

**Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*  
and  
the Problem of Ending**

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## 要 約

### Joseph Conrad の *Lord Jim* と結末の問題

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*Lord Jim* のほぼ半分が終わったところで、語り手 Marlow は、Jim についての最終的な判断の概略と思われる言葉を述べている。しかしその同じ節において、彼は明らかにそうした判断の可能性を否定しているのである。のみならず、「Jim についての僕の決定的な言葉は極めて僅かである」という、彼のはっきりした声明の後に述べ続けられている言葉の多さを見れば、Jim の全面的な救済について断定している彼の主張より、Jim とその事件について控え目に述べ続けている部分の方が重きをなすことがわかるのである。

実際小説の第二部において再現されているテキストはすべて、——すなわち Marlow の語り、そして「特権に恵まれた男」(彼の話の続きを手紙で読むことのできる特権に恵まれた男)に宛てた彼の手紙、またその手紙に添えてこの特定の読者に送られた、Jim の最期の様子を記した Marlow の記述、また Jim 宛ての Jim の父親の手紙、そして Patusan で、Brown が引き起こした厄災を説明しようとして Jim 自身が書きかけた手紙(これら2つを Marlow は自分自身の手紙の中に含め、コメントを付けている)——これらは共にどのテキストもその物語の総てを伝えることの不可能を例証しているのである。そしてこの事実は、この小説全体についても当てはまるのである。

At the approximate midpoint of the novel and in one and the same paragraph, *Lord Jim* both explicitly denies the possibility of some definitive ending and implicitly promises one. Marlow, well into his first long verbal narration on Jim's too palpable sin and provisional redemption, anticipates a conclusion. But he precedes his asserted verdict by first wondering if any conclusion can ever be final and he follows it by questioning if it can either be put into words or, if articulated, apprehended by others. As the following quotation illustrates, this whole passage is very much at odds with itself:

And besides, the last word is not said,—probably shall never be said.

Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only abiding intention? I have given up expecting those last words, whose ring, if they could only be pronounced, would shake both heaven and earth. There is never time to say our last word—the last word of our love, of our desire, faith, remorse, submission, revolt. The heaven and the earth must not be shaken. I suppose—at least, not by us who know so many truths about either. My last words about Jim shall be few. I affirm he had achieved greatness; but the thing would be dwarfed in the telling, or rather in the hearing. Frankly, it is not my words that I mistrust but your minds. I could be eloquent were I not afraid you fellows had starved your imaginations to feed your bodies. I do not mean to be offensive; it is respectable to have no illusions—and safe—and profitable—and dull. Yet you, too, in your time must have known the intensity of life, that light of glamour created in the shock of trifles, as amazing as the glow of sparks struck from a cold stone—and as short-lived, alas!<sup>1</sup>

Crudely schematized, the quotation sets forth three mutually exclusive propositions. The last word cannot be said. The last word is that Jim achieved greatness. The last word cannot be properly apprehended even if it could be said. Subsidiary contradictions are also obvious. We notice Marlow's eloquence even though he asserts that he does not use any and we notice, too, the insult aimed at his "unimaginative" audience, an insult that he also claims not to intend and yet magnifies by the disclaiming. All his observations, moreover, are explicitly addressed to this same "deficient" audience, that, lacking both imagination and illusions, is incapable of peering into some verbal rendering of "the intensity of life." Yet it is Marlow himself who reduces, metaphorically, life's intensity to the sparks from a cold struck stone.

Not the least of the contradictions here set forth in the novel is the obvious fact that no few last words are forthcoming. Some twenty thousand words later Marlow is still carrying on, attempting to affirm Jim's greatness but a greatness in which not even Marlow himself fully believes. For example, almost a hundred pages after that promise of a few last words (a promise so flagrantly broken that one must credit his listeners with

the patience of Job), Marlow admits, "For my part, I cannot say what I believed—indeed I don't know to this day, and never shall probably" (p. 320). Yet four pages later he has again "made up my mind that Jim . . . had at last mastered his fate" (p. 324). He is still trying to give a definitive reading of Jim's case, and his extended reading attests that he does not have one.

Marlow's first partly contradictory account is further undermined by his second narration. His long recounting of the cause and consequences of Jim's failure on the *Patna* followed by a subsequent "success" in Patusan is itself followed by a second installment of the Patusan story that Marlow later sends to the "privileged man" and in which he describes how Gentleman Brown precipitated the disaster that culminated in Jim's death at the hand of Doramin. This second narration necessarily rules out the first as being in any sense final. Yet the second, just as the first, ends in indefiniteness and doubt. In each case Marlow concludes by asking a variation of the very question that he has ostensibly answered. His first account concludes with him telling of his last view of Jim in Patusan, dressed all in white and shrinking to a vanishing dot in the darkness as Marlow sailed away still wondering if Jim had confronted his destiny: "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" (p. 336). That enigma is not resolved when he writes for the privileged reader a second installment on Jim's story. Even though Marlow now early asserts that "I affirm nothing" (p. 339), apparently disclaiming his earlier claim that Jim achieved greatness, he still concludes this second account by wondering if he might not have been right with the first. "Was I so very wrong after all?" he asks, to answer, appropriately, only with another question, "Who knows?" (p. 416).

Marlow, moreover, is not the only character in the novel who fails (twice, in fact) to compose a definitive concluding narrative for Jim. Jim fails in that same enterprise, and since his failure is closer to home, so to speak, it well might be paradigmatic. Furthermore, Jim's failure is itself emphasized by Marlow who delivers a devastating reading of the other's account. One failed would-be finalizer mocks the obvious failure of another, which definitely invites a scrutiny of his own failure too.

Let us here look more carefully at Marlow's reading of Jim's unfinished letter (probably intended for Marlow) that Marlow includes in the packet which he sends to the privileged man. Only ten words long and broken off at the end, Jim's abortive missive embodies his attempt to admit and react to Brown's unexpected perfidy. It is, in short, a reading turned into a writing, an ostensible recognition of his situation in Patusan and what has precipitated it preserved as a record for others to read. We can also note that Jim's attempt to read the meaning of the imminent collapse of his lordship in Patusan is precisely what Marlow, on a far larger level, retrospectively assays in his own account of what transpired. But when Marlow includes Jim's letter in the packet he sends to the privileged man and expounds on that same letter, he not only provides an account parallel to his own, he also provides a case study in which readers can observe how much his reading of Jim's reading of Jim's end departs from his own subsequent reading of Jim's end. As Randall Craig has noted, "the novel contains . . . examples against which its

central and most successful tale, Marlow's, is to be received."<sup>2</sup>

In his own letter to the privileged man Marlow connects Jim's letter (Jim's last written words) with Jim's last spoken words given at the end of Marlow's verbal narration—two years earlier in the chronology of the novel but only a few pages earlier in the text:

You remember that when I was leaving him for the last time he had asked whether I would be going home soon, and had suddenly cried after me, "Tell them!" . . . I had waited—curious I'll own, and hopeful, too—only to hear him shout, "No. Nothing." That was all then—and there shall be nothing more; there shall be no message, unless such as each of us can interpret for himself from the language of facts, that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words. He made, it is true, one more attempt to deliver himself; but that, too, failed, as you may perceive if you look at the sheet of greyish foolscap enclosed here. He had tried to write; do you notice the commonplace hand? It is headed "The Fort, Patusan." (pp. 339–40, ellipsis in the original)

With that beginning Marlow launches a savagely ironic attack on Jim's letter, an attack somewhat reminiscent of events narrated early in Marlow's first account and particularly the older seaman's brutal puncturing of Jim's futile attempts to justify or revise his jump from the *Patna*. But then Marlow had, as Ian Watt observes, two valid purposes. The older man was both attempting "to defend 'the solidarity of the craft'" and to save Jim himself from succumbing to his own "extenuating rationalisations."<sup>3</sup> Neither function is served by demeaning a man already dead. It seems, then, that Marlow vents his anger at a Jim who has again disappointed him and with his death presented Marlow with an even more conclusive "nothing" than the final non-message earlier provided. To make something of that nothing, the death promised by the break in the abortive text of Jim's letter, Marlow reads the letter in a highly idiosyncratic fashion.

Essentially, Marlow turns Jim's last missive from narration into artifact; the letter will speak the "language of facts," not of words. Thus Marlow notes—and how loudly do these facts speak—"the commonplace hand," "the sheet of greyish foolscap." Lord Jim is thereby reduced in several telling ways. His hand is commonplace, as is, by implication, his story. His original "immaculate white" (p. 3) is altered to a more appropriate grey (some dark colors such as a bit of Brown have been mixed in). Foolscap is, appropriately, the paper for rough drafts, for unfinished versions of stories and lives, and still more to the point, the fool's cap (the watermark from which this paper takes its name) fits Jim. Even the ink blots are described in detail and become obvious correlatives to the blotch that Jim has made of his own life. But what is particularly interesting about this reading is that it largely ignores what little Jim did write, and Marlow's comments center on the form of the letter, not its substance. Thus the heading, "The Fort," elicits cutting sarcasm on Jim's "judicious foresight" and how he planned to "be an invincible host in himself," while the absence of a date suggests an obliviousness to time and process, and

no salutation means that the writer had no clear intended reader—"Stein—myself—the world at large—or was this only the aimless startled cry of a solitary man confronted by his fate?" (p. 340). Even the second blot that ended the missive mid-sentence carries, for Marlow, substantially more meaning than do the admittedly few words also preserved on the paper. "And that time he gave it up. There's nothing more; he had seen a broad gulf that neither eye nor voice could span. I can understand this. He was overwhelmed by the inexplicable: he was overwhelmed by his own personality" (p. 341).

Although this reading slights Jim's words, as opposed to his blots, the substance of the letter as much as its non-textual features supports Marlow's assessment. And that, precisely, is Marlow's problem. The transparent craft in Jim's arrangement of words, few as they are, too much gives his game away. "An awful thing has happened," Jim wrote before apparently flinging the pen down onto the page. The second and final formulation of the letter (concluded with a blot, just like the first one) is, "I must now at once . . ." (p. 340). It is the *Patna* again, disaster and a vain attempt to save something (mostly his conception of himself) from the wreckage. Only now there is no possible plan of salvage, as the final ellipsis implicitly acknowledges. Nevertheless, the letter still breaks into two distinct parts, action and reaction, challenge and response. It is a reading of what has been done, of what must now be done. It is also a reading skewed by its convenient brevity. What any careful reader must notice is that the first statement of the facts, accurate so far as it goes, does not go very far. There is something of the child's falsely innocent observation that the cookie jar just broke in Jim's brief report on present conditions in Patusan. An awful thing *has* happened, and since that is simply the nature of awful things no questions as to how it all transpired need arise. But the thereby suppressed question is, of course, the crucial one. Just how much is Jim to blame for the disaster that follows his decision to let Gentleman Brown and his still armed cohorts depart in peace? As I have given elsewhere my own assessment of this matter, I will not reargue it here<sup>4</sup>. The question I do want to ask, however, is why does not Marlow argue the matter of Jim's responsibility for the tragedy in Patusan.

The answer, I think, is two fold. On the simplest level, if Marlow attended too closely to the record of what Jim does and, particularly, what he says about what he does, his verdict against Jim very well might have to be final. The words on that grey page might well be a more condemning black mark against Jim than the ink blots on which Marlow so eloquently expostulates. This narrator wants to castigate the protégé who again disappointed his patron but he is still reluctant to condemn him totally. Marlow's reading of Jim's text thereby becomes a summary symbol of his reading of Jim. As numerous critics have noted, the captain's attraction to the mate's case is ambivalent and ambiguous. "The solidarity of the craft" cuts two ways. A stern code of seamanship demands rigorous judgment, whereas the brotherhood of the sea and the sense that Jim is "one of us" prompts a search for even some shadow of an excuse to cover the other's derelictions from duty, and that search extends to questioning both the validity of the code whereby Jim is condemned and the reality of the duties that went unperformed. We have, consequently, Marlow as both judge and advocate. It is a contradictory,

double function and is particularly so when the judge does not believe what the advocate argues while the advocate will not accept what the judge decrees. Turning back to the text of Jim's letter, it is as if the judge carefully "reads" some features of the letter but the advocate keeps him from the words themselves. After all, a manifestly just sentence can hardly derive from a few ink blots.

Marlow's long written narration is not essentially different from Jim's very brief one. Both writers try to present Jim in the best possible light and thus represent obvious misreadings of the "how" of "what" happened in Patusan. But here a second factor, I would suggest, comes into play, and the case becomes still more complicated. Clearly, all misreadings are not created equal. Marlow is a much better mis-reader than Jim. Jim's shortcomings as reader and writer are pathetically obvious. But when we see how much Marlow does with so little in his reading of Jim's letter, we give him a certain amount of credit when he reads, in his full account of Jim's end, a much more admirable Jim than the Jim he reads in Jim's letter.

The problem, however, is more complicated than the admittedly difficult question of how much can the reader outside the novel trust Marlow as the reader and writer within the text. At this point we have, essentially, two Jims—the unfortunate victim Jim implicit in Jim's letter and Jim as the "overwhelmed" and self-deceived fool implicit in Marlow's reading of Jim's letter. Marlow, however, proceeds to add a third Jim to this composite portrait of the protagonist as an unfortunate young man. In his own appended account of Jim's end Marlow presents a tragic Jim whose "sheer truthfulness of his last three years" (p. 393) is undone through his concern for all those in Patusan, including Brown and his outlaws, and who then defies disaster by keeping faith with Doramin thereby to "conquer the fatal destiny itself" (p. 410). With this formulation, Marlow gives us, through a very crafty arrangement of words, a Jim distinctly different from the Jim that Jim portrayed or the Jim that Marlow previously discerned in Jim's letter. So which of these Jims represents the real thing? The novel poses the problem but does not provide an answer. Quite the contrary, it denies the possibility of an answer. Any reading is provisional and cannot be resolved by resorting to the facts behind the reading. As we have already been warned, the facts are more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words. Besides, the facts can be weighed only through the craft of words, through still another reading of those facts. And thus the unassailable logic whereby Marlow functions mostly as advocate and continues predominately in that role through to the end of the novel: the advocate knows that the judge can provide no definitively conclusive final sentence.

Indeed, all of the texts in Marlow's packet to the privileged man adumbrate this same problem of what we might term "provisionality" and serve to call each other into question. Consider, first, the letter to Jim from his father, a letter the son probably received only a "few days before he joined the *Patna*" (p. 341) and that he had saved since. This last token of Jim's prelapsarian life consists of "easy morality and family news" (p. 341). Marlow includes this letter in his packet; he summarizes it; he assesses the sender—an "old chap" who had "for forty years . . . gone over and over again the round of his

little thoughts about faith and virtue, about the conduct of life and the only proper manner of dying" (p. 341). He also quotes one of these "little thoughts." The father "hopes his 'dear James' will never forget that 'who once gives way to temptation, in the very instant hazards his total depravity and everlasting ruin. Therefore resolve fixedly never, through any possible motives, to do anything which you believe to be wrong'" (pp. 341–42). Considering the utter inapplicability of that tautological advice to Jim's impending predicament, Marlow sees "nothing much" of significance in this final missive from the parson-father to his sailor-son. Yet that reading contravenes one of Marlow's own assessments of the significance of Jim's fall. A demand to live as the faith requires is not that different, after all, from the requirement to serve as a craft demands. Marlow, playing father figure to Jim, is closer to the real father with whom he radically disagrees than he might imagine.

The letter to the privileged man (the third missive accompanying Marlow's own account of Jim's end and the letter wherein he criticizes the other two letters he also sends) adds to the problematics of interpretation in still another fashion. Marlow writes for one specific reader and he writes to question in advance the reading that he can well suspect this reader will give to the accompanying account, for that same reader was the only one to question the previous narration. As Marlow notes, of and to this specific reader, "I remember well you would not admit that he [Jim] had mastered his fate. You prophesied for him the disaster of weariness and of disgust with acquired honour, with the self-appointed task, with the love sprung from pity and youth" (p. 338). The privileged man had also argued "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" (p. 339). A European could go native—a nice contradiction here—only when supported by "a firm conviction in the truth of ideas racially our own, in whose name are established the order, the morality of an ethical progress" (p. 339).

Marlow, with all that he writes (both the letter itself and the accompanying narration—i. e., the final ten chapters of the book), invites his former antagonist who adhered to a different reading of Jim's success in Patusan to reevaluate that earlier reading in the light of the new additional evidence. Yet that evidence partly supports the other's original contentions. The prophesied disaster has arrived; the love sprung from pity and youth has come to nothing. Disaster, however, ensued when Jim followed a course consistent with the views of this privileged man who argued that only a belief in the "necessity" and "justice" of western imperialism allows us "to make a worthy and conscious sacrifice of our lives," who maintained that "we must fight in the ranks [racially defined] or our lives don't count" (p. 339). The final narration thus presents the privileged reader with crucial questions. When Jim goes against the natives to give Brown a second chance, has he become "one of us" in the requisite racist sense? Similarly, when Jim, no longer committed to any of the natives, not even Jewel, keeps the letter of his promise to Doramin and allows himself to be killed, does his last "proud and unflinching glance" (p. 416) show that he has made a "worthy and conscious sacrifice" on behalf of European imperialism or, at least, the proclaimed higher truth of white men? In short, Marlow's writing is a



reading that calls other possible readings into question and particularly questions the different reading of Jim's case earlier advanced by this skeptical auditor.

Marlow begins his summary of the earlier debate noting how his opponent refused to admit that Jim "had mastered his fate." At the time of the original disagreement Marlow apparently maintained that Jim had (even though he several times waffled on this question during the course of his spoken narrative). But at the end of the summary of the previous debate Marlow now will "affirm nothing." Will the other now similarly reverse his earlier certainty too?

Yet Marlow's disaffirmation does not remain firm either. As I earlier suggested, Marlow, throughout his final narration, persistently tries to smuggle a Jim master of his own destiny in by the back door. So again the plot of reading versus reading thickens. Marlow writes partly to counter the privileged man's interpretation of Jim and does so most effectively. In the process, he also counters his own previous predominant and often contradicted interpretation, whereupon he attempts to covertly counter that countering and affirm again Jim's greatness. In this context we might look again at one of Marlow's earlier noted final formulations, his postulating the "sheer truthfulness of [Jim's ] last three years." This "truthfulness," it will be recalled, persuaded the Bugis, much against their will, to let Brown and his men depart in peace. Jim had threatened and cajoled to achieve that end; he had promised not to lead if there was a battle with Brown and "to answer with his life" (p. 392) if any harm should befall anyone through adhering to his own plan. The natives assented because "they 'believed Tuan Jim,'" and in their agreement Marlow reads Jim's condition just before his second fall:

"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. Stein's words, 'Romantic!—Romantic!' seem to ring over those distances that will never give him up now to a world indifferent to his failings and his virtues . . . . From the moment the sheer truthfulness of his last three years carries the day against the ignorance, the fear, and the anger of men, he appears no longer to me as I saw him last—a white speck catching all the dim light left upon a sombre coast and the darkened sea—but greater and more pitiful in the loneliness of his soul, that remains even for her who loved him best a cruel and insoluble mystery" (p. 393).

Stein's words, "Romantic! Romantic!" seem to ring through this whole overly romantic assessment of a Jim who is here being true only to his own desires and who certainly does not carry the day against the "ignorance" of the Bugis. It is soon painfully obvious that they were right and he was wrong. Yet Marlow's sounding of Jim's soul still ends by emphasizing not Jim's faithfulness, but his lack of faith (the obvious allusion to Jim's betrayal of Jewel) and by denying that the soul just sounded can ever be known. To even Jewel, "who loved him best," Jim's soul must be "a cruel and insoluble mystery."

The reading turns against itself by incorporating another enigmatic fact that the reading originally overlooked.

That pattern of vision as revision which revision will reverse runs through the novel. In his spoken narration, for example, when Marlow first thinks he has a fix on Jim and has fixed him up with a position requested as a favor from a friend, he soon finds, thanks to a letter from that friend, how well his solution is working and congratulates himself accordingly: "Evidently I had known what I was doing. I had read characters aright" (p. 188). Then he receives his friend's second letter: "'There are no spoons missing, as far as I know,' ran the first line; 'I haven't been interested enough to inquire. He is gone, leaving on the breakfast table a formal little note of apology, which is either silly or heartless. Probably both—and it's all one to me'" (pp. 188–89). In much the same fashion, Marlow's whole first narration represents, as J. E. Tanner has convincingly demonstrated, "the hopeful conclusions of a Marlow immensely pleased with the achievements of Jim whom he has recently visited for a month in Patusan" and is, moreover, an account of Jim's "victory" delivered "only shortly before Jim's death."<sup>5</sup> The first letter must be reread in light of the second one; the first narration must be reviewed in the light of the second one; but the second letter or the second narration is no more final or definitive than was the first one. There will always be something left out, some different perspective from which the text might be differently assessed.

Suresh Raval has recently argued that *Lord Jim* "comprises a system of signs which exceed any stated intention of either Marlow or the impersonal narrator" or, for that matter, any critic or commentator.<sup>6</sup> As Raval further observes, "the Conrad universe" is a "fragmented" one, and thus "there is no Logos which can bring together and unite its fragmented stories into a totality; there is no Logos which comprehends them and refers them to the finality of a truth which makes for the meaning and possibility of confident moral action."<sup>7</sup> Yet the foredoomed failure of any attempt to voice some final defining word paradoxically assures the attempt—makes it a challenge and a game. It is in this sense that, confronting *Lord Jim*, we are all privileged readers in possession of a text effectively end-less in that it always requires reading again.

#### Notes

- 1 Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900; rpt. Edinburgh and London: John Grant, 1925), p. 225. Subsequent references to this edition of the novel will be made parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Randall Craig, "Swapping Yarns: The Oral Mode in *Lord Jim*," *Conradiana*, 13 (1981), 181.
- 3 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 313.
- 4 Arnold E. Davidson, "The Abdication of Lord Jim," *Conradiana*, 13 (1981), 19–34.
- 5 J. E. Tanner, "The Chronology and the Enigmatic End of *Lord Jim*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 21 (1967), 370–71.
- 6 Suresh Raval, *The Art of Failure: Conrad's Fiction* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 58.
- 7 Raval, p. 59.

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