“‘I affirm nothing.’”

Lord Jim and the Uses of Textual Recalcitrance

Jim’s Character and Experience as an Instance of the Stubborn

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Lord Jim is justly famous for both its artistic achievement and the difficulty it presents to interpreters. These two qualities of the novel have attracted many astute commentators who have offered significant insights into many of its techniques and strategies (e.g., Watt and Lothe). The novel’s difficulty has also meant that critical consensus about some central issues of the novel has never been achieved. Two very astute commentators in the 1980s nicely represent the spectrum along which most critical opinion falls. At one end of the spectrum, J. Hillis Miller argues that the novel is ultimately indeterminate: “The indeterminacy lies in the multiplicity of possible incompatible explanations given by the novel and in the lack of evidence justifying a choice of one over the others. The reader cannot logically have them all, and yet nothing he is given determines a choice among them. The possibilities, moreover, are not just given side by side as entirely separate hypotheses. They are related to one another in a system of mutual implication and mutual contradiction. Each calls up the others, but it does not make sense to have more than one of them” (1982, 40).

At the other end of the spectrum, Ralph Rader sees the novel as determinate but built on a principle of “unambiguous ambiguity,” by which he means that Conrad incorporates what Marlow calls “the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct” (1989, 37) into the representation of
Jim’s movement toward his eventual fate. In Rader’s view, the novel traces Jim’s development within the frame of both the fixed standard and the inescapable doubt. Rader argues that Conrad both endorses Jim’s final decision to take the death of Dain Waris on his own head (in that decision Jim is living up to the fixed standard) but stops short of making that decision heroic because the doubt about the rightness of that standard persists.

In this essay, I want to say “yes, but” to both Miller’s and Rader’s accounts of the novel, and in so doing, to advance the conversation about the relation between the novel’s artistic achievement and its difficulty. Indeed, I want to link those two elements even more tightly than Miller’s and Rader’s analyses do. If we were to accept fully Miller’s view of the ultimate indeterminacy of the novel, we would have to significantly revise most of our claims for the novel’s artistic achievement. Within Miller’s deconstructive view the novel’s achievement is not finally in its representation of Jim’s struggles and Marlow’s efforts to comprehend them but rather in the way literary language inevitably immerses its readers into the deconstructive element. On the other hand, if we were to accept fully Rader’s view of the ultimate determinacy of the novel, we would be shortchanging the novel’s difficulty, its way of using Marlow’s narration to underline the way Jim’s life resists definitive interpretation. In my view, Conrad’s artistic achievement is interwoven with this resistance, because he succeeds in making that resistance serve a larger narrative purpose. Furthermore, that purpose is best described not simply in thematic terms such as some statement about the fixed standard of conduct, but even more importantly with reference to the affective and ethical consequences of Marlow’s—and ultimately Conrad’s own—telling about it. To put these points another way, I propose to investigate Lord Jim as Conrad’s fascinating experiment with a particular kind of textual recalcitrance that I call the stubborn. By “the stubborn,” I mean textual recalcitrance that will not yield to our efforts at interpretive mastery but that nevertheless functions intelligibly within a larger artistic design. I distinguish the stubborn from the much more common kind of textual recalcitrance that does yield to interpretation, what I call the difficult. I shall begin, first, by clarifying the nature of Lord Jim’s stubbornness by comparing it to some other examples of the phenomenon, and then by examining some key features of the novel’s progression, especially ones related to Marlow’s role as narrator.

I first proposed the concept of the stubborn in an essay on Toni Morrison’s Beloved that attempted to come to terms with the multiple and ultimately incompatible identities of the title character (see chapter 9 of Narrative as Rhetoric, 1996). Beloved is Sethe’s slain daughter reincarnated; the woman who escaped from the cabin of a white man found dead around the time of her arrival at 124 Bluestone Road; a survivor of the Middle Passage; and Sethe’s
murdered African mother. It is impossible to meld all these identities into the figure of a single coherent character, but Morrison makes the incoherence function as part of her narrative argument that her audience needs to counter the continuing effects of slavery in American culture.¹ A second example of the stubborn is the character of Sarah Woodruff in The French Lieutenant’s Woman, whom John Fowles represents as both an unfortunate Victorian woman who is grateful for the love of the Victorian gentleman Charles Smithson and a forerunner of the New Woman who is far too independent to want the kind of conventional domestic happiness that Charles envisions for the two of them. Sarah’s stubbornness enables Fowles to write two different endings to the novel and to have his narrator plausibly insist that the reader should not yield to the tyranny of linear order and accept the second ending, in which Sarah remains independent, as the “real” ending. The two endings, by contrast, are an instance of the difficult rather than the stubborn: each is intelligible in itself and together they yield to our efforts at interpretation. As a unit, they provide Fowles with an effective conclusion to his narrative case about the differences between the culture and fiction of 1867 and the culture and fiction of 1967.

In both these cases, the novelist builds the stubbornness into the representation of the character and leaves the reader to discover it. Conrad’s use of the stubborn is different because through Marlow he makes an interpreter’s unsuccessful effort to overcome the recalcitrance of a phenomenon a prominent part of the narrative. And rather than signal that this interpreter is too obtuse or otherwise deficient to grasp the situation, he uses Marlow’s inability to overcome the recalcitrance of Jim’s experience as a guide to our similar experience.² Unlike Beloved and The French Lieutenant’s Woman, which do not

¹ In the history of the criticism on Beloved most early commentators treated Beloved only as the reincarnation of Sethe’s murdered daughter, but then Elizabeth House made the case that Beloved was actually the woman who had escaped from the dead white man’s cabin and that Morrison therefore was working with a plot about mistaken identity. In my terms, the early critics and House were all treating Beloved as yet another instance of the difficult; over time critics have come to recognize her as an instance of the stubborn (though of course they typically don’t use that term).

² One of Jim’s traits of character is of course stubbornness, and Conrad not only shows that trait in action but also has Marlow refer to Jim as “stubborn” eight times. In this way Conrad’s representation of Jim’s trait is very clear and, thus, from the perspective of readerly understanding, qualitatively different from the textual stubbornness surrounding the meaning and significance of Jim’s life. In addition, I believe it is good interpretive practice to be cautious, if not entirely suspicious, about hanging major interpretive conclusions on connections that are made primarily on the basis of terminology. (If I’d called the textual recalcitrance I find in Beloved, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, and Lord Jim “the intractable” rather than “the stubborn,” I might not be writing this note.) With these caveats in mind, I still want to suggest that Conrad invites us to reflect on the similarities and differences between Jim’s stubbornness of character and the stubborn recalcitrance of the whole novel.
foreground the stubbornness of their characters, Lord Jim wears its stubbornness on its sleeve. But at the same time Lord Jim is more than just Marlow’s telling about his unsuccessful effort to master the significance of Jim’s experience; it is Conrad’s telling about Marlow’s telling, which is itself contained within the telling of a heterodiegetic narrator, a telling that is not stubborn. I shall return to these points after a brief discussion of the framework within which they are most intelligible: the rhetorical theory of narrative and its concept of narrative progression.

**A Sketch of the Rhetorical Approach to Narrative**

The rhetorical approach starts with a definition of narrative as a rhetorical action: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose—or purposes—that something happened. In fiction this rhetorical action is at least double-layered, as the author tells her audience about the narrator telling his audience that something happened. This conception of narrative differs from most other accounts because they regard narrative as a fixed object or a product rather than an action—for example in classical narratology a synthesis of story and discourse or in cognitive narratology a mental model of relating characters and actions in time and space. The rhetorical conception is not opposed to these other models—indeed, it is indebted to many of their findings—but it places particular emphasis on tellers, audiences, and effects. More specifically, in both fiction and nonfiction, it notes that the rhetorical action of narrative generates a multilayered communication, one that involves the authorial audience’s cognition, emotions, and ethical values.

‘When we have a telling situation in fiction such as the one in Lord Jim with a clearly identified character narrator and set of narratees, then we have one text with at least two distinct audiences and at least two distinct sets of purposes: those of the narrator, on the one hand, and those of the author on the other. As I have argued in Living to Tell about It, character narrators, like other narrators, have three main functions: to report about facts, characters, and events in the story world; to interpret those reports; and to offer ethical evaluations of the characters and their behavior. Much of the art of character narration involves the author’s ability, while restricted to the same text as the narrator, to signal his convergence with or divergence from the narrator’s reports, interpretations, and evaluations. From the rhetorical perspective, the ethical dimension of the narrative is constituted by the dynamic interaction of the telling, the told, and the audience’s ethical evaluations of both. That is, the ethical dimension includes the ethical quality of the characters’ actions;
the ethical evaluations of those actions offered by the narrator and author; the ethical quality of the narrator’s treatment of both the characters and the audience; and the ethical quality of the author’s treatment of the narrator, the characters, and the audience. The final element of the ethical dimension of narrative is the way individual readers’ ethical values intersect with the ethical dimensions of the telling and the told.

The rhetorical approach also postulates that the progression of a narrative, that is, the logic of its movement from beginning through middle to end, is governed by its purposes and, therefore, that a good way to determine those purposes is through an analysis of that progression. More specifically, I define progression as the synthesis of two sets of narrative dynamics. The first set is what I call textual dynamics, the means by which the narrative generates its internal movement through the introduction, complication, and resolution (in whole or in part) of instabilities (unstable relations among characters) and/or tensions (unstable relations among authors, narrators, and audiences as in fictions with unreliable narrators). The second set is what I call readerly dynamics, the developing responses of the authorial audience to the textual dynamics. These developing responses, in turn, are tied to the judgments that the audience makes, because these judgments deeply influence our cognitive, affective, and ethical experience. More generally, then, narrative progression is the synthesis of two kinds of movement and change: that which occurs in the story world and that which occurs in the audience. The practical consequences of the rhetorical approach will become clear as I turn to examine the progression of Lord Jim.

Marlow’s Narration as Rhetorical Action

The most striking general feature of Lord Jim is the double quality of its progression. It combines, on the textual level, two main sequences of instability-complication-resolution: the first involving Jim as character and the second involving Marlow as narrator who seeks to come to terms with Jim’s story. One of the functions of Conrad’s breaking Marlow’s narration in two is to emphasize Marlow’s ongoing effort; having told the incomplete story “many times,” Marlow feels compelled to tell the most interested listener the rest of the story, and that means, as he says, that he has had to build a complete picture from fragmentary information. This act of construction raises the possibility that Marlow can move from the uncertainty he openly acknowledges at the end of the oral narration to some determinate interpretation and evaluation of Jim’s life.
The textual dynamics of Jim’s story, though marked by multiple anachronies, follow the standard pattern of instability-complication-resolution: he has dreams of heroism inspired by light holiday literature; he fails to live up to those dreams in his jump from the Patna, and suffers as a consequence; he is given another chance in Patusan where he succeeds for a time until Brown arrives and reminds him of his past failure; as a result, he misjudges Brown badly, which leads to the death of many Bugis natives, including Dain Waris, and for that misjudgment Jim pays with his life. The readerly dynamics associated with the progression of Jim’s story, however, are much harder to specify because they are so deeply influenced by the textual dynamics of Marlow’s progression, which of course ends without any clear resolution. (It is worth noting that a later modernist novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, works with the same kind of double progression in The Great Gatsby, but Fitzgerald allows—indeed, needs—Nick Carraway to succeed with his quest to come to terms with Gatsby.)

What we can say about the readerly dynamics of Jim’s story at this point is akin to what Albert Guerard said long ago: Marlow’s narration generates a dynamic interaction between sympathy and judgment in our responses to Jim. In addition, in responding to the textual dynamics, we cannot help but recognize the pattern of repetitions—both in the oft-noted two-part structure of the novel (divided between the Patna incident and the Patusan events) and in Marlow’s repeated efforts to comprehend Jim. As the narrative progresses, however, the repetitions add to rather than remove the recalcitrance of Jim’s experience to our full understanding, and in that way, add to the novel’s ultimate stubbornness. Finally, it is also helpful to distinguish between Marlow as character and Marlow as narrator. As character, Marlow consistently aids Jim even as he conducts his own inquiry into Jim. That habit of inquiring carries over into both halves of his narration about Jim.

This outline of the progression allows me to reformulate one of my earlier points: since Conrad constructs Marlow as a figure who undertakes within the world of the novel an interpretive activity much like the one that as Conrad’s audience we undertake outside that world, we must perform a double decoding. We must puzzle through Marlow’s puzzling over Jim in order to reach our own decisions about the meaning and significance of Jim’s story. For this reason, in what follows, I will focus much more on Marlow than on Jim, considering both Marlow’s narration as a rhetorical action and his specific execution of that action.

The heterodiegetic narrator introduces Marlow’s narration with two salient comments: (1) “And later on, many times, in distant parts of the world, Marlow showed himself willing to remember Jim, to remember him in detail
and audibly” (24); (2) “and with the very first word uttered Marlow’s body, extended at rest in the seat, would become very still, as though his spirit had winged its way back into the lapse of time and were speaking through his lips from the past” (25). Taken together, these two comments reveal not only Marlow’s great interest in Jim’s story (why else tell it many times in detail all around the world?) but also his effort to enter once again into the time of the action; his effort, in other words, to reimagine and even reexperience the events of Jim’s life. But the larger consequences of these comments become clear only at the end of the oral narrative, when Conrad has Marlow comment on what he makes of Jim and then has the heterodiegetic narrator return to describe the immediate aftermath of Marlow’s telling.

It is worth noting here that the heterodiegetic narrator’s telling does not involve any stubbornness. His narration, though holding back information about “the fact” that keeps the adult Jim “a seaman in exile from the sea” (4), offers an otherwise clear view of Jim’s character as flawed and limited, overly affected by his reading of light holiday literature, not able to handle the harsher demands of the sea. Strikingly, however, the heterodiegetic narrator’s view does not make Conrad’s audience infer that Marlow’s uncertainties about Jim are a result of special pleading. Instead, because Conrad makes Marlow so earnest and scrupulous in his effort to come to terms with Jim and because Marlow narrates events that are much more complicated than those narrated by the heterodiegetic narrator, Marlow’s view of Jim ultimately has more weight for Conrad’s audience.

Here is Marlow at the end of his oral tale describing and reflecting on his last look at Jim: “He was white from head to foot, and remained persistently visible with the stronghold of the night at his back, the sea at his feet, the opportunity by his side—still veiled. What do you say? Was it still veiled? I don’t know. For me that white figure in the stillness of coast and sea seemed to stand at the heart of a vast enigma . . . And suddenly, I lost him . . . ” (244). In light of the heterodiegetic narrator’s descriptions of Marlow as he begins the oral narrative, the two most prominent sentences here are the two are in the present tense. “What do you say?” and “I don’t know.” Despite Marlow’s deep interest in Jim and despite Marlow’s many efforts to reimagine and reexperience the events of Jim’s story, he is not yet able to come to terms with Jim’s life. The reference to the “still veiled” opportunity by Jim’s side recalls Marlow’s earlier report that as Jim first entered Patusan, “his opportunity sat veiled by his side like an Eastern bride waiting to be uncovered by the hand of the master” (177). His uncertainty about whether the opportunity is still veiled and his direct address to his audience constitute a confession that he is unable to render a clear interpretation of the meaning of Jim’s success in Patusan.
Moreover, accompanying Marlow’s interpretive hesitation is his inability to render a clear ethical judgment about Jim. If Jim’s jump from the Patna, whatever the mitigating circumstances, is an ethical failure that calls into question the whole ideal of conduct upon which Marlow’s life has been based, does Jim’s current success constitute an appropriate atonement, however partial, for that failure? Is it enough to restore Marlow’s firm belief in the ideal and that those like him are fit to live up to it? At this stage, the best Marlow can answer is “I don’t know.”

Furthermore, Conrad has not given his audience sufficient grounds to answer the questions any better than Marlow can. Although Conrad does not make Marlow a wholly reliable narrator—I shall shortly examine some instances of his unreliability—he does not do anything to undermine Marlow’s conclusion that Jim existed at the heart of an enigma. As Marlow ends his oral narration, then, Jim is moving from being an instance of the difficult to being an instance of the stubborn.

At the same time, however, Conrad uses Marlow’s direct address to his narratees as a way to highlight his audience’s active engagement in trying to interpret and evaluate Jim’s success in Patusan. When Marlow asks his audience, “What do you think?” we in Conrad’s audience can’t help but feel he is asking us the same question. In addition, with the commentary of the heterodiegetic narrator about Marlow’s narratees at the beginning of chapter XXXVI Conrad extends an invitation to his audience that Marlow is unaware of and thus unable to control.

With these words Marlow had ended his narrative, and his audience had broken up forthwith, under his abstract, pensive gaze. Men drifted off the veranda 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. (245)

Since Marlow’s narratees are barely characterized, they function as figures for Conrad’s readers. Consequently, the report that each has his own secret impression not only implies that many are able to decide upon interpretations and evaluations of Jim’s story but also authorizes us to do the same.

That this invitation is just an extension of Marlow’s “What do you think?” also reveals an important element of the ethics of the telling by both Marlow and Conrad. Marlow, despite his own conclusion that Jim stands at the heart of an enigma, remains open to the idea that his listeners can and should
have other thoughts. Conrad goes further and invites us to have those other thoughts—though it is just as important that he does not yet articulate specific alternatives. At the same time, because the narrative is, as the heterodiegetic narrator says, “incomplete,” any answers we might give at this stage will be provisional. Nevertheless, as Conrad breaks Marlow’s narration in two here, he simultaneously calls attention to the stubborn quality of his representation of Jim and to his invitation that each of us get beyond that stubbornness by rendering our own interpretations and ethical judgments of him. Before I consider how Marlow’s written narrative builds on these effects, I want to offer a broader look at where the progression stands at the end of Marlow’s oral narration and to do that I need to say a little more about the concept of progression.

In some recent work (*Experiencing Fiction*), I have been trying to refine the concept of progression by proposing that beginnings, middles, and endings each have four aspects, two of which are primarily related to textual dynamics and two of which are primarily related to readerly dynamics. Here is a sketch of the overall model, though, for my purposes in this essay, what it suggests about middles and endings are most important.

### BEGINNINGS

- **Exposition**  
  including front matter and any other information about setting, character, and other contexts for the action

- **Launch**  
  introduction of first global instability or tension

- **Initiation**  
  introduction to author-narrator-audience communication

- **Entrance**  
  the tacit hypothesis about the overall configuration and signification of the narrative formed at the point of launch

### MIDDLES

- **Exposition**  
  same as above, minus front matter

- **Voyage**  
  the complication of the instabilities and tensions

- **Interaction**  
  the developing relationships among author-narrator-audience

- **Intermediate configuration**  
  the tacit and evolving hypothesis about the overall configuration and signification of the narrative
ENDINGS

Exposition/Closure  same as above for exposition; closure designates signals for ending independent of the resolution of instabilities or tensions

Arrival  the resolution (which may be more or less complete, more or less open-ended) of the instabilities and tensions

Farewell  the final exchanges among author-narrator-audience

Completion  the final configuration and signification of the whole narrative

By breaking Marlow’s narration in two at the point of Marlow’s last meeting with Jim, Conrad marks a distinct intermediate stage in both tracks of his progression, as we can see by examining the interactions in chapters XXXIV and XXXV among Conrad, Marlow, and Conrad’s audience. The key element of that interaction is the combination of authority, unreliability, and limitation that Conrad gives to Marlow. When Marlow reports that Jim has become Lord Jim and brought peace and stability to both Patusan and his own life, we take the report as fully reliable, and we recognize that the complications of Jim’s progression have now reached a point of temporary stasis. At the same time, Conrad invites us to see, more clearly than Marlow does, that Jim’s progression is “incomplete.” When Marlow interprets Jim’s situation in Patusan as evidence that he has mastered his fate, Conrad invites us to regard the interpretation as too hasty, more motivated by Marlow’s desire than by the larger narrative logic. Conrad’s audience cannot yet see Jim as having mastered his fate because Jim himself will only go as far as saying that he was “satisfied . . . nearly” (236) and because Jim has not yet had to confront the past whose return had always previously made him flee. Indeed, Marlow’s own concluding comments show that he himself moves away from this interpretation.

Similarly, when Marlow remarks that, because Jim regards himself as “satisfied . . . ,” “it did not matter who suspected him, who trusted him, who loved him, who hated him—especially as it was Cornelius who hated him” (236), Conrad’s audience cannot trust Marlow’s interpretation. We cannot trust it because it, too, stems from Marlow’s own desire for Jim’s success, because Cornelius, however defeated he currently seems, is still an enemy who comes from the world from which Jim has fled. We also cannot trust Marlow’s interpretation because his formulation of it sets in the motion the operation of what I’ll call—in the manner of another rhetorical theorist Peter J. Rabinowitz—the Rule of Hubris, namely, that a character’s unquestioning confidence about a happy future is a sure sign that the future will not be so happy.
The other significant instability that remains in Jim's progression involves his relationship with Jewel. Although they live and work together with mutual devotion and love, and although both Jim and Marlow assure her that Jim will never leave, Jewel's fear cannot be assuaged. Conrad links this instability with the one about the possible return of Jim's past not only to make such a return more likely but also to raise the stakes of his response to it. What will be at stake now is not just his own fate but also that of the woman he loves. At this stage of intermediate configuration in the narrative, then, because of Marlow's treatment of Jim as both character and narrator, we come to share Marlow's hope and desire that he will ultimately master—and be satisfied with—his fate, even as the pattern of action and Marlow's own occasional unreliability cue us to expect that our hope and desire will not be fulfilled.

**Marlow's Narration and Farewell in the Written Narrative**

As *Lord Jim* makes the transition from Marlow's oral to his written narrative, Conrad introduces one specific interpretation and evaluation of Jim's life—that made by the privileged man. I will return to the details of the privileged man's view of Jim later, but for now I want to focus on Marlow's prefatory comments about his own final view of Jim.

I affirm nothing. Perhaps you may pronounce—after you've read. There is much truth—after all—in the common expression “under a cloud.” It is impossible to see him clearly—especially as it is through the eyes of others that we take our last look at him . . . ; there shall be nothing more [from him]; there shall be no message, unless such as each of us can interpret for ourselves from the language of facts that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangements of words. (246–47)

These comments constitute a startling move in the track of the progression involving Marlow's efforts to understand Jim and the audience's response to those efforts. Marlow's “I affirm nothing” significantly changes our relation to Marlow's narrative: rather than being immersed in following his efforts to understand Jim, we now know the outcome of those efforts. Consequently, our readerly interest shifts from *whether* Marlow will finally be able to come to terms with Jim to *why* he will be unable to. At the same time, Conrad uses Marlow's “perhaps you may pronounce,” to reiterate his own invitation to us to reach judgments beyond Marlow's. This time, however, the invitation comes with explicit attention to the difficulty, though not the ultimate stubbornness, of the evidence: “perhaps” we may pronounce, but only if we can interpret
the enigma contained within the language of facts. Marlow’s concluding comments link up with these prefatory ones, but before turning to them, I want to look more closely at some differences between his oral and his written narration and what these differences reveal about why he is unable to come to terms with Jim.

In Marlow’s oral narration, he is frequently featured as a character—and not just because he recounts his many interactions with Jim. When he brings in the perspectives of other characters such as Brierly, Jones, Chester, and the French Lieutenant, he typically focuses on his interactions with those characters and his responses to their opinions and ideas. This method is central to Conrad’s establishing the double progression of Jim’s story and to tracing Marlow’s developing responses to Jim’s story. In the written portion of the narrative, Conrad largely confines Marlow’s role as character to his cover letter to the privileged gentleman, where he describes his visit to Stein’s house and his interactions with Tamb’ Itam, Jewel, the Bugis trader who took them to Stein’s, and Stein himself. These descriptions both establish a tension of unequal knowledge between Marlow and Conrad’s audience—we know that Jim has died but not how or why—and they emphasize the negative effects of that death on the other characters, Jewel’s conviction that Jim has betrayed her, and the mystery that still surrounds Jim in the eyes of Tamb’ Itam and the Bugis trader. These too are matters I will return to; for now I want to keep our attention on the way Marlow’s role as character gets greatly diminished in the longer narrative he writes.

Another of Marlow’s prefatory remarks is that “[m]y information was fragmentary, but I’ve fitted the pieces together and there is enough of them to make an intelligible picture” (249). This situation opens the door for him to continue his habits in the oral narrative, that is, narrating his interactions with the characters who gave him the fragmentary information as he also tells Jim’s tale. Instead, however, he keeps the focus on Jim and Brown. When Marlow does refer to his encounter with Brown, he almost never records how he responded at the time to what Brown told him. As a result, the function of these returns to that scene are not to involve Marlow the character in the events but rather to have Brown serve as commentator on the picture that Marlow the narrator is putting together.

Here is a report that occurs early in the written narrative, shortly after Brown’s arrival in Patusan, and immediately after Marlow tells the narratee that Kassim, accompanying Cornelius on a visit to Brown, has brought food for Brown and his men:
the three drew aside for a conference. Brown’s men, recovering their confidence, were slapping each other on the back, and cast knowing glances at their captain while they busied themselves with preparations for cooking.

(266)

This report is notable because Marlow has made it up out of whole cloth: Brown is the only possible source for this information about his men, but he has left them to confer with Kassim and Cornelius. That his drawing aside takes him out of their eyesight is suggested by Conrad’s choice of the phrase “cast knowing glances at their captain” rather than, say, “exchanged knowing glances with” him. This passage indicates that, as Marlow pieces his fragmentary information together, Conrad not only continues to make him a reliable reporter but also extends his authority to matters that he does not have any sources for. And in this particular case, Conrad uses Marlow’s extended authority to flesh out his portrait of Brown as someone who, though currently in a bad situation, nevertheless inspires considerable confidence in his men and who is therefore more resourceful and more dangerous than anyone Jim has had to deal with in Patusan.

Marlow’s remark about piecing together fragmentary information and this example of his reporting beyond what his sources have told him also underline his active work in reconstructing Jim’s story. And the extent of that work is given further support by what we can infer about the interval between Marlow’s meeting with Brown and his sending the written narrative to the privileged man. Marlow meets Brown “eight months” (251) after getting his initial fragments of the story from Tamb’ Itam, Jewel, and the Bugis trader at Stein’s, meetings that occur shortly after Jim’s death. Marlow’s cover letter to the privileged man comments that the final events of Jim’s life occurred “in the year of grace before the last” (249), that is, not in the previous year but the one before that. Since up to two years may have passed since Jim’s death, and Marlow met Brown about nine months after that death, it seems fair to conclude that it took Marlow approximately a year to compose his narrative. That is certainly time enough for him to use the new information about Jim to come to a determinate interpretation and judgment of him. Consequently, at this stage, Marlow’s statement that “I affirm nothing” seems more rather than less puzzling.

3. In the Introduction to *Living to Tell about It*, I discuss this type of character narration by introducing a distinction between disclosure functions (the character narrator’s role in communicating between the implied author and the authorial audience) and narrator functions (the narrator’s role in communicating to the narratee) and the principle that disclosure functions trump narrator functions.
Let us turn to a passage of Marlow’s narration in which he does render interpretations and evaluations. I choose one from chapter XL shortly after his report, based on Brown’s testimony itself, that while waiting for Jim and negotiating with Kassim, “the lust for battle was upon him” (269).

No doubt the natural senseless ferocity which is the basis of such a character was exasperated by failure, ill-luck, and the recent privations, as well as by the desperate position in which he found himself; but what was most remarkable of all was this, that while he planned treacherous alliances, had already settled in his own mind the fate of the white man, and intrigued in an overbearing, offhand manner with Kassim, one could perceive that what he had really desired, almost in spite of himself, was to play havoc with that jungle town which had defied him, to see it strewn over with corpses and enveloped in flames. Listening to his pitiless, panting voice I could imagine how he must have looked at it from the hillock, peopling it with images of murder and rapine. (269–70)

Marlow is interpreting Brown here because he is going beyond anything Brown told him directly. Marlow is evaluating here because those interpretations are inextricably connected to his ethical assessment of both Brown’s character (its natural senseless ferocity) and his desire (his imaginative peopling of his surroundings with “images of murder and rapine”). In a sense, this passage shows Marlow doing at the level of interpretation and evaluation what he does at the level of reporting in the previous passage: he leaps beyond the information provided by Brown to his own conclusions about what is driving Brown and about what Brown most desires. And again, although Conrad could have used the evidence of Marlow’s leap as a sign that we should not fully trust his interpretation and evaluation, Conrad does nothing in the passage to cast doubt on them and then he dramatically confirms them by Brown’s later actions. In short, the interpretation and evaluation are reliable, authoritative, and significant. Indeed, I can find no instances of Marlow being an unreliable interpreter or evaluator in this section of the narrative.

But now consider another passage of Marlow’s interpretation, this one occurring in chapter XLIII, after his report that most of the Bugis agreed to Jim’s proposal to let Brown go free because they “believed Tuan Jim.” “In this simple form of assent to his will lies the whole gist of the situation; their creed, his truth; and the testimony to that faithfulness which made him in his own eyes the equal of the impeccable men who never fall out of the ranks” (287).

Initially, Marlow’s interpretation is both reliable and authoritative, as he sums up the “whole gist” of Jim’s situation in Patusan; but when Marlow moves
to interpret the larger significance of Jim’s “faithfulness,” he actually switches from interpreting to reporting, as he veers away from offering his own view of Jim’s faithfulness and instead giving Jim’s. Given Marlow’s broad authority as reporter and as interpreter of Brown and of the motives of the Bugis members of the Council, his limitation as interpreter of Jim stands out—though the passage itself does not help us come any closer to understanding the gap between his narratorial powers with everyone else and his narratorial powers with Jim. I turn for a possible answer to the novel’s ending, especially Marlow’s long farewell.

Before that farewell, Marlow reliably reports Jim’s arrival at the end of his progression, his following through on his promise to take “on his own head” (302) the consequences of his misjudgment of Brown. But once again, Marlow is unable to make the move from reliable reporting to determinate interpreting and evaluating.

And that’s the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic. Not in the wildest days of his boyish vision could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! For it may very well be that in the short moment of his last proud and unflinching glance, he had beheld the face of that opportunity which, like an Eastern bride, had come veiled to his side.

But we can see him, an obscure conqueror of fame, tearing himself out of the arms of a jealous love at the sign, at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied—quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us—and have I not stood up once, like an evoked ghost, to answer for his eternal constancy? Was I so very wrong after all? Now he is no more, there are days when the reality of his existence comes to me with an immense, with an overwhelming force; and yet upon my honour there are moments, too, when he passes from my eyes like a disembodied spirit amongst the passions of this earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades.

Who knows? He is gone, inscrutable at heart, and the poor girl is leading a sort of soundless, inert life in Stein’s house. Stein has aged greatly of late. He feels it himself, and says often that he is “preparing to leave all this; preparing to leave...” while he waves his hand sadly at his butterflies. (303–4)

The first effect of this farewell is to give the greatest possible emphasis to Jim’s ultimate stubbornness: not only Marlow but “we” ought to know whether
Jim was satisfied, whether he was eternally constant, whether he is an ongoing immense force or just a shadowy presence who never fully emerges into light. But we don’t because he remains inscrutable at heart. This emphasis on the stubbornness sheds some retrospective light on the discrepancy between Marlow’s narratorial powers with regard to Brown and everyone else, on the one hand, and with regard to Jim on the other. Marlow “affirms nothing” because his own identification with Jim means that by his own code of ethics he must be as scrupulous as possible in interpreting and evaluating him. Since Jim’s case raises for Marlow, as it does for Brierly and others, the question of what it means for “one of us” to act as Jim does, Marlow wants his answer to be as rigorous about and as responsible to the full evidence of Jim’s life as possible. Consequently, Marlow’s own commitment to an ethics of interpretation and an ethics of telling leaves him unable to overcome Jim’s stubbornness.

Although Marlow cannot reach any determinate judgment, his farewell does implicitly rule out some other interpretations and evaluations, especially the one offered by the privileged man at the end of the oral narrative. Marlow writes in his cover letter,

I remember well you would not admit that he had mastered his fate. You prophesied for him the disaster of weariness and disgust with acquired honour, with the self-appointed task, with the love sprung from pity and youth. . . . You said also . . . that “giving your life up to them” (them meaning all of mankind with skins brown, yellow, or black in colour) “was like selling your soul to a brute.”

Marlow’s farewell eliminates this response as a viable option not only because the privileged man’s prophecy does not come true, but also because neither Marlow nor Conrad shares his blatant racism. Indeed, if Marlow shared that attitude, he could not entertain the possibility that in his final acts Jim achieves a satisfactory heroism. In this connection, it is worth noting that the farewell’s simultaneous emphases on the textual stubbornness surrounding Jim and on the inadequacy of the privileged man’s view of him also explain why Conrad does not return to the frame provided by the heterodiegetic narrator and record the privileged man’s response. Such a return would diminish both effects because Marlow’s uncertainty would surely allow the privileged man to maintain his basic position.

More importantly, the conclusion of Marlow’s letter to the privileged man functions as a highly effective way for Conrad to complete his novel because of its affective and ethical consequences. Although Conrad does not provide any textual basis for us to convert Jim from an instance of the stubborn to
an instance of the difficult, he does push us beyond Marlow’s formulations because Conrad uses those formulations as one means to enhance the affective power of the ending even as they underline the narrative’s ultimate stubbornness. To put this point another way, although Conrad’s narrative does not allow us to settle on a final interpretation and evaluation of Jim, that very uncertainty contributes to the sense that in his death something—and someone—significant has gone out of the world, and this sense makes his death deeply moving. The uncertainty contributes to this effect because it means that we can enter into the disparate views of Jim held by all who knew him well, and, thus, can recognize the wide-ranging consequences of his death on the lives of those people. Conrad constructs Marlow’s last paragraph to call attention to Jim’s effects on Jewel and on Stein. It is striking that here, at the end, the emphasis is not on Jewel’s anger and outrage but on what these emotions have previously covered over, her sorrow and emptiness now that Jim has gone out of her life. It is also striking that Jim has such a powerful effect on Stein, who has previously been represented as capable of rising above any situation. And above all Conrad insists that we pay attention to Jim’s powerful effect on Marlow, to the way that Jim’s story has turned Marlow, first, into a version of the Ancient Mariner, and then into an active and imaginative historian who, because he still remains uncertain, remains in the grip of Jim’s inscrutability.

Indeed, it is in the realm of the affective that we perceive the greatest gap between Marlow’s conclusions and our own, because we see both Marlow and Jim within the larger frame of Conrad’s construction. For Marlow, Jim and his life are above all inscrutable; for Conrad’s audience, Jim and his life are not just inscrutable but also very moving. The affective power of the ending keeps us, like Marlow, fascinated by Jim, but also, I submit, even more tempted than Marlow to solve the riddle of Jim’s character. And while Conrad does use Marlow’s direct address and his many rhetorical questions to invite us to keep seeking our own answers, he also trusts his audience not to settle on any determinate answer. In other words, the ethics of his own telling, an ethics he invites us to share, involve a commitment to a kind of negative capability: he unequivocally makes the case that Jim’s life is worthy of Marlow’s and of the authorial audience’s quest for its meaning without allowing Marlow or us to complete that quest by arriving at any definitive formulation. Flesh-and-blood readers, like many of the characters in the novel, may find themselves reaching conclusions about Jim, converting his stubbornness into difficulty. Indeed, if, as Albert Guerard suggests, each of has a Patna incident in our lives, then we may find ourselves needing to come to some determinate judgment about Jim, and, indeed, about Marlow’s inability to reach such a judgment. Nevertheless,
precisely because Conrad ends by underlining Jim’s stubbornness, we are likely to find that any determinate interpretive and ethical judgments that we make of Jim will be subject to revision as our own lives progress.

Attending to the affective and ethical consequences of Jim’s stubbornness also sheds light on the overall completion of the progression. These consequences help us explain why the ending, despite its qualities of indeterminacy and open-endedness, remains aesthetically satisfying. The affective power points to Conrad’s ability to combine the resolution of the action in Jim’s strand of the progression with the lack of resolution in Marlow’s narrative quest to produce an emotionally appropriate conclusion. Conrad’s handling of the ethics of both Marlow’s telling and his own telling enhances our ethical engagement and ethical admiration for the open-endedness. In achieving these effects, Conrad has also demonstrated how foregrounding the stubbornness of major elements of a narrative can paradoxically enhance its power.
Works Cited


