

Joseph Conrad's Play of Light and Shadow

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In his most widely read story, *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad depicts the slow, painstaking journey of Marlow, his literary alter ego, out of the orderly world of European civilization and into the primeval forest of the African interior. At Marlow's final, frightful destination, however, he is not confronted with the conventional, reassuringly distant dangers of the nineteenth-century Western imagination: spear-throwing natives or totem-worshipping cannibals. Instead, his trip up the Congo River brings him to Mr. Kurtz, a man once imbued with seemingly noble European ideals who has given himself over to horrifying appetites and brutal methods.

Mr. Kurtz has become one of modern literature's most haunting images, and for good reason: As the modern world took shape, an emerging critical consciousness was suggesting—and for that matter, continues to suggest—that our civilized selves are in truth collective illusions, papier-mâché egos constructed out of thin layers of social convention. To be sure, in most instances we experience our culturally constructed selves as permanent and unbreakable. But after gaining a degree of sociological self-awareness, by

way of either an encounter with other cultures or the historical study of our own, we often find that our most deeply held convictions are arbitrary, even alien. I could have been, one thinks, an ancient Roman, cheering for blood in a coliseum as gladiators fought to the death, or a scalp-collecting Apache, or a nineteenth-century Mormon with many wives.

For some, the initial shock of critical awareness gives way to a sense of liberation. Marlow, for instance, conjuring pictures of howling, leaping natives engaged in their sacred rituals, admits to finding thrilling “the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.”¹ This secret (or not-so-secret) envy of urges expressed and hungers satisfied percolates through a great deal of pioneering work in modern anthropology: One need only think of Margaret Mead, who relished what she imagined to be the sexual innocence of primitive Samoan society. Yet for others, this same critical awareness can terrify. Stripped of our confidence in inherited norms, we might understandably begin to worry that, underneath the veneer of culture, there is nothing but a lawless riot of primitive desires. And indeed, the first half of the twentieth century—from the bomb-pocked no man’s land of World War I, through the funereal prisons of Soviet Russia and the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, to the consuming furnaces of Nazi Germany—would appear to have borne that suspicion out. Conrad’s imaginative vision of a single man’s internal degradation arguably became the cultural experience of two generations.

Yet as vivid as Conrad’s story remains, we should be wary of claiming for it the mantle of prophecy. The evidence suggests that our supposed illusions of civilized life are not inevitably shattered by a critical awareness of their failures. After all, European culture did not grind to a halt in the smoldering ruins of 1945. Whether by means of repentance, retribution, or sheer forgetfulness, the old social order was in large part restored. Émile Durkheim, the great French sociologist and Conrad’s contemporary, explained this seeming paradox. The rapidly changing social structures of modern industrial societies, he observed, overthrew established cultural norms. But while this weakened social authority produced a greater sense of personal

freedom, it came at the cost of psychic stability. “We no longer know the limits of legitimate needs, nor perceive the direction of our efforts,” he wrote in his influential 1897 work *Suicide*.² This crisis of meaning arising from a lack of life-governing norms—what he called “anomie”—poses a dire existential threat. The human psyche, he warned, needs authoritative guidance to consolidate and sustain a coherent sense of self. Therefore, while on the theoretical level a critical consciousness may make us aware of the arbitrariness of our convictions, at the same time it works to establish the psychological and social basis for our intensely felt desire to affirm and submit to societal norms.

The complexities and contradictions of our modern critical consciousness—the thrill as well as the disquietude, the freedom as well as the hunger for authority—are precisely what shape Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, another tale largely told by Marlow, and one that was written soon after *Heart of Darkness*. A much longer and more ambitious work of fiction, *Lord Jim* brings the frightful character of Mr. Kurtz out of the shadows and into the full light of day. Instead of a bloodthirsty madman who has assembled a private army—hardly the trajectory of most modern lives—the protagonist, Jim, is fair-haired and well-mannered, from a good family, eager to please, and well-meaning. He is, as Conrad emphasizes more than once, “one of us.” In fact, he is an almost perfect image of a modern ideal: True to his self-crafted inner life, he refuses to allow society to define his identity. This anomic protest—its appeal as well as its danger—serves as the singular focus of *Lord Jim*, making it one of the most sophisticated sociological novels of the modern era, and one with a great deal still to teach us about the paradoxical experience of modern life.

Born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in Berdichev in 1857, Joseph Conrad and his family came from that class of Polish-speaking landowners who had established themselves as rulers over the Ukrainian-speaking peasantry they had colonized centuries before—only to be

themselves subjugated by Prussians, Austrians, and Russians when Poland collapsed as a political entity at the beginning of the modern era. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a nationalist poet and ardent revolutionary who devoted his life to the visionary cause of Polish independence. Not an inconsequential romantic, Korzeniowski's involvement in the Polish insurrection of 1863 led to exile. The young Conrad and his mother followed him, although she died of tuberculosis soon after. The various Central European cities of Conrad's remaining childhood were roiled by social dislocations and animated by tremendous cultural passions—the latter of which both inspired and destroyed his father, who died in 1869 and was given a hero's burial in Cracow, the traditional capital of Polish dreams. The strange circumstances and ideological absurdities of his early life were not lost on Conrad. Decades later, he described his father wryly as a romantic nationalist motivated by a messianic Slavism, a person whose life was shaped by impossible fantasies.

Such, too, is the character of the young seaman Jim, who enjoys, Conrad explains in the opening pages of his third novel, a distinct capacity for moral fantasy, one that allowed him to exalt himself in his own mind. From his station “in the fore-top” of his training vessel, he often looks down, “with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of danger.”³ Saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in hurricanes, swimming through the surf with a line—Jim imagines himself always “an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.”⁴

Reality, however, intrudes. A winter gale brings a maritime emergency. The training ship is suddenly alive with action, some of the young members of the crew heading out in rescue boats. But Jim remains behind, strangely paralyzed by the raw power of the gale, missing his chance to participate in the rescue. This reaction to his inaction is telling, and establishes the psychological terrain for the rest of the novel: “He felt angry with the brutal tumult of the earth and sky for taking him unawares,” Conrad writes, “and checking unfairly a generous readiness for narrow escapes.”⁵ In other words, reality has failed, not Jim. It has failed to recognize his true character, failed

to give him a chance to display his heroism publicly. In this imaginative reversal of responsibility, Jim is able to preserve his self-image. Indeed, he chalks up the entire episode to a learning experience, one that will invariably contribute to his eventual triumphs. Where shame might have intruded and forced a painful self-examination, Jim looks back and “exulted with fresh certitude in his avidity for adventure, and in a sense of many-sided courage.”⁶

Across the many pages of the novel, Jim’s personality remains constant. Having begun his career as a seaman, he rises to become the chief mate of a fine ship; after an injury sends him ashore in a Far-Eastern port for convalescence, he takes a position as an officer on the *Patna*, a rusty old steamer chartered to take Malaysian pilgrims to Mecca. All during the uneventful stillness of placid nights on the Indian Ocean, Jim returns to his youthful habits of mind. “At such times,” Conrad writes, “his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements.”⁷

Inevitably, however, reality once again intervenes, threatening to taint Jim’s heroic self-image. In the middle of the night, a passing piece of floating wreckage silently tears a hole in the *Patna*. The ship hovers on the brink of disaster as her bulkhead strains to the point of failure. As the hundreds of pilgrims aboard the ship sleep, the captain and the other officers—who, along with Jim, are the only Europeans onboard—shamelessly decide to save their own skins by secretly abandoning the vessel, thus avoiding a general alert and a stampede for the lifeboats. Like the young boy paralyzed by the gale, Jim seems rooted to the deck of the ship by the gravity of the situation until, at the last moment, he jumps overboard to join the fleeing officers.

But the *Patna* does not sink. Rescued by a passing French gunboat and towed to port, the whole world of seamen comes to know that Jim was one the dishonorable men who abandoned the ship to its fate. The captain and another officer flee to the shadowy corners of the Far East. The chief engineer descends into the fog of an alcoholic’s madness. Jim alone remains, and is called as the chief witness in an official inquiry.

As Jim sits in the witness chair, being questioned by the panel of three nautical assessors, his mind “positively [flies] round and round the serried circle of facts that had surged up all about him to cut him off from the rest of his kind.”⁸ Even now, he imagines himself performing noble deeds, and receiving the recognition that is their due. Yet the machinery of social censure, triggered by his jump from the deck of the *Patna*, threatens to destroy rather than affirm his inner-directed life. Shame, rather than honor, seems to be his fate. Marked as a failed sailor and a coward in the eyes of others, he sees himself as a captured tiger in the courtroom, “trying to find a weak spot, a crevice, a place to scale, some opening through which it may squeeze itself and escape.”⁹

By a contrivance of plot—which, along with nearly all the forward-moving action in the novel, stems from Jim’s determination to resist the power of shame—Conrad arranges at this point for Marlow to get to know the young sailor. In the intimacy of their conversation on the veranda of a hotel overlooking the harbor, Marlow seems poised to slide into the role of father confessor, to whom Jim may unburden his soul. But Conrad is interested in a very different, and far more modern, strategy for psychological survival. As Marlow recounts the conversation, he describes Jim’s efforts to think his way out of the implications of his actions. In his mind’s eye, Marlow sees Jim as a contorted figure, speaking “as if some conviction of innate blamelessness had checked the truth writhing within him at every turn.”¹⁰ Indeed, Jim does not repent of his violation of the seaman’s code of honor. Rather, he regrets “a chance missed.”¹¹ If only he had remained onboard! he thinks. He would then have been the singular hero!

As Jim tells Marlow about that night on the *Patna*, the reader is struck by his confidence in himself, how he exults in his self-image as a man prepared to face any danger. Events, Jim imagines, simply conspired against him. Even at the crux of their conversation, when Jim recounts the fateful final moments, he hesitates and equivocates, unable to conceive of himself as a failed sailor who abandoned ship. “I had jumped...” Conrad has Jim say of his moment of moral collapse. But then: “He checked himself imme-

diately,” Marlow recalls of Jim’s decidedly non-confessional confession, and “averted his gaze... ‘It seems,’ he added.”¹²

Marlow responds with neither disgust nor judgment. On the contrary, he is fascinated by Jim’s ability to evade the grip of social and moral realities. Jim is pathetic and hopeless—and yet, at the same time, inescapably attractive. True, his desperate efforts at exculpation are almost ridiculous, but they have their own heroic outlines, for in Jim, Marlow sees “the struggles of an individual trying to save from the fire his idea of what his moral identity should be.”¹³ And Jim succeeds, telling his story in a way that allows him to preserve the core of his self-image, and to protect his ego from the social sanctions of shame.

If Jim’s strategies of self-loyalty seem familiar, it is likely because they are so often our own. The evasive tense that Jim uses to describe the core of his failure (“I had jumped...”), for example, puts him into the role of a remote observer. As if to emphasize Jim’s distance from himself, Conrad adds a subtle wrinkle to the final moments of his story: In the frenzied instants during which the officers scramble to escape, George, one of the white officers, dies of a sudden heart attack. Not realizing what has happened, the others call up urgently from the lifeboat, “Jump, George! Jump!”¹⁴ The echoing cries of “Jump!” directed at George ring in Jim’s head. As he recalls to Marlow, “I jumped! I told you I jumped; but I tell you they were too much for any man. It was their doing as plainly as if they had reached up with a boat-hook and pulled me over.”¹⁵

To reinforce the impression of critical distance, Conrad has Jim detail for Marlow his thoughts in the final, decisive moments, creating an almost analytical atmosphere of psychological objectivity. Jim puts himself on the couch, as it were, taking possession of himself from above. And as his own therapist, he shifts his loyalty. A greater self—a critical self—looks down upon and analyzes the socially vulnerable and culturally constructed man who cannot but fall victim to collective weaknesses and social pathologies.

It is as if Jim were saying to Marlow, “I was corrupted by the bad character of the crew”—and in so doing, holding his true self aloof. Clearly, Conrad believes, man has a powerful survival instinct that can override his conscious intentions. Whether the critical self turns to sociology, psychology, or biology, the effect remains the same: A moment of insight allows us to see our humanity as a pawn of larger, impersonal powers.

Too often we think in metaphysical terms, imagining that insights into our social and instinctual vulnerability will undermine and enervate; if, in other words, we become convinced that our behavior is largely determined by instincts, we will come to see our lives as meaningless. For a few, perhaps, this is the case. But for most of us modern men and women, the existential result has been almost exactly otherwise: As we see ourselves absorbed into social or instinctual dynamics, the very act of seeing grants us tremendous psychological leverage. Modern critical consciousness may show us that we are socially defined creatures, but this critical moment operates at a different and higher level than our instinctual or social selves. With personal identity thus layered, we can transfer our loyalties upward, protecting ourselves from the condemning power of social norms and the consequences of our own behavior. We see this clearly with Jim: By severing the inner, psychic relationship between his failure and his moral identity, he can dismiss the *Patna* episode as an alien moment rather than a defining one. Critical distance clears the way for him to remain loyal to the heroic potential he sees in himself.

This is a paradoxical empowerment, for it derives from a critical awareness of our profound subjection to social, psychological, and instinctual dynamics. And yet there seems to be a form of freedom latent in critical knowledge. Historical and cultural critique disenchants those parts of the soul held captive by the powers of nature and society. As such, it creates the psychological conditions for self-loyalty, making critique the primary mode of achieving autonomy in the postmodern era. We have largely lost confidence in the authority of reason. But we continue to use critical self-awareness—the notion that my conceptions of truth are socially

constructed, and my behavior instinctually determined—in order to stretch ourselves, ascending to a point from which we can *overlook* ourselves. Thus elongated, we can feel ourselves somehow above the cultural authorities, aware of them rather than under their dominion. Thus installed in its perch above, the imperial, knowing self becomes a stronghold for whatever dreams manage to escape the searchlights of critical scrutiny.

The fate of Captain Brierly, one of the nautical assessors to whom Jim must give testimony about the abandonment of the *Patna*, dramatizes the power of Jim's independence from his socially defined identity. Brierly is a representative of the sacred authority of social norms, not only in his official role in the court of inquiry, but also in his conversations with Marlow. "We must preserve professional decency," he tells Marlow, and doing so requires more than the mere imposition of official penalties at the court of inquiry.¹⁶ For Brierly, it is essential that the shame of dishonor overthrow Jim's sense of self; otherwise, the special dignity of seamen will be exposed as a merely formal affair, a code of honor reinforced at an official level, but ultimately lacking a soul-defining—and soul-destroying—power.

But Jim will not be shamed. Entirely exasperated by Jim's sturdy appearance as a witness, Brierly ends up becoming a victim of his own investment in the ultimate importance of social authority. After the inquiry ends, he returns to sea and jumps from his own boat, committing suicide rather than accepting a world in which Jim's independence from shame invariably weakens and diminishes the seaman's code of honor.

Despite the dramatic contrast between their characters and their fates, Conrad suggests an underlying fellowship between Jim and Captain Brierly. After the latter's suicide, Marlow runs into Jones, Brierly's former first mate, and the two discuss the strange episode. Why, Jones wonders, would such a successful man—"young, healthy, well off, no cares"—commit suicide? Marlow, who has been struck by both Brierly's arrogance and his agitated response to Jim's very existence, gently suggests that whatever led Brierly

to jump into the sea, “it wasn’t anything that would have disturbed much either of us two.” Quite right, responds Jones, “neither you nor I, sir, had ever thought so much of ourselves.”¹⁷ Brierly, Conrad seems to hint, participates in Jim’s way of thinking. The crucial difference, however, is that Brierly’s egoism has come to depend upon, rather than resist, an elaborate social system of honor and shame. As Conrad makes clear in the snippets of conversation between Marlow and Brierly, the captain had a sociological consciousness of his own, one that acknowledged the need for enchantment. “This infernal publicity is shocking,” he tells Marlow. “There he sits while all these confounded natives, serangs, lascars, quartermasters, are giving evidence that’s enough to burn a man to ashes with shame.”¹⁸

Clearly, then, for Brierly, more than just the seaman’s world is at stake. The exalted captain sees the cultural machinery of European civilization at work: subjugating native cultures, demanding obeisance, and justifying its imperial power through claims of unquestionable superiority. Jim’s shamelessness shakes its very foundations, precisely because it exposes, however indirectly, the contingency of those social norms that support the presumptive authority of the white races. If Jim can live outside the rules, then in what sense are the rules genuine in their claim to authority?

A nomic fear is by no means the only possible response to Jim’s critical consciousness. Years after the *Patna* episode, Marlow meets a French naval lieutenant who had helped with the rescue of the old steamship. The very antithesis of Jim, the lieutenant boarded rather than abandoned the ship, staying rooted on the deck for thirty long hours as the damaged boat was gingerly towed to port. All the while, he explains, quartermasters on the gunboat stood poised with axes, ready to cut the towing lines, for the fragile state of the *Patna* presented a constant danger to the French vessel. While the lieutenant does not say it outright, the fact is well understood by Marlow: Had the *Patna* faltered and the lines been cut, he would have gone down with the ship. In telling this story, Conrad brings to the fore

yet another aspect of Jim's behavior—which, in the context of this most sociological of novels, means revealing still another aspect of modern critical consciousness.

Conrad presents the French lieutenant as the very embodiment of inertia. Large and immobile in his café chair, he is the image of concentrated authority, invested with centuries of social reality. "He reminded you," writes Conrad, "of one of those snuffy, quiet village priests, into whose ears one poured the sins, the sufferings, the remorse of peasant generations."¹⁹ Marlow wishes to know what this stolid representative of military honor thinks of the strange case of a man—Jim—seemingly committed to heroism, who nonetheless fails when put to the test.

Interestingly, the French lieutenant expresses no surprise at Jim's jump. "Given a certain set of circumstances," he observes, "fear is sure to come."²⁰ With a keen sense of human nature and of our vulnerability to the instinct of self-preservation, he admits that Jim "might have had the best dispositions—the best dispositions"²¹; nonetheless, inner sentiments are unreliable, unknowable. Who can judge oneself, or even know oneself? "But the honor—the honor monsieur!" the Frenchman reminds Marlow, "The honor... that is real—that is!" In an exquisitely compact and timeless insight into the power of cultural authority, the French lieutenant then makes his own sociological point: "Habit—habit—necessity—do you see?—the eyes of others—voilà."²²

As his recognition of the role of socialization suggests, the French lieutenant is not a man untouched by modernity and the possibilities of a critical consciousness. It is not surprising, therefore, that he, like Captain Brierly, is for a moment unsettled by the image of Jim. As his conversation with Marlow reaches its crux, he rises from his chair "as a startled ox might scramble up from the grass."²³ Marlow's talk of Jim has brought a disquieting thought to the fore, suggesting that the social system is, after all, merely outward and external, unable to touch the inner truth of one's identity. Marlow wonders of honor and shame, "couldn't it reduce itself to not being found out?" The French lieutenant gathers himself to answer. "But when

he spoke,” Marlow recalls, “he changed his mind.”²⁴ The embodiment of social authority refuses to elevate himself to critical heights, not even to defend the necessity of social norms. “This, monsieur,” the French lieutenant responds, “is too fine for me—much above me—I don’t think about it.”²⁵ Quite simply, the French lieutenant declines to stand outside the confines of a circumscribed ambit of honor and shame.

Jim, by contrast, never wavers in his refusal to accept and internalize society’s judgments. In the wake of the trial, he continues to seek openings through which to squeeze his romantic ego. At first, as if to drive home his main theme, Conrad gives literal expressions to Jim’s determined efforts. He will not, for example, entertain the thought of returning to England, where his failure will become a permanent part of his reputation. Instead, Marlow helps him secure a promising position with a friend who runs a business in the East Indies. Unfortunately, one of the other dishonored officers from the *Patna* turns up there. His winks and nods to Jim, signaling that “We know what we know,” enrage the latter’s sense of honor, and cause him to depart. He goes on to take a sequence of jobs in various ports, always quitting to escape the shaming awareness that others know his story. At each juncture, Jim continues to elongate himself, stretching to keep his ego one step ahead of the facts.

But this literal pattern of escape can go on only so long. Seeing that a solution must be found, Marlow visits Stein, an old friend who has built a commercial empire on the Malay Peninsula. After hearing Jim’s story, Stein diagnoses him as a “romantic,” a man determined to live in accord with his dreams. It is a condition “that is very bad—very bad,” Stein says, and yet, recapitulating Marlow’s own double movement of disturbed uncertainty and fascination, also “very good.”²⁶ Jim’s condition, moreover, is something for which Stein has great sympathy, for he knows himself to be a romantic as well, someone whose inner dreams revolve around an elaborate collection of butterflies.

The difference, Marlow suggests, is that Stein has managed to marry his dreams to the reality of his life. In his youth, Stein was engaged in a danger-

ous trade that put his life at risk. One day, he was ambushed by his enemies. Mastering his fear, Stein fought and won. Then, in his moment of triumph, floating above the body of one of the assailants whom he had just killed, Stein saw the fabulous rare butterfly of his dreams, which he immediately caught. As Marlow explains, Stein seized the day: "When one fine morning your dream came in your way you did not let the splendid opportunity escape."²⁷ By contrast, we are to infer, that fateful night on the *Patna*, Jim let his chance at glory slip away.

Stein, however, turns out to share the outlook of the French lieutenant, at least in part. He protests Marlow's formulation as altogether too neat: "Do you know how many opportunities I let escape; how many dreams I had lost that had come my way?"²⁸ All romantics are failures, Conrad seems to say, because our dreams shift, our inner desires multiply, and the hard realities of life refuse to conform. The difference between Jim and Stein, therefore, stems from the fact that Stein's failures remain private, unseen by the public eye. In the end, the French lieutenant is right: "The eyes of others—voilà."

The second half of *Lord Jim* tells of Jim's fate in Patusan, a remote trading station far from the eyes of others. "He left his earthly failings behind him and the sort of reputation he had," observes Marlow, "and there was a totally new set of conditions for his imaginative faculty to work upon."²⁹ And work it does: Conrad is keen to emphasize the surreal, dream-like quality of Jim's life in Patusan. When Marlow visits, Jim recounts his adventures among the natives, commenting, "It's like something you read of in books."³⁰ Of the natives to whom he has linked his destiny, he says, "They are like people in a book, aren't they?"³¹ Indeed, Marlow finds himself seeing Jim less and less as a real person, declaring him "symbolic."³²

But there *is* a social reality in Patusan, and Jim inevitably crashes into it. He fails the natives of Patusan, just as he had failed the Malaysian pilgrims crowded onto the *Patna*. A similarly dreamy arrogance and lack of contact

with the dangers of real human beings lead Jim to permit the departure of a desperate band of privateers who wreak havoc and seal his fate. After the privateers kill the son of a local ruler, Jim comes face to face with dire social consequences. This time, however, the stakes are higher: Jim's life must be exacted as fitting retribution for his failure as a leader.

At this final juncture, Conrad accentuates Jim's romantic egoism, describing him as acting and thinking as if in a dream. Brushing off his native lieutenant's suggestion that he fight for his life, and pushing aside the pleading cries of his native-born wife, Jim goes to face the justice of Patusan that demands his death, just as he faced the court of inquiry after the episode with the *Patna*. But Conrad makes clear that this decision does not reflect a kind of sociological repentance, a sudden embrace of the world of the sort expressed by the French lieutenant's insight. As if to ensure that the reader recognizes how Jim's fate fulfills rather than contradicts his essential character, Conrad harks back to the opening of the novel: "Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success!"³³

And what is Jim's boyish success? "He goes away from a living woman," writes Conrad, "to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct."³⁴ The most fundamental dimensions of human reality—in this case, the loyalty of his closest native ally and the love of his native wife—are as nothing compared to his internal vision of his own heroism. Just as European society once tried to force him to live with shame, now, in his final moments, the voices of his friend and his wife attempt to hem him in. Live with shame, they say, for the sake of the world you share with us. But Jim escapes yet again. He submits himself to the retributive logic of the native culture, a world he never regarded as more real than stories in adventure books. In his final embrace of death, entirely free from any psychologically constraining social realities, he succeeds in living a life undefiled by shame.

In a review of a volume of Conrad's essays, E.M. Forster expressed exasperation with the author's tendency to conjure vast and important questions, yet evade responsibility for giving answers. At just the moment one wishes for him to take a stand, he tacks and sails away. Forster thought that Conrad's slippery qualities as a thinker carried over into his novels, which combine portentous language and images with shadowy, vague meanings. These literary qualities, Forster wrote, "suggest that he is misty in the middle as well as at the edges, that the secret casket of his genius contains a vapor rather than a jewel; and that we need not try to write him down philosophically, because there is, in this particular direction, nothing to write."³⁵ And in his own review of one of Conrad's later novels, Henry James observed "a wandering, circling, yearning imaginative faculty" at work in Conrad's method of retrospective story-telling dispersed across multiple characters. It was, thought James, a method that "diffused itself as a presence or a tide" rather than taking responsibility for giving literary shape and sharpness to a discrete reality.³⁶

Conrad acknowledged his own ambivalence: In *Heart of Darkness*, as Marlow prepares to tell of his experiences in the Congo, one of the listeners wryly observes that, unlike the usual seaman's yarns, "the whole of which lies in the shell of a cracked nut," Marlow's stories tend to be "inconclusive." Instead, Conrad says of Marlow, "to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of those misty haloes that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."³⁷ Indeed, in the person of Jim, Conrad conjures the misty halo around an emerging sociological reality in Western culture. Jim's critical self-loyalty, achieved against the full force of society's attempts to define him as a man marked by shame, was becoming an existential ideal in Conrad's day, as the influence of the plays of Henrik Ibsen at the end of the nineteenth century demonstrates. Outward political freedom is empty, Ibsen suggests, so long as the soul remains bound by the narrow confines of bourgeois morality.

Indeed, Marlow's overriding fascination with Jim reflects, in a fairly direct way, the allure of *Hedda Gabler* and the idea of existential freedom from social mores that she represents.

Yet Conrad was no prophet of Bohemian liberty. Throughout *Lord Jim*, he suggests that the very same critical consciousness that encourages and supports the project of existential freedom also accentuates our sense of existential vulnerability, planting in our minds the dangerous suspicion that the castles of culture are built on sand. It's a thought with numerous possible results: It can lead to anomic horror, as in the case of Captain Brierly; to a redoubled loyalty to social norms of honor and duty, as in the case of the French lieutenant; to wry self-knowledge, as in the case of Stein, who recognizes that good fortune allowed him to continue dreaming; or, finally, to the ambivalences of Marlow, who neither wishes to lose touch with the soul-shaping power of social reality nor is willing to give up entirely the inner freedom that comes from critical distance.

Durkheim—like many modern critics—hoped that a critical theory of society would clear the path for others to develop a purely rational basis for human flourishing. But this hope presumes that our critical consciousness can indeed crack the nut of our humanity and extract a timeless kernel. Conrad harbored no such illusion. The insights and techniques of modern consciousness can create the possibility of Jim, but its lunar light cannot illuminate his moral significance. Is Jim good or bad? A success or a failure? Not only does the novel fail to provide an answer; it positively resists these questions.

Could Conrad, the literary muse of our critical age, do otherwise? Modern critical consciousness pervades intellectual life today like the inflow of an ocean tide, but lacks a consistent current to guide our lives. The techniques of critical inquiry allow us to disengage from the parts of our lives that we wish to neutralize, as well as to take command of those we wish to affirm. But that very same distance brings a disquieting insight, the peculiar feeling that we cannot quite trust in our achieved freedom from social norms. Thus

the paradoxical experience of our day, which feels at once empowered and independent as well as enervated and disarmed.

Undoubtedly, we cherish the insulation and protection from the voices of authority that critical distance provides. To see things from above! It's a moment of insight that promises delivery from the constraining realities of life and inherited culture. Invariably, however, the sea of our dreams will cast us up onto shores where we must live our lives rather than our critical insights. On these inevitable shores, Conrad can be of no help. As Forster and James recognized, he is the master of our strategies of evasion, not of our commitments. He is a poet of our culture of critique, not of the intimacies and bondages of love.

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Notes

1. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 37-38.
2. Émile Durkheim, *Suicide* (Free Press, 1951), p. 386.
3. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, introduction and notes by Norman Sherry (London: Everyman's Library, 1974), p. 5.
4. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 5.
5. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 7.
6. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 7.
7. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 15.
8. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 23.

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9. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 23.
 10. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 58.
 11. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 61.
 12. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 82.
 13. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 60.
 14. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 81.
 15. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 91.
 16. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 50.
 17. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 48.
 18. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 50.
 19. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 102.
 20. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 107.
 21. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 108.
 22. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 108.
 23. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 109.
 24. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 109.
 25. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 109.
 26. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 158.
 27. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 158.
 28. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 158.
 29. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 160.
 30. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 171.
 31. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 191.
 32. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 194.
 33. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, p. 306.
 34. Conrad, *Lord Jim*, pp. 306-307.
 35. E.M. Forster, quoted in Lionel Trilling, *E.M. Forster* (New York: New Directions, 1943), p. 169.
 36. Henry James, *Notes on Novelists* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1928), pp. 350-351.
 37. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, p. 9.