Moments of intense bewilderment occur so frequently in Conrad's fiction that they seem less unusual than customary. For example, Conrad's early story "The Return" still has considerable power despite its verbal excesses because it renders so vividly Alvan Hervey's nightmarish "vision of everything he had thought indestructible and safe in the world crashing down about him, like solid walls do before the fierce breath of a hurricane."\(^1\) In his late novel *Chance*, Conrad concentrates less than Trollope would on the financial intricacies of the Great de Barral's collapse. He focuses instead on "the force of the shock" that overwhelms young Flora, her "sense of the security being gone"—"a force capable of shattering" the child's very "conception of its own existence."\(^2\) Marlow's journey to the dark heart of the Congo is similarly an escalating series of disorientations that challenge his sense of identity and unsettle his convictions about the world. Any account of dislocating moments in Conrad would also have to include the blow delivered to Verloc's complacency in *The Secret Agent* by the orders to dynamite the Greenwich Observatory, the devastation wreaked on his wife's sanity by the news of her brother's death, and the radical overthrow of the ordinary routine of Razumov's life caused by Haldin's unsolicited confession in *Under Western Eyes*.

*Lord Jim* also pivots on the surprise and shock of baffling, unexpected events: Jim's helpless confusion after the *Patna* collision with a derelict,

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Marlow's annoyance and alarm on his first encounter with the anomalous Jim, Gentleman Brown's violent destruction of the community of trust on Patusan, and the disillusioning impact of Jim's death on Jewel, Tamb' Itam, and even Stein. Marlow compares the experience of bewilderment to the "sense of utter insecurity as during an earthquake." Quoting Jim's servant Tamb’ Itam, Marlow describes a feeling of "great awe and wonder at the 'suddenness of men’s fate, which hangs over their heads like a cloud charged with thunder.'” Like Hervey's vision of a hurricane, these images of natural calamity (earthquake, thunderstorm) capture an important aspect of Conradian bewilderment—its revelation of our exposure to the fortuitous, the unpredictable, the uncontrollable.

All of the instances of disorientation I have cited demonstrate Conrad's abiding sense of the power and ubiquity of contingency. Victims of bewilderment in Conrad experience with devastating force the absence of any guarantee to the order, meanings, and beliefs they had taken for granted. The dislocations in his fictions reveal the frailty of the constructs we ordinarily trust without thinking much about them—our beliefs about our identity, our situation, or the nature of the world. Conradian bewilderment insists that the sense of security such trust provides is illusory and precarious precisely because it is a matter of faith.

Like James and Ford, then, Conrad portrays bewilderment as a challenge to the natural attitude of unquestioned understanding—a dislocation that reveals this attitude is made up of unexamined, unnoticed beliefs. But he ascribes to bewilderment more of a metaphysical than an epistemological function. Agreeing with James that interpretations are acts of epistemological composition and completion, Conrad then goes on to ask ontological questions about their status and their foundations. He reveals that their being is nothingness because they are made up of beliefs. Absence is for Conrad not only a basic characteristic of meaning; it is also, for that very reason, a fundamental condition of existence. Similar to Ford in his use of techniques for rendering unreflective experience, Conrad frequently portrays moments of shocked confusion in all of their obscure, unsynthesized immediacy. But Conrad's purpose is not only Ford's aim of dramatizing how we live forward but understand backward; it is also to render the lived experience of contingency—to portray extremity in the act of unsettling our illusion that the prevailing set of meanings had been necessary or natural.

Contingency, Interpretation, and Belief in *Lord Jim*

Conrad's novels are, among other things, a prolonged meditation on the meaning and significance of contingency. The notion of contingency has many dimensions for Conrad, and I have already suggested the most important of them: chance, impermanence, the lack of necessity in the ways and shapes of the world, the negativity and insubstantiality of human constructs, the absence of foundations. Conrad is a novelist of contradictions. Most of these contradictions express Conrad's perpetual alternation between a deep longing to overcome contingency and an intense recognition that this is an impossible dream. The unresolvability of this contradiction prevents Conrad from ever finding a lasting, satisfactory point of rest. But it consequently keeps his fictional universe ever in motion as he relentlessly seeks a solution to a problem he knows cannot be solved.

Conrad's contradictory attitude toward contingency has resulted in contradictory responses to his fiction. The question that most deeply divides his critics is this: Does Conrad have a profoundly skeptical vision of our plight, or is his fiction ultimately an affirmation of basic human values? J. Hillis Miller calls Conrad's fiction "an effort of demystification," for example, and Tony Tanner claims in particular that "*Lord Jim* is a prelude to profound pessimism" because it debunks both the idealists for their illusions and the realists for their materialism. By contrast, Ian Watt finds in Conrad an exception to the nay-saying moderns because he confronts the issue they neglect: "Alienation, of course; but how do we get out of it?" Watt calls *Lord Jim* "the tale of a friendship"—a tribute to human solidarity which affirms the value of sympathy and reciprocity.

Neither nihilist nor yea-sayer, however, Conrad is a volatile, contradictory combination of both suspicion and faith. He has a skeptic's awareness of the precariousness of any convictions and the depth of the void on which we stand. Unable to resign himself to his negative conclusions, however, Conrad also affirms the urgency of transcending the contingency of our meanings and values—even if this is an unattainable goal.

In words that recall the heroic simplicity of a Singleton or a MacWhirr,


5Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 33, 335. In a rare lapse, Watt is wildly inaccurate when he claims that the question of how to get out of alienation "was not to be of any particular concern to the other great figures of modern literature" (p. 33). How to remedy humanity's powerlessness and isolation was an issue of deep and abiding importance to writers as different as Eliot, Lawrence, Mann, and Sartre.
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the narrator of *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* claims: “those are strong who know neither doubts nor hopes.” Conrad’s strength as a novelist is that he knew both—and the anguish of their deadlock is what makes him appreciate the blessings of ignorance. Conrad’s doubts and his hopes are equally powerful even if, unlike James, he finds them irreconcilable. But this in turn only intensifies his effort to get past their contradiction. Because Conrad cannot resolve the opposition between suspicion and faith, he moves perpetually back and forth between them—an oscillation that calls attention to their contradiction all the more vividly for its inability to surpass it.

My analysis of *Lord Jim* consists of three parts that correspond to three major aspects of Conrad’s preoccupation with contingency. Isolating first the suspicious movement of his imagination, I explore how he unmasks the hidden dominion of the arbitrary not only through his depiction of Jim’s metaphysical implications but also in the challenges the novel poses to the reader’s assumptions about the nature of fiction. These metaphysical investigations should lend new significance to the epistemological questions to which I then turn—questions about reality and interpretation raised by the contradiction that the “facts” of Jim’s case are indubitable, but that this is no guarantee of “truth” and cannot resolve the many hermeneutic conflicts he inspires. Finally, moving to the revelatory pole of Conrad’s contradictory world, I examine his attempt to exorcize suspicion with a declaration of faith whose power is proportional to his awareness of its frailty. Conrad’s affirmation renews the very oscillation between suspicion and faith which it hopes to end, inasmuch as it demystifies the beliefs it proposes even as it insists on their absolute truth.

The Varieties of Contingency

Jim’s Metaphysical Implications

Conrad’s works repeatedly express scorn for “the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals.” In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow seems only slightly hyperbolic when he damns as “offensive” and “outrageous”—“an irritating pretence”—“the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of


perfect safety.” The Marlow of Lord Jim is equally critical but more resigned: “It’s extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. Perhaps it’s just as well.” This is the form Conrad ascribes to everyday, unquestioned understanding. Its unreflective certainty about its assumptions is a protective shield guarding against the revelation that they are nothing more than assumptions—and hence less secure and justified than we like to believe.

The representatives of this attitude in Lord Jim are legion (as they are, Conrad implies, in life). They cross cultural boundaries and encompass both East and West. They include “the unconscious pilgrims of an exacting belief” on the Patna, pitifully naïve in the simplicity of their trust in the men who will abandon them (p. 15). Their unthinking confidence is matched by the European pilgrims, the travelers in Marlow’s hotel, who are “just as intelligently receptive of new impressions as their trunks upstairs” (p. 77)—and who thus provide an appropriately ironic backdrop for Jim’s unsettling confessions. When Jim, after his stay in the hospital, falls in with laggards who “shuddered at the thought of hard work, and led precariously easy lives,” their “determination to lounge safely through existence” simply takes to an extreme and brings into the open the principle governing ordinary civilized behavior (p. 13)—its determination to protect its security and to avoid any challenge to its beliefs, a determination so insistent as to suggest perhaps a secret awareness of their frailty. According to Conrad, “the majority of us . . . want to be left alone with our illusions”—“Man . . . is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious. He shrinks from explanations.” Complacency, the resolute refusal to recognize the threat of contingency, is for Conrad a fundamental feature of the human condition.

Such complacency is less safe than it thinks, however, because it is always vulnerable to bewilderment. From his first view of Jim to the news of the young man’s death, Marlow is beset by a series of disorienting surprises that dramatize the revelatory power of shock and confusion. Marlow’s ambivalent relation to the social norm makes him particularly well suited to convey the challenge of its dislocation. He is both the ally and the critic

8Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (1899), in Youth and Two Other Stories (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1924), p. 152.
9Conrad, Lord Jim, p. 143. Subsequent references will be given parenthetically in the text and will refer to the 1924 Doubleday edition.
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of convention. He understands and shares the need for "that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy!" (p. 43). But he also recognizes, even if at times reluctantly and resentfully, the pretense and precariousness of every declaration of faith. An embodiment of the norm (which presumably includes Conrad's readers), Marlow is often angry about the disruptions his equanimity must suffer. His all too understandable weaknesses and fears may make it easier for the reader to see him as one of us. Because Marlow embodies the norm, his disillusionment can also be ours.\(^\text{11}\)

Jim reveals to Marlow the power and pervasiveness of contingency in many ways. Among the most important of these is his illustration of the ubiquity of chance. However much Jim may be responsible for his failures, he is also the victim of unpredictable, inexplicable events. It is a matter of chance, for example, that the *Patna* would collide with a submerged derelict, that the bulkhead would hold against all odds, or that the ship would be discovered in time and survive towing to port. It is sheer accident that Jim and Marlow should establish a lasting relation on the basis of a misunderstanding about a dog in the courthouse. Although the story of the *Patna* is widely known, it is wholly fortuitous when and how references to it will turn up to send Jim packing. His triumph on Patusan testifies as well to the power of accident. Although his success depends on his own judgment, courage, and imagination, he is luckier than he knows to escape death on his arrival, and the plan that leads him to power seems to come to him all at once, inexplicably, in a moment of inspiration. Finally, of course, the arrival of Gentleman Brown is an unhappy chance. Conrad violates with impunity Aristotle's dictum that a plot should prefer the probable to the possible. The reason is that he does not share Aristotle's conviction that the world and human action are ultimately logical in design. The predominance of capricious and arbitrary occurrences in *Lord Jim*, as in so many of Conrad's works, dramatizes his sense that no order of things is necessary or secure. For Conrad, the improbable is always possible, even likely.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{11}\) Each of Marlow's incarnations is different, and my characterization of his role holds only for the Marlow of *Lord Jim*. The Marlow of "Youth" is less skeptical, often amused at the boyish enthusiasm he reports, and almost nostalgic for his lost innocence. The Marlow of *Heart of Darkness* is less ambivalent, more scathing in his cynicism about the social norm even if he ultimately upholds its deception. The Marlow of *Chance* is an ill-controlled mix of seemingly capricious annoyance and (particularly at the end) almost sentimental sympathy.

\(^{12}\) Although for different reasons, J. Hillis Miller makes a similar point about Conrad and Aristotle: "Insofar as [*Lord Jim*] is . . . not the straightforward historical movement
As we saw, chance in *The Ambassadors* is epistemological—the accident of the real asserting its force and banishing Strether's deception. Chance also has an existential dimension for James; what has been in Strether's history is both arbitrary (it could have been otherwise) and necessary (it is now fixed). In Conrad, however, chance is ultimately metaphysical because it discloses the presence of contingency. Marlow tells Jim: "It is always the unexpected that happens" (p. 95). "One chance in a hundred!" Marlow later declares, "but it is always that hundredth chance" (p. 189). It is only an apparent contradiction to say that chance is inevitable in Conrad. Accident is everywhere and all-powerful in his fiction because arbitrariness is for him the very stuff of the world.

The ultimate contingency in life is, of course, death. A reminder of life's frailty and finitude, death haunts *Lord Jim*. Even a partial listing of death's many forms in the novel suggests that it has unusual prominence: Jim's imagination of disaster on the *Patna*, the crew's fear of dying, the third engineer's heart attack, Brierly's suicide, the dangers to Jim's life on Patusan, Jewel's mother in her grave, Dain Waris's murder, Gentleman Brown on his deathbed, and Jim's demise. By the weight of numbers alone, all of these images of mortality suggest Conrad's conviction that "fatality is invincible."\(^{13}\) The paradoxes of death exemplify in striking form the contradictions of contingency. Death is the wholly other that can suddenly break through to shatter complacency. But it is consequently always with us, an ever-present possibility—"the suspended menace discovered in the midst of the most perfect security" (p. 96). It is perhaps the ultimate transcendent, but as such it is an end that suggests endless emptiness beyond. Although it can be fearfully imagined (particularly given Jim's "faculty of swift and forestalling vision"; p. 96), it cannot be known. Death owes part of its darkness to its epistemological opacity. But what we can know is that death is the negation of existence, an indication that nullity is the origin and end of life.

Death is uncontrollable, the limit to our powers. But Conrad suggests in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* that something ungovernable often only tempts us to seek its mastery. James Wait's ruse of playing with his illness, suggested by Aristotle's comments on beginning, middle, and end in the *Poetics*, then the sort of metaphysical certainty implicit in Aristotle, the confidence that some logos or underlying cause and ground supports the events, is suspended" (*Fiction and Repetition* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982], p. 35). Later I discuss Conrad's refusal of temporal coherence. As I have tried to show, a similar denial that the world is inherently logical and orderly is implicit in his defiance of probability.

\(^{13}\)Joseph Conrad, "Anatole France" (1904), in *Conrad on Fiction*, p. 67.
as if his death were an instrument to manipulate, or the crew’s mad desire to keep him alive (alternating with their wish to kill him)—these are futile efforts to overcome contingency by mastering what cannot be controlled. A similar effort, although less desperate, can be seen in Jim’s calm acceptance in Patusan of the monthly risk of drinking poisoned coffee. He defies his enemy by pretending superiority (if not immunity) to the possibility of death. Stalked by assassins, Jim feels either a peculiar indifference or else an annoyance appropriate to a minor nuisance—as if the threat of death were impotent or unimportant. When he kills one of them, he seems to be asserting his defiance of death: “He held his shot, he says, deliberately. . . . He held it for the pleasure of saying to himself, That’s a dead man! He was absolutely positive and certain” (p. 301). By delaying his shot to revel in his certainty of the other’s demise, Jim plays with death—distancing himself from it and savoring the power of governing it. He thus enacts the reverse of what occurred on the Patna when he was overwhelmed.

Conrad portrays a variety of responses to contingency. There are those who rebelliously deny it as Gentleman Brown does in his violent rage against circumstances and misfortunes that interfere with his will. His rage is only an extreme form of the anger and resentment that inexplicable events often provoke (in Doramin, for example, who shoots Jim to avenge his son’s death, or in Jewel, who refuses to forgive Jim for failing to fight). Brierly succumbs to the revelation of his own finitude when he commits suicide rather than live with the recognition that perfection cannot be attained. The two Malays at the helm meet the exigencies of chance resolutely if perhaps unthinkingly. There are those who flee, like the German captain, less anguished than Jim. And there are those like Stein and Marlow who are made reflective by the discovery that our confidence in our convictions and capacities is deceptive. Susceptible to so many forms, the response to contingency is itself more contingent than necessary.

_Lord Jim_ suggests that one customary collective response of society is to resort to scapegoating. By projecting evil, failure, and vulnerability onto certain designated individuals through institutionalized rituals of exclusion or confinement, society turns its back on potentially troubling revelations. Jim is made a scapegoat in just this manner. By officially branding Jim a criminal and pulling his certificate, society exorcizes Jim’s menacing reminder of the frailty of all it takes for granted. By labeling the culprit “other” than itself, society repels any suggestion that it need reexamine its beliefs. Once again not only a critic of the norm but also an embodiment of it, Marlow himself feels the temptation of scapegoating: “I tell you I
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wanted to see him squirm for the honour of the craft" (p. 46). The more Jim “squirms” in the inquiry, the more society can feel justified in its righteousness.

The problem with such mechanisms of exclusion, however, as both Brierly and Marlow recognize, is that the scapegoat has an ambiguous status. In order to qualify as a fit candidate for banishment, he must be both continuous and discontinuous with the community—both a member and potentially an outsider. Although ultimately declared “other” than the group, the scapegoat is at first someone with whom it feels a potentially disturbing kinship or who poses a threat to its internal bonds.\(^{14}\) Jim’s ambiguity as a scapegoat causes a crisis for both Marlow and Brierly because he is too much “one of us” and not enough distinctly different. For both of them, identification with the scapegoat interferes with the ritual meant to banish its menace. Brierly wants to “preserve professional decency” (p. 68)—which is also the aim of the inquiry. But he wants Jim to run (and offers Marlow money to finance the escape) because society’s mechanisms of exclusion are, he senses, an imperfect defense. Jim’s trial suggests that scapegoating is at most a stopgap; it cannot guarantee society that its self-certainty need never be disturbed.\(^{15}\)

The denigration Jim suffers because of his failure and public humiliation is especially ironic inasmuch as he had initially sought an apotheosis of the self. His youthful response to the contingencies of existence—its accidents, constraints, and failings—is at first to transcend them by projecting a vision of boundless perfection. Even after his failure on the *Patna*, his visions of “the impossible world of romantic achievements” are capable of evoking in him “an ecstatic smile” and “a strange look of beatitude”—signs

\(^{14}\)Conrad’s story “Amy Foster” (1901) might seem an exception to this rule inasmuch as the scapegoat Yanko Goorall is an outsider from the start. The community finds his strangeness disturbing, however, only because it senses continuities with him. He may seem like a beast, but he is of course still a man. Because he defies the villagers’ interpretive categories, however, they call him a lunatic—invoking madness as a label for radical otherness. They thereby refuse to recognize the limitations of their constructs for organizing the world, constructs they consider natural and absolute but which his different language and customs show to be contingencies.

\(^{15}\)On the theory of scapegoating and the ambiguity of its victim, see especially René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Girard’s emphasis differs somewhat from Conrad’s, however. Girard regards scapegoating not as a defense against contingency but as “an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence” (p. 17). Society protects itself against its own internal dissensions, Girard argues, by channeling its vengeance and animosity onto a single victim. This theory parallels closely Ford’s depiction of scapegoating in *Parade’s End*, as I show later.
of deliverance from the mundane which apotheosis promises (p. 83). Jim's imaginative transcendence seeks to overcome contingency in several ways. It denies the restrictions and adversities of finite existence, thanks to the boundless mobility and creativity of fantasy. Jim's imagination can consequently ascribe to itself completion and perfection instead of the arbitrary deficiencies and disappointments that invariably taint anything specific. The freedom and power of fantasy transport Jim beyond the vagaries of the passing moment into an atemporal realm where actions are reversible and infinitely repeatable.

The strengths of Jim's imagination are also its weaknesses, however. The images he projects—pure emptiness—take advantage of the inherent negativity of consciousness to fill in what is missing from his life. But such a vision of fulfilled desire only shows the extent to which lack is the essence of one's being. Because Jim's image of himself is what he is not, it is a revelation of the deficiencies in what he is. His apotheosis can only be actual if it remains potential; its realization would destroy it by removing it from the realm of the transcendent and circumscribing it within definite limits. Although Jim's imaginings may be the most essential aspect of his life—"its secret truth, its hidden reality" (p. 20)—they are also its least essential part. Not only are they entirely private, a being-for-himself divorced from his being-for-others; they are also in themselves ephemeral and groundless. Once again Conrad suggests that the attempt to overcome contingency, however noble the endeavor, is destined only to reveal that contingency is ubiquitous and ineradicable.

The necessary failure of any human quest for perfection is also the moral of Stein's well-known meditation on the beauty of the butterfly (see pp. 207–8). In all of its paradoxes, the butterfly represents a triumph over contingency. It is a particular entity, but its incidental identity is surpassed through its absolute perfection of structure. It is "delicate" and "perishable," but its frailty suggests tremendous power and a permanence "defying destruction," "a splendour unmarred by death" (p. 207). It is an immanent object, but it seems to embody the transcendent truth of Nature. The butterfly is the image of wholeness, harmony, and equilibrium. Its perfection is the achievement of totality.

Its very harmony and completeness are deathly and inhuman, however. When Stein explains that man is not a butterfly, he suggests that the human lot is restlessness and insufficiency. Incompleteness, he implies, is the power

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16 One of the best studies of Jim's imagination is still Eloise Knapp Hay, "Lord Jim: From Sketch to Novel," Comparative Literature 12 (Fall 1960), 289–309.
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that drives existence: “We want in so many different ways to be. . . . Man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so” (p. 213). The very multiplicity of possible modes of being stands in the way of wholeness, since the shadow of those excluded offers a perpetual critique of the ones selected. Stein muses: “Sometimes it seems to me that man is come where he is not wanted, where there is no place for him; for if not, why should he want all the place?” (p. 208). Because we have no necessary, preordained place in the scheme of things, everything is open to our desires. But restlessness rather than stability, a lack of completeness rather than totality, seem to be the counterpart and the cost of the requirement that we choose for ourselves what place we will occupy and what we will become.

Stein’s words recall Schopenhauer’s claim that “the basis of all willing is need, deficiency, and thus pain.”17 Marlow argues in favor of the pragmatic “wisdom” of “putting out of sight all the reminders of our folly, of our weakness, of our mortality; all that makes against our efficiency—the memory of our failures” (p. 174). The impossibility of achieving completeness and perfection may make it advisable for us to forget as quickly as possible about loss and disappointment instead of brooding over them. But Brierly’s suicide and Jim’s many trials also suggest that a constant remembrance of the inevitability of fault may provide a useful safeguard against impossible visions of transcending contingency through a personal apotheosis.

Fiction and the Nature of Meaning

If Jim’s story suggests that the world’s order is more arbitrary and unstable than we customarily think, then the aesthetic structure of the novel reinforces this point by calling attention to the contingency of fiction. Conrad experiments with the conventions of narrative in a number of ways to undermine the naturalization of meaning. Although themselves artifice, stories can make meaning seem natural. If the elements of a narrative seem like indispensable parts of a whole, its meaning may seem necessary rather than contingent—something natural that could not be otherwise rather than an artificial production based on conventions. Mean-

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ing may then seem to be a given, an object indubitably there. The artifice of narrative privilege can paradoxically aid naturalization by acting as a force for stability and coherence. An all-knowing narrator guarantees the certainty of the story's parts and the necessity of their overall shape. One reason readers find nothing strange in the epistemological impossibility of omniscient narration is that it reinforces their sense of the naturalness of meaning.

By making Marlow the teller of Jim's tale, however, Conrad simultaneously invokes and questions narrative authority. Marlow begins his account both by claiming knowledge and disputing its necessity: "'Oh yes. I attended the inquiry,' he would say, 'and to this day I haven't left off wondering why I went' " (p. 34). Marlow has the authority of someone who knows much of his story firsthand or from eyewitnesses, but his knowledge is often based on gratuitous, even inexplicable, occurrences. Although his information insists on presenting itself to him as if he were destined to receive it, more often than not it is quite accidental what he learns from whom and in what order—as, for example, when he runs across the French lieutenant in a café in Sydney and, from this fortuitous encounter, receives a vitally revealing perspective on the Patna after its desertion. Marlow may show zeal in tracking down informants, as when he searches out Brown on his deathbed, but it is only a lucky chance that the scoundrel still lives.

If Marlow's right to tell Jim's story seems unquestionable, the novel's repeated insistence on the accidents of its acquisition questions this assumption. Marlow's authority as a narrator is arbitrary, the result of a series of contingencies. We can hardly imagine that Marlow could be otherwise than he is. But his story need not have existed—it is actually a small miracle that it does—and then Marlow would not be who he is for us (or would not be at all). The chance quality of Marlow's sources is a way of dramatizing that meaning is contingent on the accidents of its production, and this is part of what makes it an artificial construct, not a natural given whose shape is preordained or guaranteed.

A reader customarily assumes that all of the elements of a tale are essential to its meaning, but the haphazard origins of Marlow's story challenge this assumption as well. The chance quality of its acquisition undermines the expectation that it is organically unified. Because Marlow's possession of the parts of Jim's story is often purely accidental, they cannot claim the status of necessary components in a seamless totality. It is sheer chance
that we do not have one less piece or one more than we do. Marlow is himself uncertain whether he has all the evidence he needs. The vital piece necessary to make his picture of Jim complete and coherent may still accidentally be missing. This instability prevents the meaning of Jim’s story from seeming inevitable as it might if its parts were all present and harmonious.

*Lord Jim* similarly questions the naturalization of meaning in its portrayal of the delivery of the tale. The occasion for Marlow’s oral recitation is so conventional as to seem natural. When we hear the words “Hang exertion. Let that Marlow talk” (p. 35), the stage has been set for a sailor’s yarn, a diverting story for after-dinner entertainment. After this reassuring invocation of a traditional format, however, the story that follows is unsettling in structure as well as theme. The traditional device of a remembering storyteller raises expectations of relaxed reception and moral edification which the narrative’s subsequent refusal of coherence denies. The fragmented presentation of Jim’s story refuses the consistency and continuity that we anticipate from an entertaining, instructive tale and that we ordinarily take as proof that meaning is stable and objectlike. Although rambling is a very natural way to tell a story, Marlow’s digressions make the basic components of Jim’s tale so elusive that the reader finds the creation of meaning made strange. Marlow’s refusal of coherence makes us as readers work harder to discover consistency than we ordinarily expect to, and this heightened activity emphasizes that meaning is a process and a construction, not an object whose determinacy and completeness can be assumed.

The temporality of the occasion also invokes and subverts stability: “later on, many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim. . . . Perhaps it would be after dinner, on a verandah” (p. 33). Marlow’s frequent reiteration of his tale endows it with a semblance of permanence—much like the self-sameness of a literary work preserved in an oral tradition. But the specification of the setting of this particular recital (especially in the conditional form “perhaps it would be” such and such) suggests as well the story’s infinite variability. The version reported to us is only one of many recitations, each presumably different (although not necessarily any more revealing) to the extent that Marlow’s penchant for digression produces a different chain of associations and takes

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him in unpredictable directions. The tale may seem like a given—one of the items in the storyteller’s repertoire—but its variability questions this by suggesting that its existence depends on the contingencies of its telling.

This sense of potential multiplicity and variability is reinforced when the oral narrative breaks off: “Men drifted off the verandah in pairs or alone without loss of time, without offering a remark, as if the last image of that incomplete story, its incompleteness itself, and the very tone of the speaker, had made discussion vain and comment impossible. Each of them seemed to carry away his own impression, to carry it away with him like a secret; but there was only one man of all these listeners who was ever to hear the last word of the story” (p. 337). Suspended in midcourse, Jim’s unfinished history leaves open a variety of interpretations, each with different predictive implications about his subsequent development. The incompleteness of the story refuses to let its meaning cohere and stabilize. Public discussion cannot produce a consensus about a single reading that seems self-evident because all accept it.

The revelation of Jim’s end to a lone reader who peruses in the privacy of his rooms the documents accompanying Marlow’s letter moves the story even further away from the public arena, where community opinion may control and limit meaning. The privileged reader hears “the last word of the story,” but the inconclusiveness of Jim’s “proud and unflinching glance” (p. 416) when he dies frustrates the expectation of finality. The promise of completion is offered, only to be withheld as the ambiguity of Jim’s death leaves open a variety of readings: noble act of integrity, or romantic flight from responsibility? Signification is not closed off at the end but continues to resonate between these two poles. Conclusiveness encourages the naturalization of meaning by offering a finally completed object, no longer contingent on the activity of interpretation, but Conrad refuses this illusion. The inconclusive ending of Lord Jim defies the expectation that coherence is the natural state of things and will therefore ultimately prevail.19

In one of the many commentaries the inconclusiveness of this novel has received, Miller argues that “the ‘ending’ of Lord Jim is Marlow’s realization that it is impossible to write ‘The End’ to any story” (Fiction and Repetition, p. 40). The reason for this, in Miller’s view, is that any part of a narrative (including the conclusion) is an interpretation of other elements which both discloses and obscures their meaning and therefore requires its own explication. This argument is compatible with my claim that the novel’s inconclusiveness is a challenge to our tendency to naturalize meaning. In my terms, what Miller shows is that any stopping point in the interpretive process is only a contingent choice or convenience, since it is always possible to go further or halt earlier. Closure in
Marlow's shift from speech to writing raises the further question of whether either of these two modes is inherently closer to truth. In an intriguing reading of *Under Western Eyes*, Avrom Fleishman argues that "one conclusion that might be drawn from Razumov's career is that writing is in vain, but that speech may not be so ineffectual after all." In *Lord Jim*, however, Marlow's move from one mode to the other suggests that speech and writing are interchangeable and that neither is inherently more authentic—more privileged or empowered to deliver the elusive meaning of Jim's career. The young man may be figuratively bodied forth in the substance of Marlow's speech and given a semblance of dramatic presence when he is quoted in dialogue. But this only ironically emphasizes his absence from the scene. His absent presence re-creates the distance that makes him enigmatic to Marlow and that even direct conversation cannot fully bridge. As Marlow talks on in the darkness, illuminated only by cigar ends, in a silence uninterrupted by his listeners (if indeed they are attending to his tale), his voice is a dominant power. But it also seems more and more spectral—a chain of words which holds back the night and keeps the group together only by the force of its own momentum, a series of signifiers that continuously explicate each other without disclosing the

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fiction encourages naturalization by making a temporary interruption in the interpretive process seem like the arrival at an independent, objectlike meaning that was always there waiting for us.

20 Avrom Fleishman, "Speech and Writing in *Under Western Eyes*" in *Joseph Conrad: A Commemoration*, ed. Norman Sherry (London: Macmillan, 1976), p. 126. The theoretical point at issue here is illustrated by the debate between Derrida and Gadamer over the status of written versus spoken discourse. On the one hand, Derrida argues that speech encourages the illusion of presence, ground, and authority, because the speaker's self-reference implies an originating mastery over meaning. He finds in writing greater honesty about the absence of the signified and the anonymity of language inasmuch as the traces on the page are insubstantial, a system of differences, nothing more than representatives. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), particularly pp. 3–26. On the other hand, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that written documents seem uniquely authoritative. He finds that a special claim to truth attaches to language as soon as it escapes the temporary accidents of speech and enters the more permanent, reputable realm of transcription: "It is not altogether easy to realize that what is written down can be untrue. The written word has the tangible quality of something that can be demonstrated and is like a proof" (Truth and Method, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming [New York: Seabury, 1973], p. 241). Caution must consequently be exercised, he argues, to distinguish between blind prejudice in favor of what is written and legitimate recognition of its authority as a source of knowledge. Fleishman implies that Conrad shares the illusion about the privileges of speech which Derrida unmasks. I argue Conrad questions this illusion in *Lord Jim*, but that this novel demystifies writing as well.
central truth Marlow seeks, a sequence of meanings which could go on forever or stop abruptly (as it eventually does).

Because documents can seem especially authoritative, the introduction of writing might seem to reinforce the promise that the truth of Jim's history will be delivered at last. But the two documents Marlow provides, although suggestive, are strikingly inconclusive—Jim's unfinished, ink-blotted note, and his father's platitudinous letter, full of "easy morality and family news" (p. 341). They show, if anything, the inability of written evidence to provide the full truth about the past. Marlow's letter and his chronicle do provide a last glimpse of Jim, but they insist that he remained an enigma to the end. The authority of Marlow's writing is insufficient to break through the walls separating Jim from those who seek to understand him. In a repetition of the effect produced by Marlow's speech, the distance between the chronicle and the events it narrates reduplicates the distance that makes Jim mysterious. This repetition frustrates the expectation that a different mode of discourse will offer a different access to truth. Both speech and writing are at best mediators that defer and withhold what they display.

In *Lord Jim*, speech and writing are not only ways of signifying. They are also—even primarily—vehicles for remembering. Conrad might well agree with Valéry that "memory is the substance of all thought" because thought "is always, in some way, a production of absent things."21 The dialectic of withholding and representing which characterizes the production and interpretation of signs becomes in Conrad the special province of memory. Marlow's recollections make present the past but also assert its absence. Its temporal distance from the present is what makes possible its manifestation as something remembered. This dialectic of presence and absence is reinforced by the many informants who give Marlow glimpses of Jim even as their perspectives remind him of the extent to which the young man escapes him. Even when the two are together—during Marlow's visit to Patusan, for example—what matters is usually not so much their current situation as what lies across its horizons, impinging on it but removed from immediate access. The role of memory in representing Jim suggests that the distance between signifier and signified is not only spatial (the implication of James's ambassadors who stand for Woollett in Paris), but also temporal (the past of remembered events, the futurity of their explication).

Memory also has metaphysical significance for Conrad, and it is consequently beset by the many contradictions that mark his attitude toward contingency. According to Conrad, “the permanence of memory” is “the only possible form of permanence in this world of relative values”: “one must admit regretfully that to-day is but a scramble, that to-morrow may never come; it is only the precious yesterday that cannot be taken away from us.” Conrad’s very description here of the endurance of the past suggests that transience is humanity’s essential condition. Marlow’s mode of narration reflects both of these aspects of memory—its conquest of time’s flight and its testimony to the inevitability of change.

Marlow calls the Patna affair unique for its “extraordinary power of defying the shortness of memories and the length of time: it seemed to live, with a sort of uncanny vitality, in the minds of men, on the tips of their tongues” (p. 137). Marlow’s recollection of Jim’s history dramatizes the ability of memory to preserve the past and grant permanence to events long gone. Marlow’s memory also testifies, however, to the inescapability of transience, inasmuch as the events he narrates have perished and therefore defy full recovery. Although Marlow has rescued a fragment from the passage of time, his story still preserves the past only as a construct, assembled from many incomplete, accidental, and perhaps dubious sources. It continues to exist only as long as Marlow tells it or as long as his written narrative and the memory of his listeners survive. Jim may endure in Marlow’s memory, but a remembered being necessarily has the status of not-being. In all of these ways, the temporal structure of Lord Jim suggests Conrad’s sense that the passage of time infects everything with contingency because any state of affairs is always on the verge of being displaced and can never be fully, permanently restored.

The complications of the novel’s temporal structure contribute to a more general effort to incite the reader to heightened participation in concretizing the potentialities of the work. All works have a virtual dimension—an unwritten aspect left for the reader to create by filling gaps and making connections from the suggestions in the written text. But Conrad’s experiments with the virtuality of his novel are unique in the way they
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emphasize and multiply the contingencies of reading. This is the epistemological function of two characteristic devices Ian Watt has labeled “symbolic deciphering” and “thematic apposition.” Their purpose is to expand and call attention to the potential variability and chance quality of any given reading, even if it observes the limits set by the text.

Taking the example of Brierly’s suicide, Watt calls the episode “symbolic” because “an insistent semantic gap” remains after the reader has put together “all the literal details” of his death. The reader must still ponder “the latent questions” and “larger meaning” the incident implies. Although Watt rightly suggests that the enigma of how to fill such gaps as this one gives the effect of “our bewildered participation in a puzzle,” his analogy is also somewhat misleading. The meaning of Brierly’s suicide is an unusual “puzzle” in that it has not one but many permissible solutions, some mutually consistent but others contradictory: unconscious identification based on guilt, self-conscious anxiety about his own competence, a fall precipitated by an overextended reach for perfection, and so on. Indeed, Brierly figures among the most-discussed aspects of the novel precisely because the reasons for his death are a blank left for readers to fill as they see fit. Just as Brierly discovers himself in his imaginings about Jim, so we encounter our own dispositions and presuppositions in projecting an interpretation of the good captain’s death. The reader’s projections are not uncontrolled, but they are a contingency that will vary between readers and even between any single reader’s concretizations of the text. Here and elsewhere, Conrad’s refusal to specify motives and implications multiplies the chance that his readers will construe his work differently.

*Lord Jim* further increases the play of chance in reading by the technique of “thematic apposition.” Violating chronology, according to Watt’s explanation, Conrad often follows one scene with another that “has no connection with it other than that of continuing and developing the same moral

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25See Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 279–81, from which the subsequent quotations are taken. My aim is to supplement Watt’s description of these devices with explanations of their hermeneutic and metaphysical implications.

26The phrase “limits set by the text” is a necessary simplification of the process by which the reader learns what he or she can or cannot do with the work at hand. These limits are not simply there, totally predetermined. They only come into effect through the act of reading, and they will vary from reader to reader. But texts set constraints on what we can do with them, otherwise we would never experience surprise or frustration when we read. See Paul B. Armstrong, “The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism,” *PMLA* 98 (1983), especially pp. 340–49.
issues." As in the juxtaposition of Marlow’s visit to the mad engineer and his description of Brierly, for example, we readers must discover for ourselves the link between seemingly unrelated events. My reading would suggest that insanity is an outbreak of contingency which society deflects and controls by scapegoating the mad, branding them as “other” and banishing them to institutional custody. This parallels society’s treatment of Jim in the inquiry in which Brierly reluctantly takes part. But other solutions are possible. Watt associates the engineer’s “unconscious idea of his guilt” and Brierly’s “shameful idea of his fear.” Such doublings recall Ford’s method of “juxtaposed situations.” Place two scenes next to each other, he argues, and the result is not only the enhancement of each but also the addition of something more: “Let us put it more concretely by citing the algebraic truth that \((a + b)^2\) equals not merely \(a^2 + b^2\) but \(a^2 + \text{an apparently unearned increment} + b^2\).”27 Ford’s analogy is revealing but somewhat imprecise. The “unearned increment” of meaning that accrues from juxtaposition is not the predictable, fixed quantity the mathematical term \(2ab\) suggests. The \(2ab\) is a blank that can be filled at the virtual level in many possible ways within a range of permissible variation.

The predominance of “thematic apposition” in *Lord Jim* challenges the reader’s ability to make connections in the virtual dimension. The novel offers many more possibilities of connection than most readers will take advantage of, and the links they establish will vary with each new reading. Once again Conrad opens up his novel to the contingency of its manifestations. Any concretization of it is one chance among others. Our assurances about our reading are constantly menaced by unresolved enigmas, by recalcitrant evidence suggesting that our synthesis is incomplete, and by an awareness that other choices are possible in filling the blanks and making the links that the novel leaves open. All of these factors call attention to the provisionality of our concretization and remind us that it is as fortuitous and inessential as all of the constructs we live by. As a result, the effect of reading *Lord Jim* can be paradoxically both liberating and unsettling—both pleasurable and potentially anguishing. By expanding the virtuality of his novel, Conrad enables the reader to revel in the freedom and power that come from multiplied possibilities for creating meaning. But by extending the play of chance in reading, Conrad also undermines

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27Ford Madox Ford, *The March of Literature* (New York: Dial, 1938), p. 804. This text gives the equation as \((a = b)^2\)—an error I have corrected in my quotation.
the assurances of the world’s stability which more restricted narratives reinforce. In either case, *Lord Jim* insists on the ubiquity of contingency in the reader’s very effort to construe it.

*Reality and Hermeneutic Belief*

*Lord Jim* begins its dramatization of the trials of understanding by introducing the contradictory attitude toward reality and interpretation which Conrad shares with James: Is the “real” empirical or phenomenal, single or multiple, fixed or variable? The first four chapters of third-person narration suggest that Jim has an autonomous existence beyond the many interpretations of his character which will later be offered. The evidence at the inquiry is similarly incontestable. There is no doubt that Jim jumped. But Conrad’s novel affirms the independence and certainty of reality only to call them into question. Jim complains of the inquiry: “They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!” (p. 29). Jim’s complaint is justified to the extent that the inquiry uses “facts” to deceive itself. The “facts” are consequently signs that support a lie—instruments society uses to flee from the more disturbing implications of Jim’s case and to avoid confronting the contingency of its own beliefs and values. Conrad’s depiction of the inquiry suggests that empiricism is not a bedrock “truth” but a hermeneutic attitude. The “reality” the inquiry sticks to is a screen and a convention.

The contradiction between Conrad’s belief in the independence of reality and his awareness of the ubiquity of signs reflects once again his two-sided attitude toward contingency. He may desire the singleness of truth, but he also questions the ability of our hermeneutic instruments to attain certain knowledge. A disequilibrium seems to jeopardize validation in *Lord Jim*. Conrad suggests that a failure of consistency can disprove some hypotheses, but that a residue of incoherence is not enough to falsify others. It prevents us, however, from demonstrating conclusively that they deserve our trust.

Consider, for example, the myths about Jim and his “jewel”—“an extraordinary gem—namely, an emerald of an enormous size, and altogether priceless” (p. 280). These rumors are a parody of the beliefs Marlow and others must project to understand the enigmatic Jim. They can be easily

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28On Conrad’s assumptions about the independence of the material world, see particularly Miller, *Poets of Reality*, pp. 47–49.
falsified, however, because Jim’s actual Jewel fails to fit their pattern. But this only comically underlines Marlow’s inability to evaluate definitively the many other hypotheses about Jim which he and others entertain. These hypotheses are often inconsistent with each other—romantic hero or despicable criminal? idealistic youth or pretentious egotist? The fragmentary glimpses of his character which Jim offers make him seem obscure, mysterious, and confusing because they are not always internally coherent. *Lord Jim* suggests that a failure of aspects to synthesize may sometimes demonstrate their unreality (as with the rumors about Jewel), but that incoherence may at other times be evidence not of the falsity of a hypothesis but of the elusiveness of truth.

Jim is repeatedly described as “misty” and “under a cloud,” not only because the aspects he presents to others refuse to synthesize but also because his hidden sides defy definitive explication. Conrad’s doubts that “truth” can always be determinately ascertained extend to both functions of belief in understanding—not only the hypotheses that compose parts into wholes but also our guesses about the absent, the disguised, the unspecified. According to Marlow, there “were things he could not explain to the court—and not even to me; but I would have been little fitted for the reception of his confidences had I not been able at times to understand the pauses between the words” (p. 105). The gaps Marlow must fill in between the views he has of Jim are not only a challenge to his quest for an interpretive pattern that would fit the young man’s fragments together. They also suggest depths beneath the surface the young man shows—depths Marlow can understand only by projecting hypotheses about them.

Marlow’s dilemma, however, is that the same surface can suggest contradictory assumptions about what it disguises. Wondering about Jim’s courage, for example, Marlow confesses: “what I could never make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out. . . . It might have been flight and it might have been a mode of combat” (p. 197). The ambiguity Marlow faces here is exacerbated, of course, by Jim’s inarticulateness. But it also suggests that seemingly reasonable guesses about the hidden sides of others may vary widely.

*Lord Jim* suggests that the opacity of others becomes darkest during conditions of extremity. At the time of the inquiry Marlow describes Jim as “one of those cases. . . . which no man can help” (p. 97). There are limits to how much Marlow and Jewel can give solace to Jim or even comprehend him during his crises because some aspects of existence are not sharable.
Jim's experience suggests that inwardness becomes radical and noncommunicable when one must struggle with guilt, anguish, or responsibility—matters that, like one's own death, no one else can fully participate in. According to Marlow, "it is when we try to grapple with another man's intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun. It is as if loneliness were a hard and absolute condition of existence" (pp. 179-80). This is the form the paradox of other minds takes in Conrad's fiction. By our hypotheses we can attempt to disclose another’s unexpressed being-for-himself, but what we ultimately find is an impenetrable inwardness that transcends all our guesses.

Because understanding Jim is a question of what to believe, Marlow faces the epistemological problem familiar to us from Henry James of what ratio of suspicion and faith to show toward Jim. Uncertain about his new acquaintance, Marlow alternates between compassion and angry impatience. Although he wishes to give Jim all the sympathy he deserves, Marlow frequently warns himself (and us) against the danger of excusing the young man too much. Marlow's ambivalence lingers even to the end. It is no accident that two of the most important readings of the novel are at odds over whether to praise Marlow for his fatherly concern for his friend or to unmask his sympathy as a disguise for his own unconscious guilt. This dispute reenacts the contradiction between trust and demystification which the novel itself dramatizes. Because the text does not resolve the opposition between suspicion and faith, it turns over to the reader the conflict between them.

The problem of belief Jim poses for Marlow is not simply epistemological, however. Marlow reports: "Didn't I tell you he confessed himself before me as though I had the power to bind and to loose? He burrowed deep, deep, in the hope of my absolution, which would have been of no good to him" (p. 97). Despite Marlow's disclaimer, though Jim tells him gratefully: "You don't know what it is for a fellow in my position to be believed" (p. 128). Jeopardized by his own doubts and by the suspicions of society, Jim's very sense of self depends on what Marlow will believe about him. Marlow's role goes beyond the epistemological function of the Jamesian confidante in providing intersubjective scrutiny of the validity of hypotheses. In Conrad's world the belief of others has the ontological value of providing a foundation for identity. For Marlow and for the reader—

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29 The first view is Watt's (Conrad in the Nineteenth Century, pp. 319–20) and the second Guerard's (Conrad the Novelist, p. 141).
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and even for the young man himself—Jim's being varies according to the ratio of suspicion and faith applied to him.

Marlow attempts to get beyond his uncertainties about Jim by consulting with other observers. Instead of definitively answering his questions, however, his inconclusive quest for consensus merely displaces and restates them. Marlow has at least two motives for seeking out informants. First, they may expand his collection of fragmentary evidence about Jim and provide a missing link or a new hypothesis that might finally make his anomalies cohere. Second, Marlow can avoid the solipsism of nonsharable conviction only by testing his opinions against those of others. If Marlow must embrace convictions in order to make sense of Jim, then these may become more secure to the extent that others find them plausible—or so, at least, Marlow hopes. Instead of the confirmation he seeks, however, Marlow finds that equally authoritative interpreters can disagree radically. *Lord Jim* dramatizes an irreconcilable conflict of interpretations which demonstrates that intersubjective agreement cannot always deliver the determinate truth of a matter.

This conflict is exemplified by the opposition between the two most authoritative observers in the novel. Both Stein and the French lieutenant seem at first to be reference points for us to orient ourselves by. Impressed with the seaman's air "of an expert in possession of the facts, and to whom one's perplexities are mere child's-play," Marlow reports that the lieutenant made him feel "as though I were taking professional opinion on the case" (pp. 145–46). Similarly, with Stein—"one of the most trustworthy men I have every known" (p. 202)—Marlow remembers that "our conference resembled . . . a medical consultation" (p. 212) that produced a specialist's diagnosis. But the reader can accept the views of one expert here only by rejecting those of the other.

The authority of each expert is overtly asserted only to be covertly undermined. Marlow may feel that his talk with Stein "had approached nearer to absolute Truth" (p. 216). But Stein's diagnosis of Jim as "romantic" can also be seen as a wishful projection of his own ideals onto a perhaps unworthy candidate. If Stein's noble idealism may tempt him into overlooking the young man's weaknesses, such indulgence is called into question by the French lieutenant's denial that Jim is exceptional ("The fear, the fear—look you—it is always there"; p. 146) and by his refusal to take a lenient view ("But habit—habit—necessity—do you see?—the eye of others—*violâ*. One puts up with it"; p. 147). Still, although the lieutenant seems wise in his reflections and heroic in enduring the threat of imminent
death for thirty hours on the Patna, his ethnically typical complaint about "eating without my glass of wine" (p. 141)—apparently his primary worry during his ordeal—makes him a figure of the sphere of domesticity which the novel profoundly criticizes. The stolid officer's obliviousness to disorientation is not only a strength but also a weakness because it aligns him with the placid parsons of the world (Marlow even compares him to "one of those snuffy, quiet village priests"; p. 139). The Frenchman may seem to refute Stein conclusively, but his authority is itself questionable. Just as Conrad's novel asserts the autonomy of the real only to demonstrate the variability of interpretation, so Marlow invokes experts to disclose the truth about Jim only to reveal that hermeneutic conflict is inescapable.

Conrad further emphasizes the conflict between the two authorities by giving them different nationalities and by rendering their accents. His insistence on the linguistic identities of the German trader and the French sailor recalls Mallarmé's claim that "the diversity of languages on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself Incarnate." Although some translation between codes is possible, different linguistic systems are not perfectly compatible because their semantic units reflect different categorizations of permissible resemblances and oppositions. It is not surprising that the multilingual Conrad should have a sense that different languages project different worlds that do not overlap completely. Stein and the French lieutenant exemplify the problem of translation. Both speak in English—not their native tongue—with the authority of experts about a reality seemingly independent of language. But their disagreements about what is "there" before them call attention to the interpretive conflicts linguistic systems codify. Marlow's two authorities show both how the possibility of translation makes reality seem autonomous and univocal and how the obstacles to translation reveal the variability of what can be seen, understood, and expressed with different interpretive categories.

By offering two competing reference points—one romantic and somewhat idealistic, the other pragmatic and somewhat materialistic—Conrad prevents the hermeneutic field his novel displays from assuming fixed lines.

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of orientation. *Lord Jim* is a structure with two incompatible centers, and such a structure is inherently unstable. This instability echoes and reinforces the novel's refusal to settle the conflict of interpretations it portrays. Conrad's double gesture of asserting and then undermining the authority of Marlow's two experts makes the reader move back and forth between hermeneutic alternatives. And this alternation calls for reflection about the factors that set it in motion—about the reasons why disagreement between interpretive hypotheses can prevent the disclosure of a determinate reality.

In this and other ways, the difficulties Marlow encounters in his search for beliefs to make sense of Jim are paralleled by the dilemmas the narrative structure of the novel poses for its readers. The characteristic hermeneutic aim of many of the novel's most frequently discussed techniques is to provoke and heighten but also to frustrate the reader's efforts to discover hypotheses that will fit together elements in a coherent pattern. The multiple layering of temporal levels, the partial disclosures and delayed specifications, the proliferation of informants, Marlow's penchant for digression—these are all fundamentally related, mutually reinforcing strategies. All increase the responsibility of the reader to compose the parts offered in a disconnected manner on the level of the narration into a whole that would make up the story presumably unifying and underlying them. The unusual effort the reader must expend to forge coherence out of these fragments brings to the fore the same necessity Marlow confronts of discovering synthesizing hypotheses. But the further effect of Conrad's narrative fragmentation is to thwart any conclusive discovery of consistency. Faced with too much to synthesize, frustrated by gaps between the fragments, and hindered by the refusal of incompatible perspectives to reconcile their differences, the reader shares Marlow's discovery of the inherent vulnerability of consistency building as a hermeneutic procedure.

This double movement of inciting and thwarting the reader's quest for coherence can be seen, for example, in Marlow's periodic speculations about the implications of Jim's tale. When Marlow interrupts his narration to offer commentaries (as in the passage quoted earlier about our "hard, absolute loneliness"), his remarks provide organizing constructs that promise to guide the reader. But the effect of many of his commentaries—as with the one just mentioned—is to remind us of the difficulties that block full comprehension. Early on, Marlow's characterizations of Jim often make him seem more enigmatic than the facts as yet would warrant. Marlow's later generalizations insist on Jim's ambiguity even after the facts
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are in. In both cases, the function of Marlow’s commentaries is to add to our mystification in defiance of the presumption that they might help to dispel it.

Douglas Hewitt is not the only critic who has complained about this: “The effect of muddlement which is so commonly found in Lord Jim comes, in short, from this—that Marlow is himself muddled.” A narrator’s confusion can have a clearly defined narrative function, however, and Marlow himself is often quite lucid about the difficulties that stand in the way of a definitive interpretation of Jim. Marlow’s ambiguous characterizations of the young man are a narrative strategy that encourages the reader to attain a similar degree of hermeneutic self-consciousness. By reinforcing our effort to reach a global understanding at the same time as they frustrate our search for clarity and consistency, Marlow’s commentaries set up an opposition in the reader between a heightened desire to know and a heightened inability to understand. This opposition parallels Marlow’s own experience with Jim. Although it is an opposition that cannot be resolved, one way the reader can get past it is to reflect about its origins and implications—reflection that will take as its theme the epistemological need for beliefs to compose elements into patterns. This is precisely the need that has been invoked and blocked. Some readers may complain that the unequivocal meaning they expect from a narrative has been withheld from them. But readers who accept Marlow’s ambiguity as a challenge to hermeneutic reflection will learn more about the role of belief in understanding than they might if his commentaries delivered a clear, simple truth.

A similar invocation and frustration of the reader’s desire for consistency can be seen in the novel’s relation to conventional narrative types. Lord Jim defies the customary generic categories a reader might apply to it: a tale of the sea, an adventure story, a romance in exotic lands. It is all of these—and none of them. The novel’s subtitle (A Tale) might seem superfluous except that its very vagueness suggests the work’s ambiguity as a type. Conrad’s alternatives (“I would like to put it as A simple tale A plain tale—something of the sort—if possible”) are even more explicitly ironic as commentaries on the novel’s unresolvable typological complications. 33 Lord

33Conrad to David S. Meldrum, May 19, 1900, in Joseph Conrad: Letters to William
Jim defies the reader to fit it into a classificatory scheme—a pattern that might help make sense of the whole by suggesting a pregiven set of generic expectations. This blockage throws into question the adequacy and completeness of our generic categories—a plight in reading analogous to Marlow's dilemma in typing Jim. Just as Stein's diagnosis of Jim as "romantic" is challenged by other typologies, which classify him as anything from a coward and a deserter to an egotist, and just as Jim is, if romantic, as much a critique of the type as an embodiment of it, so the novel as a whole both demands and resists classification. This double movement makes strange the hermeneutic function of genres and kinds instead of allowing us to take it for granted.  

By challenging and defying the reader's quest for consistency, Lord Jim paradoxically encourages both immersion and detachment. This paradox is evident from the very first responses the novel received to some of its most recent evaluations. One of the early reviewers reported: "if you once succumb to the sombre fascination of his narrative . . . your thraldom is complete." A sense of deep, enthralled immersion in the novel's world may be encouraged by the requirement that we as readers make connections and discover patterns on our own. Because our participation in the construction of the work's virtual dimension is more extensive than usual, our involvement with what we produce may be more intimate. But the early reviewers also committed some glaring errors in concretizing the work—one of them reporting, for example, that the Patna "goes to the bottom like a shot, with all hands," and another claiming that, at the outset, Marlow is "attracted by Jim's frank and engaging personality." These mistakes suggest a need to simplify in the face of excessive demands for concentration, discrimination, and synthesis. Another possible response to these demands is to step back and exchange immersion for reflection about the efforts of interpretation they require and the dimensions of understanding.


Nettels oversimplifies the epistemological function of types in Lord Jim: "Ultimately, for Marlow, the tormenting question is not what kind of person is Jim? but how is one to regard him? How is one to judge his actions?" (James and Conrad [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977], p. 50). These questions are not separable, however. Marlow cannot classify Jim without simultaneously evaluating him because both acts require the imposition of types.


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they manipulate. The dual opportunity of involvement and detachment which Lord Jim offers helps to explain why Conrad has earned contradictory praise—for his fidelity to representation and for his turn away from mimesis to textuality. A realistically minded reader can find in Conrad ample occasion for heightened participation in a represented world. A different reader can find inducements to reflect about meaning and interpretation. Or a reader may shift back and forth between these two poles.

Another source of the reader’s oscillations is the novel’s narrator. Both intimate and distant, our relation to Marlow is a perpetual alternation between communion and detachment which calls attention to the self’s paradoxical combination of involvement with others and unreachable inwardness. Although Marlow often makes revealing disclosures about his own deepest feelings, we do not have immediate access to his inward being (as we occasionally do with Jim in the opening omniscient pages). This dramatized narrator presents to us his self-for-others, the construct that reveals but also disguises his self-for-himself: The opacity of Marlow’s innermost self gives legitimacy to those who unmask his unconscious motives. After insisting on our inherent solipsism, however, Conrad also invokes the ability of dialogue to overcome the barriers between selves. Not only between Marlow and Jim, but also between the narrator and his listeners, the ultimate value of conversation is its capacity to make inwardness sharable.

Nevertheless, just as Marlow’s conversations with Jim often only emphasize the young man’s opacity, so the narrator’s community with his listeners is invoked only to be subverted. Refusing to let this communion stabilize, Marlow advises his listeners (and by implication his readers) to take advantage of their distance from him: “You may be able to tell better” who Jim is “since the proverb has it that the onlookers see most of the game” (p. 224). If our perspective transcends Marlow’s, that is because our remove from his involvements may allow us to interpret and judge with something closer to authoritative detachment. But the ineradicable opacities and conflicts in his story doom this effort to failure. Any attempt to go beyond Marlow’s perspective must bring us back to his level. If we try

to overcome his hermeneutic plight, we are only made to share it more immediately. What Marlow says of his relation to Jim therefore also holds for the reader's relation to him—that by grappling with another's "intimate need" we learn about the intransigence of the separation of selves.

The clash between indeterminacy and the reader's quest for coherence reaches perhaps its greatest intensity at the level of the novel's symbolism. Conrad's images are typically cloaked in mystery because they invoke the two-tiered structure of connotation only to call it into question. Consider, for example, the well-known image of the moon rising over the hills of Patusan:38

[Jim and Marlow] watched the moon float away above the chasm between the hills like an ascending spirit out of a grave; its sheen descended, cold and pale, like the ghost of dead sunlight. There is something haunting in the light of the moon; it has all the dispassionateness of a disembodied soul, and something of its inconceivable mystery. It is to our sunshine, which—say what you like—is all we have to live by, what the echo is to the sound: misleading and confusing whether the note be mocking or sad. It robs all forms of matter—which, after all, is our domain—of their substance, and gives a sinister reality to shadows alone. (Pp. 245–46)

Here, as with many of Conrad's landscapes, the immanent presence of the natural world seems to point to forces and meanings beyond it. This suggestion of transcendence heightens the classic structure of the symbol—the manifestation of a second, indirect meaning in and through a direct meaning. But when readers attempt to decipher the second level, their efforts are blocked. Marlow increases the moon's suggestiveness—but also its elusiveness—by explicating it not with literal language but with a chain of figures that compare it to the realms of ghosts, echoes, and shadows. The explication of the primary symbol through secondary metaphors contributes more to its density than to its lucidity.

The metaphors themselves are, further, both consistent and inconsistent with each other. Although the moon has the insubstantiality of a disembodied spirit, it gives shadows a demonic materiality. Although it lacks passion, it seems actively villainous. Although its reflective light seems secondary to the sun as the echo is to sound, the forces Marlow attributes to it gradually increase until it seems indomitable. The shifting multiplicity

of Conrad's symbol undermines its seemingly straightforward structure by refusing to stabilize the second tier of meaning it promises. The basic contrast between moon and sun may seem simple and even trite, but these paradoxes undercut that impression and revivify the image by multiplying the moon's possible meanings.

A similar effect results from the strings of images running through the novel. The most pervasive of these is the often-noted symbolism of light and darkness—suggesting, for example, virtue versus corruption, the human world and the abyss beneath it, the truth as opposed to Jim's enigma, the butterfly's perfection and the earthly falleness of the beetle, and so on. The repetition of this dichotomy is an incitement to the reader to look for some orderly, systematic relation among its occurrences, some principle to unify them consistently. But the terms are not equivalent to each other. (Jim's enigma is not quite the same, for example, as the darkness of evil.) They may overlap, but they also diverge. Instead of confirming and limiting each other's meaning, the addition of a different meaning with every new use invokes the field that prior occurrences have established in order to shift its relations and enlarge its boundaries. The recurrence of uses suggests some underlying coherence, but their many shades of difference deny it.

In all of these ways, Conrad's symbols defy synthesizing impositions of unity and order. To recall a much-quoted passage from *Heart of Darkness*, such consistency might make meaning seem like "a kernel" found "within the shell of a cracked nut"; for Conrad and Marlow, however, "the meaning of an episode was not inside . . . 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 halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illuminations of moonshine." By offering but then withholding the second, kernellike level of the symbol, Conrad subverts the reader's everyday assumption that meaning is a determinate object rather than an activity open to endless variation. Instead of handing over its referent to the reader, Conrad's use of the symbol sets us in motion imagining an ever-outwardly-spiraling series of associations which its contexts and constituent elements

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39 These divergences are subtler than the radical shifts Miller observes, but they are just as destabilizing: "Light changes place with dark; the value placed on dark and light changes place, as light is sometimes the origin of dark, dark sometimes the origin of light" (*Fiction and Repetition*, p. 38).

might allow. Instead of giving us a meaning, it incites us to mean. Like a glowing haze, the Conradian symbol both suggests and disguises—both illuminates and destabilizes. By both encouraging and defying his reader to discover a single consistent meaning beneath or beyond his symbols, Conrad re-creates the double movement of his own desire for and skepticism about the existence of an ultimate truth. The reader may consequently find Conrad's symbols both pleasurable and anguishing—a liberating occasion for expanding our capacities to signify, but also an unsettling refusal of the assumption that signs can deliver what they promise.

The novel's ambiguous ending recapitulates all of the major elements of Conrad's preoccupation with interpretation, reality, and the quest for consistency. Jim's death is an irrefutable fact, for example, but its reality does not resolve the question of how to interpret it. Rival hypotheses can assemble his demise into equally coherent syntheses, but each casts doubt on the other: Does he meet death heroically, accepting responsibility for his judgments and the catastrophe they lead to, or is he a coward who refuses to fight and flees once again, this time into suicide, the ultimate escape? How should we type his final proud glance? Does it suggest a justified integrity, or the last flare-up of romantic vanity? These questions defy definitive answer because they depend on speculation about Jim's being-for-himself. And Jim is most mysterious at the moment of his death, his opacity compounded by the extremity of his situation.

Marlow says of Jim earlier: "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" (p. 265). Jim remains symbolic to the end. The direct meaning of his final episode (that he is killed) suggests a second, indirect tier of meaning (what deeper significance should Marlow, Jewel, Stein, and we as readers find in it?). True to the working of the Conradian symbol, however, the ambiguity of Jim's death suggests a transcendent realm of meaning only to leave it obscure, open to endless conjecture. Confronted with a novel that oscillates inconclusively at the end between rival possibilities of interpretation, readers of Lord Jim may choose to put a stop to the ambiguity by picking one alternative. Another effect of ambiguity, however, can be to give rise to reflection about its causes. Blocked one last time in the quest for consistency, the reader is challenged to turn back to reconsider the hermeneutic issues the novel explores—issues that find culminating expression in its inconclusive ending.
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A Self-negating Affirmation

Conrad's depiction of the ubiquity of contingency and the elusiveness of truth suggests the temperament of a nihilist. But this contradictory novelist is not that simple. Conrad responds to his negative discoveries with an affirmation of absolutes which he proclaims all the more resolutely because they are nothing more than beliefs. In contrast to the dialectic between suspicion and faith which we examined in *The Ambassadors*, the relation between skepticism and affirmation in Conrad is not a process of mutual correction. Conrad's beliefs and doubts are radically opposed, not susceptible to dialectical mediation. His affirmation does not eradicate or even ameliorate his negative vision but counters it without overcoming it.

As for Kierkegaard, so for Conrad, faith is an absurd, unjustifiable leap. Conrad does not share Kierkegaard's conviction, however, that the leap can transcend the barrier between the finite and the infinite. Nor does Conrad believe that the pain and suffering that testify to faith's risks also signal its legitimacy. Conrad's certainty about his convictions remains arbitrary. And his triad of absolutes—mastery, honor, and fidelity—lies squarely this side of the boundary between humanity and the realm of transcendence. Although absolutes, they are nonetheless immanent to the human world. Conrad's ultimate values can still lay claim to the status of fundamentals, however, because they deploy beliefs in the three main areas where humanity encounters being: our engagement with objects and the world of equipment, our attitude toward the self, and our relations with others. Mapping the world of being, mastery addresses the *Umwelt*, honor the *Eigenwelt*, and fidelity the *Mitwelt*.

*Lord Jim* is emblematic of Conrad's contradictory, resolute but self-negating affirmation. This novel asserts his three major values as absolutes even as it exposes their flaws and unmask their fragility. They emerge from the inquiry not strengthened by the chastening fires of skepticism but made more urgent in spite of—or because of—their very weaknesses.

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42 My argument that Conrad's contradictions simultaneously deny and affirm opposes William W. Bonney's claim that they are purely negative: "Conrad perpetually generates inconsistencies by means of statements that are mutually exclusive if evaluated according to Aristotelian logic, and he thereby reveals the absence of meaning that is central to his
In a perpetual back-and-forth movement between suspicion and faith, *Lord Jim* demonstrates the contingency of Conrad's absolutes even as it insists on their necessity. It offers a demystification of values which it asks us to accept as fundamental truths. This contradiction transfers Conrad's dilemma to the reader by setting up an unstoppable alternation between belief and doubt in our response to the novel's assertion of value. Conrad's absolutes are offers to the reader of affirming beliefs that, if accepted, turn out to be unsettling rather than reassuring because what we discover is their inadequacy. But this discovery alerts us to the need for absolutes that are absent from the world as they are from the novel. Activating and frustrating the reader's desire to believe, Conrad asks us to join his quest for indubitable convictions. The whirligig of affirmation and demystification goes on.

*Lord Jim* considers but rejects the roads to affirmation which James suggests. Unlike Strether, for whom the development of self-consciousness is itself a moral achievement, Jim's "acute consciousness of lost honour" ("Author's Note," p. ix) intensifies his longing for what might have been instead of facilitating a resignation to loss and disappointment. Jim's self-consciousness is less a positive force for instruction than a paralyzing source of anxiety. Marlow does grow in self-understanding through his attempt to understand others. But what he learns threatens his sense of identity rather than deepening and confirming it. He resembles Strether in his capacity for reflection, but the expansion of his self-consciousness has an opposite existential result. Because Conrad does not share James's conviction that existence carries its own rationale—that it itself is a trustworthy locus of such moral values as freedom and care—consciousness of the human condition cannot for Conrad be ultimately redeeming.

Conrad's oscillation between faith and suspicion is evident even in *Lord Jim's* central moment of affirmation—Stein's ringing declaration that we must "in the destructive element immerse" (p. 214): "A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns—nicht wahr?

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ontology" (*Thorns and Arabesques: Contexts for Conrad's Fiction* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980], pp. 4–5). To say two contradictory things is not necessarily to mean nothing, however. It can be a desperate, valiant attempt to mean both—even if one recognizes that they cannot coexist.

43Nettels similarly observes: "James defines consciousness as a constructive force, Conrad as the cause of suffering" (*James and Conrad*, p. 196).
and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me—how to be?” (p. 214; original ellipses). The metaphysical question has been posed and, apparently, answered. A couple of difficulties present themselves, however, if the reader attempts to accept this passage as the novel's refutation of nihilism. First, as I have already suggested, Stein's authority as a source of wisdom is challenged by the French lieutenant's less indulgent reading of Jim. Still, this speech might seem to resolve at least some of their disagreement if the officer's stoic endurance in the face of danger can be taken as a partial illustration of Stein's point. A further difficulty, however, is that Stein's image is so confusing that some critics have charged Conrad with poor writing. For example, customarily regarded as an ethereal realm associated with airy heights, dreams here are something we fall into instead of rise with above the mundane; they are water, and air is their opposite. The image thus clashes with the rest of the novel where Jim's dreams lift him on high and he falls down out of them (or jumps). Stein's solution—that we tread water—is a curious activity, less a grand than an almost ludicrous image if we stop to translate his metaphor into a concrete picture.

Nevertheless, there is good reason why this image has become one of the most memorable in all of Conrad's canon. Its very ambiguities set up an oscillation between the poles of revelation and demystification which gives it special resonance. It is not a botched image because its apparent flaws have productive power in promoting the reader's contemplation of the field of meaning it opens up. A failed image would hinder rather than facilitate such reflection. By preventing the image from stabilizing, the contradictions that prompt complaints about metaphorical incoherence grant readers greater freedom and responsibility to project its meaning for themselves. This freedom helps explain why Stein's image has received so many diverse interpretations. By withholding figurative coherence, the image discourages us from transforming it into a concrete picture—a transformation that, as I have suggested, would undermine its grandeur. This in turn encourages us to ponder its weightier if less substantial metaphysical implications.

Our reflections may roam widely within broad limits established by the opposition between destruction and redemption, which controls the im-

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44One of the first critics to find fault with this passage, Guerard proposes two alternative explanations: “that Conrad produced without much effort a logically imperfect multiple metaphor, liked the sound of it, and let matters go at that” or that he “wanted to show Stein giving confused advice” (Conrad the Novelist, p. 166).
Contingency, Interpretation, and Belief in *Lord Jim*

age—an opposition between a demystifying act of suspicion and a revelatory gesture of faith. The notions that the human world is no more substantial than a dream, that our condition is an arbitrary fall from grace and perfection, that the truth of life is potentially destructive—these implications of the image invoke Conrad’s negative conclusions about contingency and establish them as one boundary of the metaphor’s semantic field. The image makes clear only that fleeing this state of affairs is impossible and self-destructive. The revelatory boundary of the image is somewhat obscure and stands in an ambiguous relation to its negative limit. Precisely how we are to exert ourselves is left open to considerable variation, and no reason is given why the destructive element will not swallow us up. Stein’s resolution remains a paradox that encourages but defies the reader to plumb its depths. The act of faith that Stein counsels opposes but does not abolish or transcend the negative vision he begins with. His image is thus an expression of the contradiction in Conrad himself between his negative vision and his insistence on getting beyond it—a contradiction that the reader is made to share by the oscillations this contradictory metaphor sets in motion.

Stein’s metaphor about the “destructive element” suggests the importance of mastery—the first of Conrad’s articles of faith. Conrad sees metaphysical value in the practical activity of sustained exertion. If our capacities are limited, our existence precarious, and our constructs fragile, we can still attempt to lessen our vulnerability by exercising as much control as we can over the situation we find ourselves in. Jim’s crime on the *Patna* is a failure of mastery, and his triumph in Patusan is the achievement of regulatory power. But both episodes also give reason to doubt that mastery is an absolute value or that it can overcome contingency. On the *Patna* Jim overreached himself by attempting too great a degree of control. He tells Marlow that for a long time “he had been preparing himself for all the difficulties that can beset one on land and water” (p. 95). He feels that “nothing less than the unconceivable itself could get over his perfect state of preparation” (p. 95)—but the unconceivable is, of course, precisely what happens. Jim’s problem is that no amount of mastery can put the inexplicable and unforeseeable entirely under our will. Conrad may value preparation because it seeks to reduce our vulnerability to breakthroughs of the sudden and the unexpected, but he also suggests that even the most far-reaching readiness cannot prevent the unpredictable and the fortuitous from asserting their dominance.

Powerless earlier, Jim later seems the figure of boundless competence:
"He had regulated so many things in Patusan! Things that would have appeared as much beyond his control as the motions of the moon and the stars" (p. 221). Impressed with Jim’s power over his circumstances, Marlow reports that Jim “seemed to have come very near at last to mastering his fate” (p. 274). But just as his efforts at preparation had overreached themselves earlier, so his claims to management have overextended themselves now. Such perfect mastery is more than anyone can hope for, even within a limited sphere like Patusan. Hence the accidental, unpredictable, and disastrous arrival of Gentleman Brown, with the result that Jim is once again “overwhelmed by the inexplicable; he was overwhelmed by his own personality—the gift of that destiny which he had done his best to master” (p. 341). If Jim’s downfall is attributable to flaws in his character, then one of his central failings is that he seeks excessive control. The collapse of his world demystifies the dream of mastering one’s fortunes. Jim is both an embodiment of the value of mastery and a critique of its hubris.

_Lord Jim_ oscillates similarly between endorsing and demystifying honor. The French lieutenant asserts its unequivocal importance: “But the honour—the honour, monsieur! . . . The honour. . . that is real—that is! And what life may be worth when. . . the honour is gone—ah ça! par example—I can offer no opinion” (p. 148; last ellipses added). This tautological repetition without explanation indicates a fundamental level of conviction where one can say no more than it is so because it must be so. Conrad has reasons for the primacy he gives to honor, however, and they all have to do with his sense that the belief of others in the self provides personal identity with the firmest foundation it can claim. Conrad gives a modern reinterpretation to this feudal value by proposing honor as the basis of the ontology of the self.

Honor is for him essential to self-constitution because the trust and expectations of others create an external construct that the self can hold onto in order to rescue itself from the obscurities of its own inwardness. Hence his claim that “a man’s real life is that accorded to him in the thoughts of other men.” Reversing the customary notion that the authentic self is inward, Conrad implies that the personality one presents to the eyes of others is more substantial and more “real.” I have already noted how Jim’s very sense of identity seems to depend on Marlow’s willingness to believe his version of the _Patna_ affair. On Patusan, his honor restored and his identity with it, Jim says: “I’ve got to look only at the face of the first man


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that comes along, to regain my confidence” (p. 306). The existence ascribed to him by the thoughts of others has the power to overcome the bottomless depths of his inner torment and rescue him from his endless private ruminations. Honor not only grants solidity and clarity to the emptiness and obscurity of the self thanks to the objectifying gaze of others; it also transforms a contingency into a necessity by pledging that one’s actions are dependable rather than arbitrary.

Nevertheless, because a pact of honor is nothing more than a tissue of beliefs, it is less trustworthy than it may seem. As the gap between Jim’s being-for-others and his being-for-himself makes clear, there is always the question of whether someone’s claim for honor is deserving. It can be a lie—an indication that honor does not transcend the universe of signs but is instead implicated in the contingencies of interpretation. Jim’s desertion of the Patawa shows that honor is easily lost, and his stewardship of Patusan suggests that it sustains itself only by being continuously renewed. Although Jim’s status on the island seems untouchable, the sudden, complete, and irreversible collapse of his fortunes at the end reveals that the confidence of others is a more precarious foundation for identity than he had believed. Conrad indicates the fragility of a self constituted by others when he writes to Edward Garnett: “All of you stand by me so nobly that I must still exist.”46 The converse of this reassurance is less comforting: if they did not, he would not. Conrad may affirm that honorable relations provide the self with its best hope for attaining security and stability. But he also shows that honor supports the self only on tenuous terms.

The social dimension of honor suggests the importance of fidelity for Conrad—the article of faith most dear to this deeply skeptical novelist. But even with this most unequivocal of his absolutes, the act of affirmation is almost immediately beset by doubts. Insisting on the primacy of bonds with others, Marlow states the positive case for fidelity in the strongest terms: “We exist only in so far as we hang together” (p. 223). With honor, fidelity is a necessary foundation for the very being of the self. The extremity of Marlow’s assertion ascribes an almost spiritual significance to personal relations. He even reports a fleeting experience of quasi-religious transport when he is last together with Jim on the ship bound for Patusan: “There was a moment of real and profound intimacy, unexpected and short-lived like a glimpse of some everlasting, of some saving truth” (p. 241). Solidarity with others extends the self beyond its limited, transient

domain. Relations with others and membership in communities are for Conrad ways of overcoming the incidental particularity of an individual’s life.

If fidelity is an absolute in Conrad’s world, then Jim is wrong to complain that “there was not the thickness of a sheet of paper between the right and wrong of this affair” (p. 130). His desertion of the *Patna* is irrefutably a crime because it is a violation of trust—“a breach of faith with the community of mankind” (p. 157). But *Lord Jim* affirms the indubitable truth of fidelity only to call it into question. Allegiance to the community is not always this certain and univocal as a standard of conduct. Conrad’s novel suggests that fidelity can be a relative, heterogeneous value because kinds of obligation and forms of communal bond can vary widely. This variation can result in irresolvable conflicts of allegiance which undermine the claim of community to offer a single, clear-cut truth. Marlow runs the risk, for example, that his loyalty to the desperate Jim may be a betrayal of his commitments to the code of seamanship and to the standards of social responsibility. This dilemma foreshadows the error Jim later makes in recognizing the solidarity of a common humanity with Brown—an act of generosity but a betrayal of Jim’s obligations to Patusan. Solidarity can be defined in many different ways. Some seem clearly more worthy than others, but others are equally meritorious yet mutually incompatible. Such is the case at the end, for example, when Jim is torn between his obligations to Doramin’s group and his commitments to Jewel, Tamb’ Itam, and his retainers. The possibility of conflicting allegiances makes fidelity multiple rather than single in meaning. Its claims are therefore variable and contingent, not unequivocal and necessary.

The potential variability of fidelity casts doubt on its capacity to overcome the inessentiality of the self. Jim argues: “You take a different view of your actions when you come to understand, when you are made to understand every day that your existence is necessary—you see, absolutely necessary—to another person. I am made to feel that. Wonderful” (p. 304; original emphasis). Jim refers here to Jewel, but he is also “necessary” to Doramin, Dain Waris, and the larger community of Patusan. The problem, however, is that the necessity of one’s existence is merely relative to the commitments one chooses to undertake. It is consequently always somewhat arbitrary, since these could invariably have been different. And they can clash, as they do when Jim chooses to die.

Furthermore, the status of being essential to others is not always as exhilarating as Jim’s “Wonderful” implies. The leader of Patusan is vindi-
cated in his existence because his followers need him, but Jim also for that reason finds himself enslaved: "all his conquests, the trust, the fame, the friendships, the love—all these things that made him master had made him a captive, too" (p. 247). The gaze of others confirms his identity only at the cost of entrapping it in a fixed, objectified form. Even when keeping faith with others does succeed in overcoming the inessentiality of our lives, the captivity it entails is a reminder of our limits and a sign that the dream of perfection must fail.

The contradictions in Conrad's attitude toward fidelity and solidarity are evident in the very terms themselves. They are unusually strident, even militant words for personal relations and membership in a community (in contrast, say, to a term such as care). The forcefulness of Conrad's language dramatizes the status of these values as absolutes in his hierarchy of convictions. But the very unequivocal insistence of his rhetoric here is deceptive because it covers over the qualifications and complications he dramatizes with such relentless moral courage when he explores his absolutes in his fiction. The stridency of these terms is proportional to the depths of the crisis in belief which Conrad seeks to overcome in affirming them. But instead of resolving his crisis, his rhetorical urgency gives evidence of it through the very attempt to mask it.

In all of his contradictions, Conrad is both more conservative and more radical than James. And this paradox makes him more modern. More conservative, Conrad is less willing to accept that we inhabit a semiotic universe where sign leads only to sign without necessary origin or determinate end. More radical, he pushes to deeper metaphysical levels his explorations of the consequences of inhabiting just such a world. He is thus more modern because the crisis of belief signaled by Conrad's self-negating affirmation is a first instance of the dissociation between suspicion and faith which many later moderns regard as a defining feature of the cultural climate—or which they enact by embracing one of the two poles (Eliot's conversion to the church versus Kafka's depiction of the absence of the law; Lawrence's celebration of the body versus Beckett's reduction of both it and the mind; Bellow's return to traditional moral values versus Pynchon's irreverent demystification of all systems of signification). Flaubert provides a precedent for the duality of skepticism and affirmation in Conrad. But Flaubert's scathing irony toward bourgeois manners, juxtaposed against his faith in art, is more stable and less self-contradictory than Conrad's oscillation between all-embracing negation and ardent absolutism. Conrad radicalizes Flaubert's contempt for conventional attitudes by
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unmasking them as an ontological deception instead of faulting them for moral and aesthetic hypocrisy.

By orienting his novels toward the metaphysical underpinnings of the self and society, Conrad announces an important tendency in modern fiction. He is the first of the great narrative innovators who cut beneath the tradition of realism by exploring the foundations of being—whether suspiciously, as Beckett does in exposing the negativity of consciousness and meaning, or affirmatively, as Woolf does in celebrating moments of communion when selves transcend their boundaries and achieve a saving oneness. *Lord Jim* plays out Conrad's contradictory attitude toward contingency in a portrait of an individual. His meditations about being therefore await expansion in a study of the metaphysics of the social world. This is achieved in *Nostromo*. 