ideal of honour that raises him in Marlow’s eyes far above such men as the German captain, Chester, Cornelius and Brown — men who have actively rejected the ideal of honour and de-

generated to a semi-bestial existence largely determined by greed, selfishness and destruction. For Conrad, romantic ideals may be, and indeed often are, proved to be 'illusions' (more so perhaps in the modern world) and yet they are, as he elsewhere says, 'saving illusions', and therefore necessary, for without them man faces the risk of sinking back to the 'gloom' of barbarity and eventual extinction (a theme he explored more fully in *The Heart of Darkness*).

But equally necessary for Conrad is a growing sense of personal responsibility which should check the excesses of the 'romantic feeling'. One major theme in Conrad's work is the ordeal of an individual, often involving his moral isolation from all normal supports of family and community, in which his romantic beliefs are put to the test and his real worth is revealed. In Chapter 2, the narrator speaks of Jim as having never 'been tested by the events of the sea that ... reveal the quality of his resistance and the secret truth of his pretences, not only to others but also to himself.' The first real trial for Jim occurs on the Patna, Finding himself for the first time on his own, Jim has to choose between courageous loyalty to the sailors' "fixed standard of conduct" on the one hand, and his fear and instinct for survival on the other. Jim fails the test, as he had done on the training ship. But this time his romantic sensibility receives a potentially salutary shock:

'he was partly stunned by the discovery he had made — the discovery about himself... You must understand he did not try to minimize its importance. Of that I am sure, and therein lies his distinction.'

Jim's anguished sense of the seriousness of his 'jump', shows an acute, if not quite complete, awareness of personal guilt and responsibility, even though as Marlow perceives, Jim tended 'to make so much of his disgrace while it is the guilt alone that matters.' But in spite of this ambiguity in Jim's motives, it is a fact that he, alone of the crew, remains behind to face the enquiry, knowing beforehand the disgraceful outcome it involved for him. When later Marlow succumbs to Brierly's suggestion and tries to bribe Jim into running away, Jim stubbornly refuses and Marlow has to admit that 'no doubt he was selfish, too, but his selfishness had a higher origin, a more lofty aim. I discovered that say what I would, he was eager to go through the ceremony of execution. There was something fine in the wildness of his, unexplained, hardly formulated hope. "Clear out. Couldn't think of it," he said with a shake of his head.' (Chapter 13)

Jim's two other major 'tests' both occur in Patusan. Once more, he is on his own when he arrives at Patusan, where he is promptly captured by the predatory Tunku Allang. Jim bravely makes his second and this time heroic 'jump' and escapes to the Bugis settlement. There he manages to organize and unite the Bugis under Doramin, and eventually leads them to victory over Sherif Ali, bringing a great measure of stability and peace

in Patusan. After this 'conquest of love, honour, men's confidence,' Tuan Jim assumes full responsibility for Patusan and its people. He has passed this test brilliantly — it seems. And yet, has he *fully* developed that saving 'sense of personal responsibility' and the 'recognition' of 'hard facts'?

Jim's third and final 'test', his confrontation with the forces of evil incarnated by Gentleman Brown, ends in catastrophe. Brown, who has viciously rejected all ideals of honour, reminds Jim of his own betrayal of honour on the Patna. Jim is again paralyzed by this reminder — because he has never really wanted to recognize, much less admit consciously to himself that universal 'weakness unknown, not perhaps suspected ... from which none of us is safe'. (Chapter 5) Brown's presence in Patusan triggers into awareness this repressed weakness, and because Jim has never wanted to see it, he cannot now cope with it. Instead it leads him to underestimate the evil and vindictive capacity in Brown. Out of an excessive, and in this case sadly misplaced ideal of personal honour, Jim allows Brown and his band to get away fully armed. Jim here displays his basic tragic flaw — he has too much of the innocence of the dove and too little of the equally essential wisdom of the serpent. Jim's fatal decision, his third 'leap', results in the death of his friend Dain Waris, Doramin's son and the loss of the trust and honour he enjoyed among the Patusan population. In an apparently cruel decision, he abandons his wife (betraying the promise he had made to remain with her forever) and gives himself up to Doramin, determined to remain loyal to his ideal of honour by facing the consequences of his mistake. He fully (but as Marlow perceives, perhaps too proudly) assumes responsibility for the disaster. 'Yes. Upon my head.' But is Jim's final act of immolation an act of heroism or egoism? Is it proof of fidelity to a romantic ideal or simply a selfish betrayal of wife and life? We shall return to this difficult question later on.

But an eventual 'answer' to it certainly depends on the related question of whether Jim ever attains to that recognition of the 'hard facts of existence' which for Conrad saved the 'romantic feeling' from becoming a 'curse' or a 'sin'. In Conrad, these 'hard facts' meant primarily the inescapable evils in human life. As in many of Conrad's novels, in *Lord Jim* evil is presented in two basic forms — the evil outside man in nature, and the world, and the corresponding evil inside man himself. Thus Marlow in Chapter 5 speaks of the necessity for 'an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature, and the seductive corruption of men — backed by a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas.' For instance, what Conrad often calls the 'dark powers' can reveal themselves in the hostility of elements in a storm at sea when 'there appears on the face of facts a sinister violence of intention'. (Chapter 2) This is why the whole Patna incident takes in Jim's mind all the grim aspects of grotesque horror — 'a joke hatched in hell'. But it is not just the set of natural circumstances that confront Jim with evil on the Patna; evil also

acts in the fear and moral degradation, the 'seductive corruption' of the other crewmen. The German captain (an 'incarnation of everything vile and base that lurks in the world we love) and the two engineers have thrown overboard, all sense of honour and duty the moment they see their lives in danger — and their wretched fear finds an answering call from Jim's own instinctive 'inward terror'. As always in Conrad, evil inside responds to evil outside to demoralize the individual in his moment of trial. Marlow himself has to fight the 'inward terrors', though in his case they are not, as for Jim, the excesses of an undisciplined imagination, but the opposite and equally dangerous extreme of sceptical ideas 'Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds knocking at the back door of your mind ... each carrying away some of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy.' (Chapter 5) The failure of Jim's ideals on board the *Patna* throws Marlow into existential doubts about the validity of his own (and all men's) values when challenged by the overwhelming forces of evil around and inside men. This is why Marlow is haunted by that 'most obstinate ghost of man's creation ... more chilling than the certitude of death — the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct.' (Chapter 5) But perhaps the most deadly form of evil inherent in man is, for Conrad, that form of egoism 'akin to madness' which has cynically renounced all ideals of honour and decency. This is exemplified by Gentleman Brown, in whom 'an almost inconceivable egotism ... made him, when resisted or foiled in his will, mad with the indignant and revengeful rage of a thwarted autocrat.' (Chapter 43)

Faced with such forces of evil, how does man confront them without falling either in despair and suicide (Brierly) or becoming mad and destructive himself (Brown)? A clue to Conrad's answer to this question is contained in that phrase 'a recognition of the hard facts *shared by the rest of mankind*'. In Conrad's view man could only hope to make a stand against the dark powers by remaining loyal to a deep-felt sense of human solidarity. More specifically, a person showed his real worth by being faithful to the values and beliefs that unite and sustain men within the human community — among such values were 'honour, fidelity, friendship and duty'. In many of his works Conrad often symbolized this fidelity to the human group in the image of a sailor's loyalty to the code of conduct that united the crew on board a ship — what Marlow in *Lord Jim* calls the 'honour' or the 'solidarity' or again the 'secret' of the craft. In jumping from the *Patna* Jim had, in Marlow's phrase, fallen 'out of the ranks' betraying not only the seamen's code but also his human obligations to the rest of mankind. Early in the story Marlow affirms that Jim's fate 'concerned me no more than as a member of an obscure body of men held together by a community of inglorious toil and by fidelity to a standard of conduct.' (Chapter 5) But later on, Jim's jump from the *Patna* comes to represent for Marlow no less 'than a breach of faith with the community of mankind, and from that point of view he was no mean traitor.' (Chapter 14)

Alternatively in *Lord Jim*, Conrad pictures the spirit of fidelity to the human group as devotion to the 'spirit of the land!' In Chapter 21, Marlow says that it is 'the lonely, without a fireside or an affection they can call their own, those who return not to a dwelling but to the land itself, to meet its disembodied, eternal and unchangeable spirit — it is those who understand best its severity, its saving power, the grace of its secular right to our fidelity, to our obedience.'

The profound sense of the 'fixed standard of conduct' that unites members within the human group against the forces of evil, together with the tragic consequences suffered by the lonely individual who has cut himself from it by betrayal, is one dominant theme in *Lord Jim*. Of course the sense of exile from the 'homeland' or the human community in part springs from Conrad's own experiences as an exiled Pole. But in *Lord Jim* (as in many of Conrad's novels) it is given universal and mythical significance. Jim is repeatedly described as 'one of us' — as representative of us all who, at one time or another, have fallen short of our ideals, and felt exiled by a sense of guilt and betrayal from our most cherished beliefs and the human community that embodies them. Gradually, in the book, we see Jim's predicament as exile, symbolically assuming the universal proportions of the whole human condition in this world. This is hinted at in Stein's words: 'Man is amazing, but he is not a masterpiece ... Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him.' (Chapter 20) Stein is here echoing one of Conrad's recurring motifs — that man is not at home in the universe; he is out of place, a misfit, haunted by a painful sense of divorce between himself and reality. In his most lucid moments of awareness, man feels himself living in a world that is alien to him, a place of exile in fact, where he is burdened by an anguished sense of guilt and betrayal, re-enacting daily the immemorial myth of the Fall and exile from a Paradise lost, torn between the conflicting claims of the need to survive and the need to regain a lost human integrity. It is this larger background that implicates us in Jim's plight, in his romantic ideals and the 'humble reality' of his egoism and failure, in his pathos and his tragedy.

It is in fact Conrad's essentially tragic view of man in the world that lends Jim's story its wide-ranging appeal and its deep abiding significance. In the quotation which heads this essay, Conrad presents his own 'romantic feeling of reality' as a point of view, a disciplined vision, which achieves a precarious balance between 'the romance' and the 'reality', between the shadows of life and their 'internal glow', between the 'hard truth' and its 'aspect of beauty'. Such a vision has been aptly described by David Cecil as 'a complex mixture of pessimistic scepticism and romantic faith'. In *Lord Jim* Conrad, through Marlow, acknowledges both the necessary truth of the human reality, with its shadows, its 'hard facts', its weaknesses and evil, and the 'truth' (perhaps more difficult to prove nowadays, but equally necessary) of man's romantic ideals which impell him to heroic endeavours

that as often as not lead him into extremes of glory *and/or* catastrophe. Jim is a youth of excellent intentions, full of romantic dreams and ideals — but he repeatedly fails to live up to them, and in his efforts to redeem himself and his lost honour he deals death and suffering to himself and others:

‘And yet 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? And what is the pursuit of truth after all?’ (Chapter 37)

Jim’s plight represents the universal tragic dilemma of man as a lover of the absolute astray in a world where everything is relative. For Conrad, man is condemned to thought, a *rational* view of justice and freedom, in a world which seems to know of neither justice nor freedom, but only necessity — the necessity of blind force, chance and suffering. And yet man insists, because it is in his nature as a *conscious* being to insist, in finding an explanation, a meaning, a justification to suffering. Conrad explicitly states elsewhere ‘What makes mankind tragic is not that they are the victims of nature, it is that they are conscious of it. To be part of the animal kingdom under the conditions of this earth is very well — but as soon as you know of your slavery the pain, the anger, the strife — the tragedy begins.’ Man is therefore forced by his own nature to explain the inexplicable, even though, he lives, according to Conrad, “in a world where no explanation is final.’ Hence the unresolvable conflict between man’s romantic ideals and the ‘humble reality’ of his situation. It is this conflict which is dramatized in Jim’s life. The central question, which the book poses to the reader is — in a world which knows only of ‘hard facts’, was Jim *simply* a selfish dreamer and were his romantic ideals nothing but dreams? or did he and his ideals have some kind of reality, some real and significant existence, not only for Marlow, but for all of us?

Such a question gains its immediacy and relevance for us in our age when seen against the background of ideas and attitudes that were gaining ground when Conrad wrote *Lord Jim* and that have perhaps become more widespread and dominant in our times. At the turn of the century, Conrad had to contend with a growing scientific worldview which saw the origin and development of human existence not in the wise providence of a Creator God but from the undifferentiated matter of the physicists, who revealed to modern man the terrible spectacle of an earth destined to ‘run down’, to end in the formless darkness of entropy. Confronted by this vision of a mankind and an earth destined to oblivion, what is the whole point of humanity? — are not man’s hopes and his romantic ideals of improvement and perfection in this world sad illusions in an absurd and meaningless universe that is ultimately to disintegrate into the inert matter from which it all ‘inexplicably’ sprang? Conrad explicitly refers to this vision in one of his letters:



‘Of course reason is hateful — but why? Because it demonstrates (to those who have the courage) that we, living, are out of life — utterly out of it ... The fate of a humanity condemned ultimately to perish from cold is not worth troubling about. If you take it to heart it becomes an unendurable tragedy. If you believe in improvement you must weep, for the attained perfection must end in cold, darkness and silence ... Life knows us not and we do not know life — we don’t know even our own thoughts. Half the words we use have no meaning whatever and of the other half each man understands each word after the fashion of his own folly and conceit. Faith is a myth and beliefs shift like mists on the shore: thoughts vanish; words once pronounced, die... As our peasants say; “Pray, brother, forgive one for the love of God!” And we don’t know what forgiveness is, nor what love is, nor where God is.”’

Conrad faced and struggled bravely against this paralyzing vision in his major novels, including *Lord Jim*. In Chapter 7, Marlow alerts the reader to the symbolic relevance of Jim’s plight to that of humanity — “the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind’s conception of itself.’ In Chapter 2, when Jim is injured and feverish below deck, while a storm is tossing the ship, he has a momentary glimpse of a meaningless, chaotic universe and man’s inexplicable agony in it ‘now and again an uncontrollable rush of anguish would grip him bodily, make him gasp and writhe under the blankets, and then the unintelligent brutality of an existence liable to the agony of such sensations filled him with a despairing desire to escape at any cost. Then fine weather returned, and he thought no more about it.” Typically, and perhaps inevitably, Jim represses these thoughts. It is Marlow who later has a full and horrifying glimpse of a nihilistic universe, stripped of all human ideals, values and meaning. When Jewel in Chapter 33 describes to Marlow the tragic scene of her mother’s death, with its evidence of the infinite agony, degradation and abysmal depths of evil that man is heir to, his mind is troubled by the “irremediable horror of the scene”.

‘It had the power to drive me out of my conception of existence, out of the shelter each of us makes for himself to creep under in moments of danger, as a tortoise withdraws within its shell. For a moment, *I had a view of a world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder*, while, in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive. But still — it was only a moment. I went back into my shell directly. One must — don’t you know? though I seemed to have lost all my words *in the chaos of dark thoughts I had contemplated for a second or two beyond the pale.*’

Marlow here is momentarily aware of the ‘moral chaos’ lurking behind our human ideas of order, just as earlier. Jim’s failure to live up to the ideals of honour as seamen and human being had led Marlow to question and doubt the validity of these ideals in standing the onslaught of the nihil-

istic forces of evil — what he describes as ‘the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct.’ (Chapter 5). Faced with Jim’s failure, Marlow felt that he was being ‘made to comprehend the Inconceivable ... to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and the essential sincerity of falsehood.’ (Chapter 8) And yet, given that mankind’s ideals, its romantic ‘dreams of its greatness and power’ are proved to be mere ‘convention’, mere illusions, by their failure in the face of the forces of evil (forces which for Conrad were assuming virulent forms in modern nihilism), can men afford to give them up completely? Marlow (and Conrad) hold that man cannot give up these ‘illusions’, without at the same time giving up all sense of human dignity and honour, and degenerating into a sub-human existence, specimens of which are given in the German Captain, Cornelius and Brown, (all of whom are described in terms of animal imagery). Conrad’s position has been ably summed up by R. P. Warren:

‘Conrad’s scepticism is ultimately but a ‘reasonable’ recognition of the fact that man is a natural creature who can rest on no revealed values and can look forward to neither individual immortality nor racial survival. But reason in this sense is the denial of life and energy, for against all reason man insists, as man, on creating and trying to live by certain values. These values are, to use Conrad’s word, ‘illusions’, but the last wisdom is for man to realise that though his values are illusions the illusion is necessary, infinitely precious, is the mark of his human achievements, and is, in the end, his only truth.’

It is within the framework of Conrad’s complex, tragic vision of human life, caught between the conflicting claims of romantic ideals and ‘human realities’, of “illusions” and truth, that Jim’s final act of self-immolation must be viewed. Was his a martyrdom or a suicide? Was he motivated by an ‘exalted egoism’ or an ‘eternal constancy’ to his and Humanity’s ideal of honour? For Marlow, as for Conrad and possibly his readers, Jim’s ultimate motives remain ambivalent. For though Jim does remain faithful to his ideal of honour, he betrays his wife, Jewel, and his fidelity is bought at the cost of much suffering and death. As Conrad perceives, Fidelity to a ‘fixed standard of conduct’ is the only possible human defence against the destructive force of moral nihilism. But Fidelity itself is not an absolute remedy for the evils of the human condition, condemned as it is to romantic ideals which can neither be fully actuated nor utterly abandoned. ‘Strictly speaking, the question is not how to get cured, but how to live’ as Marlow says. For men, Like Jim, often discover that Fidelity to one principle means betrayal of another — and this is the tragedy in the question of how to live. Thus ‘Jim goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct.’ As Conrad says in his book *A Personal Record*.

‘It would take too long to explain the infinite alliance of contradictions in Human Nature which makes love itself wear at times the desperate shape of betrayal. And perhaps there is no possible explanation.’

Because there is, perhaps, 'no possible explanation', Marlow sees Jim as 'inscrutable at heart', standing at the heart of a 'vast enigma', as 'he passes away under a cloud'. At times Jim appears to Marlow an unreal 'disembodied spirit' belonging to a 'world of shades'. But at others, Marlow confesses 'that the reality of his existence comes to me with an immense, with an overwhelming force.'

'Who knows?' asks Marlow, and this final conclusion (or lack of it) ends the novel on an ambiguous note. Such ambiguity should not however be mistaken for confusion or non-commitment on Conrad's part. On the contrary, Conrad deliberately holds up this ambivalent ending both as a reminder and as a warning for the reader not to simplify (and hence distort) the tragic dilemma of man in the world by any facile judgement:

'The part of the inexplicable should be allowed for in appraising the conduct of men in a world where no explanation is final. No Charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered.' (**A Personal Record**).

The tragic uncertainty of the human condition is maintained by Conrad throughout *Lord Jim* and reflected in Marlow's untiring quest to understand sympathetically yet truthfully Jim's story. When Stein tells Marlow that it is because he is romantic that Jim exists, Marlow confesses that:

'At that moment it was difficult to believe in Jim's existence — starting from a country parsonage, blurred by crowds of men as by clouds of dust, silenced by the clashing claims of life and death in a material world—but his imperishable reality came to me with a convincing, with an irresistible force.' (Chapter 20)

It is this 'imperishable reality' of man's aspiration, of his ideals and dreams that Conrad's art at its best seeks to express without however, losing sight of the clashing claims of life and death, the 'hard facts' of existence. The measure of Conrad's success is shown by the fact that the reader often comes to feel and believe in it, like the sceptical Marlow, 'with a convincing, with an irresistible force'.

'What is it that Novalis says? "It is certain my conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it." And what is a novel if not a conviction of our fellow-man's existence strong enough to take upon itself a form of imagined life clearer than reality and whose accumulated verisimilitude of selected episodes puts to shame the pride of documentary history.'" (**A Personal Record**)

Significantly, Conrad's used the saying of Novalis as a subtitle to the original edition of *Lord Jim*, revealing his central concern in the book to bear witness to Jim's (and humanity's) existence, in spite of the transience and dissolution that threaten (nowadays perhaps more than ever) mankind and its ideals in the material world. This central concern is everywhere evident in this book — it is seen in Jim's desperate struggle to make his experience credible and real to Marlow, in Marlow's ironic yet deeply sym-

pathetic efforts to understand Jim, in Stein's attempts to explain to Marlow the inexplicable question of 'how to be' and finally, in Conrad's own art, with its complex narrative method seeking 'by indirection to find direction out' — to put through to the reader *his* conviction of Jim and Mankind's existence in a world where everything is an illusion destined to oblivion. It is this conviction of the reality of man's aspirations, ideals and dreams, however "illusory" they may be 'proved' by modern nihilism, that makes Conrad's works, and among them *Lord Jim*, of great importance and relevance for us. With Marlow, Conrad can claim of Jim's story, that:

'It was a strange and melancholy illusion, *evolved half-consciously like all our illusions, which I suspect only to be visions of remote unattainable truth, seen dimly.* This was, indeed one of the last forgotten unknown places of the earth; I had looked under its obscure surface; and I felt that when tomorrow I had left it for ever, it would slip out of existence, to live only in my memory till I myself passed into oblivion. I have that feeling about me now; perhaps it is that feeling which had incited me to tell you the story, to try to hand over to you, as it were, *its very existence, its reality — the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion.*'  
(Chapter 34)

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