

Beyond the *Bildungsroman*:
Character Development and Communal
Legitimation in the Early Fiction of Joseph Conrad

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In what sense could “Tuan” Jim be said to have been “one of us”? (*Lord Jim* passim). Marlow’s sudden appearance in the fifth chapter of *Lord Jim* derails the form of what had previously seemed a conventional novel of disillusionment, and yet is motivated by nothing more than the urgency of his claim. It seems plausible to read into this urgency the repressed anxiety of an author whose relationship to his self-chosen national community remained open to question throughout his life, who after fifteen years in the most British of all professions still felt that his ability to pass for an Englishman was not taken for granted by everyone. In a classic study, Avrom Fleishman documented Conrad’s affinity for post-Burkean conceptions of “organic” and self-contained national communities in meticulous detail (51ff.). More recent essays have applied his findings to *Heart of Darkness* and uncovered in that novel a profound meditation on the question of “Englishness.”¹ Remarkably little attention, however, has been paid to *Lord Jim* and the way in which its central narrative rupture implicates questions of form and genre in Conrad’s struggle for communal recognition and legitimation.²

The dominant model for such legitimation in the stories and novels that Conrad produced during the early part of his career is that of the *Bildungsroman*, a form that is still reflected in the opening chapters of *Lord Jim*. But already in these early efforts we can detect the attempt to express a model of human experience that cannot easily be incorporated into the classical framework by which the *Bildungsroman* medi-

ates between the individual and his community. As a result of the inevitable crisis that resulted from these two antagonistic tendencies, Conrad turned to the "oral" tale as a way to reassert narrative authority and lead his protagonist back into the fold of a community that, although not explicitly described in these terms, nevertheless stands in as a metonym for that of organic English nationalism. Marlow's insistence that Jim was "one of us" is the signaling phrase that accompanies this change. Paradoxically, however, Conrad's status as a great modernist depends precisely on the ultimate failure of this endeavor. Marlow never definitively proves that Jim was "one of us," and in the process leaves us with an analysis of a human subjectivity that in its complexity transcends the simple binarism of communal inclusion and exclusion.

My study will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I offer a short overview of Conrad's political beliefs, develop a schematic model outlining how the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman mediates between the individual and his community, and then connect these two topoi in brief readings of the first four chapters of *Lord Jim* as well as the short stories "Youth" (1898) and "Amy Foster" (1901). The second part investigates Conrad's most successful early novel of community, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* and shows how it already contains within itself elements of a crisis that comes to the foreground in the *Patna* incident of *Lord Jim*. To describe this crisis, I introduce some theoretical elements from the work of the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. The third and final part examines Marlow's intervention as a storyteller and the ultimate status of the claim that "he was one of us."

I

In February of 1899, a few months before he began working on *Lord Jim* in earnest, Conrad wrote an often-quoted letter to his close friend, the Scottish socialist R. B. Cunninghame Graham. Cunninghame Graham had invited the novelist to a peace meeting organized by the Social Democratic Federation and had even asked him to take the platform alongside Jean Jaurès and Wilhelm Liebknecht. Conrad begrudgingly agreed to attend, but in the same breath stressed his fundamental animosity to the universalist aspirations of the peace movement: "I can not admit the idea of fraternity not so much because I believe it impracticable, but because its propaganda [. . .] tends to weaken the national sentiment the preservation of which is my concern" (*CL* 2:158). The cen-

tral opposition between “fraternity” and “national sentiment” in these lines shows the direct influence of the post-Burkean tradition of organic nationalism prevalent in Victorian Britain on Conrad. Edmund Burke, it should be remembered, had taken offense at the credo of fraternalism espoused by the French Revolution, and particularly at the belief that states should take as their foundation inalienable rights shared by all of mankind. In place of such abstractions, Burke argued for nationally contingent rights, such as those codified in the Magna Carta, that might be passed on from one generation of subjects to the next as an “entailed inheritance” (45).³

The biographical reasons that led Conrad to align himself with the organic nationalist tradition are complex and surely include as a major factor his childhood in divided and occupied Poland.⁴ But it also appears plausible to read the lines to Cunninghame Graham as the expression of a heartfelt wish finally to be accepted as an Englishman, a wish that was threatened by the ideology—continental in origin and internationalist in its outlook—of the Social Democratic movement. The most revealing document of these surreptitious cravings is provided by his response to a review of his stories by H. L. Mencken, who had commented upon Conrad’s “Slavic” outlook and concluded that “[t]he Anglo-Saxon mind, in these later days, becomes increasingly incapable of [his] whole point of view” (20). Conrad, vexed to the core, fired back at Mencken in a new preface to the second edition of his autobiographical reflections, *A Personal Record*, where he wrote that

Nothing is more foreign than what in the literary world is called Slavonism [*sic*], to the Polish temperament with its tradition of self-government, its chivalrous view of moral restraints and an exaggerated respect for individual rights: not to mention the important fact that the whole Polish mentality, Western in complexion, [. . .] had always remained, even in religious matters, in sympathy with the most liberal currents of European thought (*Personal xi*).

The unmistakable aim of this passage is not merely to detach Poland from its geographical position in Eastern Europe and place it amid the Western powers in the mind of the reader, but more specifically to legitimate it as a metonymy for *English* political values. “Self-government,” “moral restraint,” and “individual rights,” to which will be added in the next sentence “simple fellowship and honourable reciprocity of services” are virtues that bear an unmistakable stamp of national particu-

larity (*Personal xi*). Two pages earlier, Conrad had gone even further, rewriting his autobiography in order to claim that “it was I who was adopted by the genius of the [English] language, which directly I came out of the stammering stage made me its own so completely that its very idioms I truly believe had a direct action on my temperament” (*Personal ix*).⁵

In light of this evidence, it comes as no surprise that English national traits are valorized so heavily in Conrad’s fiction. But this conclusion should be taken only as the first step in a more comprehensive evaluation of the Polish émigré’s work. As Edward Said has shown in his influential studies on the cultural manifestations of imperialism, Conrad’s status as a great modernist derives precisely from the fact that the complexity of his narrative voice undermines the foundations of his seemingly uncomplicated Eurocentrism. As I will show, the same double structure can be uncovered in Conrad’s only superficially unproblematic embrace of nineteenth-century organic nationalism.

The symbolic form par excellence of such nationalisms is that of the classical Bildungsroman. As Franco Moretti has argued, the genre emerges in the early years of the nineteenth century as a strategy to mediate and contain the demands for social mobility and the corresponding experience of inner restlessness that arise in the wake of the French Revolution—the same phenomena, in other words, that also unsettled Burke (5ff.). The Bildungsroman responds to these challenges by creating narratives of socialization, in which ambitious young protagonists work their way to the inside of the power structures that govern their time, attempt to hew for themselves a position of privilege, and characteristically fail, realizing only too late the fundamentally misguided nature of their social ambitions. The unspoken premise of these fictions, and indeed more generally of all realist mimesis, is that the reader should be willing to accept the world depicted in the novel as being somehow like his or her own, and consequently also identify to at least some extent with the protagonist.⁶ Benedict Anderson has singled out precisely this imaginative fusion of fictional and real world as crucial to the development and spread of nationalism (30ff.). Realist novels provide an imaginative space into which collective dreams and fantasies may be projected. Such projections, in turn, strengthen identity-based projects to build organic communities, such as those envisioned by the nationalist imagination.⁷

The first four chapters of *Lord Jim* can easily be read as a proto-Bildungsroman, although one that already foreshadows its own failure in

its opening lines. They attempt to chart Jim's progress into psychic maturity and a stable place in the world—a development, however, that is rudely interrupted by the shipwreck of the *Patna*. As is often the case in this genre, narcissism provides the privileged dynamic that structures this progress, and its predominant trope is unsurprisingly the mirror image. It is surely no coincidence that Conrad's first mature novel was set on a boat called the *Narcissus* and that he would later publish a collection of sketches entitled *The Mirror of the Sea*. Kurtz, Jim, Brierly, Nostromo, and the anonymous captain of "The Secret Sharer" are just some of the better-known Conradian characters who walk through life with a constantly watchful eye directed towards an ego ideal, only to see the reflection of this gaze turn into admonition after their inevitable catastrophic failure. Sometimes, as in "The Secret Sharer," this ego ideal is projected onto another living person and assumes a comforting corporeal reality. More commonly, it is perceived as through a glass darkly, in dream images (as with the young Jim) or in carefully crafted dual personalities (as with Kurtz's schizophrenic report to the Society).

Ego ideals may not be reflections of the Self in the most literal, optical sense of the term, but they obey a similar topology, requiring, most centrally, a division between real and imaginary space.⁸ The nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* ordinarily accesses this imaginary space by depicting scenes of reading; we need think here only of the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations*.⁹ As such, it self-reflexively thematizes the process of identification by which the *Bildungsroman* itself becomes the mirroring surface that aids in the construction of imagined communities. But *Lord Jim* obeys a different logic, and Jim's childhood case of *Bovarysme* plays a comparatively subordinate role in fostering his self-understanding and belligerent ambition. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that Conrad's characters are rarely shown to be reading; and that when they are, they often seem perplexed by the texts in front of them. Singleton, laboriously and ludicrously spelling his way through Edward Bulwer-Lytton in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* may well represent an ironic commentary on the realist novel's obsession with narrative communities. Captain McWhirr in "Typhoon" and Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, at any rate, only increase their loneliness by reading because of their inability to connect the words (or symbols) on the page with any measure of human experience.

As Gerald Morgan has shown in a masterful analysis of narcissism in Conrad, the privileged realization of the boundary between real and

imaginary space in his work is typically the sea, or, to be more exact, the sea's surface. The sea provides the more idealistic among Conrad's protagonists with the necessary surface upon which the physical eye may rest as the mind's eye fills its immeasurable expanse with visions of adventure and glory. Jim is no exception to this rule, as a famous episode describing his early training aboard a teaching vessel documents:

His station was in the fore-top, and often from there he looked down, with the contempt of a man destined to shine in the midst of dangers, at the peaceful multitude of roofs cut in two by the brown tide of the stream. [. . .] He could see the big ships departing, the broad-beamed ferries constantly on the move, the little boats floating far below his feet, with the hazy splendour of the sea in the distance, and the hope of a stirring life in the world of adventure. (*Lord* 4)

The danger inherent to this form of psychic projection, of course, is that the surface—always a two-dimensional expanse, a mere membrane—risks collapsing under the pressure of the narcissistic gaze, merging real and ideal space. Images of such a collapse abound in Conrad's fiction. A memorable instance, already quoted by Morgan, can be found in the early short story "Karain" (1897), where the scenery for the first encounter between the anonymous narrator and the indigenous chieftain, himself a psychically fragmented individual, is described in the following terms: "The bay was a bottomless pit of intense light. The circular sheet of water reflected a luminous sky, and the shores enclosing it made an opaque ring of earth floating in an emptiness of transparent blue" ("Karain" 5).

The mirror surface is not the only form that the sea assumes in the psychic topology of Conrad's fiction, however. It also functions as a space of passage that the ego traverses on its voyage into subjectivity and ideological containment. Conrad's characters discover themselves and their place in a community by repeatedly traversing the empty ocean. This process is foregrounded in the 1898 short story "Youth," which Franco Moretti has compellingly analyzed as one of the last great examples of the Bildungsroman form (238–39). "Youth" tells the tale of the young Marlow's first voyage at sea and, in a pivotal passage, of his first command of a lifeboat after the *Judea*, the ship on which he served, has been blown up by a coal fire in the cargo hold. The narrative differs from ordinary stories of shipwreck in that its principal focus is not the

struggle for survival. Indeed, this theme is almost completely absent from all of Conrad's fiction, a curious and highly characteristic omission in the work of a man who had himself several close encounters with death on the open seas. The reward that stands at the end of Marlow's journey is not a life regained, but rather a vision, and thus a life transformed. This vision is of that miraculous phantasm, "the East" ("Youth" 46).

This should not be interpreted as a mere superimposition of imaginary onto real space. For Conrad, "the East" cannot simply be mapped onto "the east" as it can, for example, for Bram Stoker's Jonathan Harker, who believes he descends into a miasma as soon as he crosses the Danube at Budapest, and thus reaches the territory of ancient Turkish rule (7). Marlow, by contrast, does not enter the East simply as a consequence of his landfall in the Malayan archipelago, but rather as a sort of reward for the successful completion of his first voyage in command of a boat. His success in the face of all the delays and obstacles that fate had put in his way completes his process of *Bildung*—and at the same time, crucially, also admits him to that select community where "men and sea interpenetrate [. . .] the sea entering into the life of most men, and the men knowing something or everything about the sea" ("Youth" 3). The name that the opening lines of the story give to this community—and this is where personal development and the symbolic legitimation of the social order once again encounter each other—is "England": Marlow, by steering his boat into safe harbor, has not only proven himself, but also his "entailed inheritance."

It is useful, in this context, to compare the Marlow of "Youth" with another character from Conrad's early fiction who is in every regard his exact antithesis. "Amy Foster," a story that Conrad wrote in 1901, features as its protagonist a man named Yanko, a wretched Slavic—and quite possibly Polish—emigrant who is washed ashore in Eastbay after the shipwreck of the transport that was supposed to take him to America. Yanko provides an archetypal example of stunted *Bildung* in Conrad's fiction. Like Marlow, he sets out on a voyage that he hopes will bring not only adventure and prosperity, but also a sense of place in the world. Unlike Marlow, however, he conducts this voyage in the cargo hold of a ship, not in steady confrontation with the sea and its dangers. In this sense, he short-circuits the psychological maturation process that transforms the narcissist fantasy object into the symbolic register of lived experience. The catastrophic results of this attempt are foregrounded in the very different direction the two characters's lives

take after their respective shipwrecks. For Marlow, the burning of the *Judea* presents a chance to fulfill development and enter into a society of equals, with whom he will later exchange yarns over a bottle of claret. For Yanko, the sinking of his transport constitutes a trauma that upends his sense of Self and throws him into speechlessness. He will never overcome his persistent difficulties with the language and customs of an ethnically homogenous and nationally united English community to which he always remains a foreigner.

Taken together, these smaller stories that surround the composition of *Lord Jim* provide a compelling model of Conradian Bildung, and one that clearly reflects its author's own life experience. In this model, the sea emerges first as an empty surface upon which the nascent subject can project an idealized image of himself. The transformation of this image into reality can only happen through a different relationship to the ocean: that of toil and deprivation entailed by everyday nautical drudgery and even more importantly of courage and vigor in the face of the sea's many dangers. The reward of these exertions is not only a fully realized sense of Self, but also the admission to a (national) community that defines itself precisely through its shared values and experiences. As his 1899 letter to Cunninghame Graham and his acidic response to H. L. Mencken's review of his fiction document, Conrad attempted to project the appearance of one who has successfully completed this developmental itinerary. "Amy Foster," however, suggests that his anxieties ran deeper than mere appearances would suggest and that he was not at all certain of his status as "one of us."

It is not difficult to realize that the story told in the first four chapters of *Lord Jim*, with its opening and concluding vision of the novel's protagonist as an outcast and failure, fits the above paradigm perfectly. Brierly may in this context be read as the embodiment of the English community, in which "men and sea interpenetrate," until the former are identifiable chiefly by their professional behavior in the face of all challenges that the latter might throw at them: "We've got all kinds amongst us—some anointed scoundrels in the lot; but, hang it, we must preserve professional decency or we become no better than so many tinkers going about loose" ("Youth" 3; *Lord* 62).

But *Lord Jim* does not end with Jim's jump off the *Patna* and his subsequent court appearance; indeed, to the extent that it is a modernist narrative it might be said to commence only after these events. Marlow's repetitive injunction that Jim should be regarded as "one of us" stands in direct opposition both to Brierly's point of view and to the

internal closure that the preceding citation of the *Bildungsroman* form had ostensibly established. His words break open the narrative and send it on a breathless quest to describe yet another episode of Jim's life and to find yet another interlocutor who might provide anecdotal evidence related to his character. This endless series of addenda suggests that there is something amiss with the way the traditional *Bildungsroman* conceives of communities and the way in which characters fit (or do not fit) into them. In order to work out a theory of what this flaw might be, we can usefully compare the events during the final hours of the *Patna's* ill-fated voyage in some detail to those of Conrad's most ambitious prior narrative of community formation: *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*

II

On the surface of things, Conrad's "Tale of the Forecastle" (thus the original subtitle of the novel) appears to be merely a more elaborate treatment of the same basic elements already present in "Youth." *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* tells the story of a fairly international crew who nevertheless grow into a community over the duration of their passage from Bombay to London. The catalyst of this process is their mutual acceptance of an ethos based on shared duties and responsibilities, which here as so often in Conrad the crew expresses in their common nautical labors. In short, the novel seems a clear adaptation of the Burkean organic community to the microcosm of a merchant sailor.¹⁰ The antagonist of this community is Donkin, who discourses "with filthy eloquence upon the right of labour to live" and tries to persuade the sailors of the value of fraternity and their universal rights that supposedly entitle them to less work and more benefits than their contracts stipulate (*Nigger* 216). His ultimate fate as an outcast from the crew and indeed the maritime life in general only reinforces the biographical picture of Conrad as a Tory nationalist.¹¹

A more careful reading of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* however, uncovers a considerably more complex structure than a comparison with "Youth" would initially suggest. Perhaps the greatest paradox posed by the novel is that a community supposedly rooted in a common ethos, in a life of work and duty, in reality derives its coherence from its exact opposite, an outside figure who not only refuses to form his life according to the dictates of a communal compact, but who seems incapable of taking on *any* form whatsoever. This figure is the

"Nigger," James Wait, whose sole purpose aboard the *Narcissus* appears to be to pass as much time as possible in inactivity: to vegetate. Indeed, it might be said with some justification that even the basic effort of living exceeds his capacities, for Wait exists only unto death. He will breathe his last breath before the *Narcissus* reaches England, and indeed, the return home seems possible only after his curiously deficient subjectivity has been destroyed. And yet, a true sense of community aboard the merchant vessel only arises when the sailors' shared labor directs itself towards the rescue of the invalid during a stormy night of the passage.

In his author's note to the American edition of the novel, Conrad wrote about Wait that "in the book he is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship's collective psychology and the pivot of the action" (*Nigger* v). A pivot, by definition, stands at the center of a rotating structure and is the fixed point towards which the centripetal force experienced by the structure directs itself at any given moment of the rotation. But a pivot is also distinguished by its quality of remaining *apart* from the structure that rotates around it, in the sense that it does not participate in its movement. The metaphor is apt, for James Wait, although not himself involved in the everyday dealings of the ship's community, nevertheless centers its very actions.¹²

The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben has recently advanced the thesis that human communities derive their integrity neither from shared traditions nor from universal values (as the Burkean and the Jacobin positions respectively claim), but rather from the way in which some of their ostensible members are forced into a position of "bare life"—an existence that remains anterior to the symbolic (and thus also narrative) systems by which human activity might somehow be legitimated as purposive and meaningful (*Homo* 7 and *passim*). Modernity, Agamben goes on to elaborate, is the name commonly given to the "process by which [. . .] the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion [. . .] enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (*Homo* 9). A kind of existence that was once excluded and strictly patrolled suddenly becomes typical because all members of modern communities, precisely in order to be included, must accept a certain level of exclusion.¹³

I do not wish here to enter into the biopolitical nuances of Agamben's argument, nor evaluate his rather sweeping claims about modernity. The underlying topology of his model, however, by which

an existence that remains excluded from the narrative processes by which communities define themselves suddenly turns out to stand at the very center of these communities, seems to me to be extraordinarily applicable to Conrad's fiction and to offer an important corrective to the essentially linear narrative of socialization offered in the traditional *Bildungsroman*. For *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* like so many of Conrad's other early stories, presents itself as a *Bildungsroman*, though one in which the formation of the individual Self has been entirely subordinated to the development of a collective identity. The anonymous narrator emphasizes this in the last lines of the story, in which he proudly addresses his fellow sailors with the words: "Haven't we, together and upon the immortal sea, wrung out a meaning from our sinful lives? Good-bye brothers! You were a good crowd. As good a crowd as ever fisted with wild cries the beating canvas of a heavy foresail; or tossing aloft, invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale" (*Nigger* 217). The prevalence of kinetically charged verbs in this passage—"to wring out," "to fist," "to toss" etc.—emphasizes once again Conrad's persistent claim that mutual toil and shared experiences provide the foundation of any community. But the attentive reader, willing to interpret Conrad's narrative against the grain of its own ideology, detects a hollow ring to these lines—a ring that springs from the knowledge that it is really James Wait, the man of total inactivity, who fuses the otherwise deeply divided collective of sailors into a working unity. And indeed, the vaunted community seems to exist only in the narrator's idealizing imagination, for

A gone shipmate, like any other man, is gone for ever; and I never met one of them again. But at times the spring-flood of memory sets with force up the dark River of the Nine Bends. Then on the waters of the forlorn stream drifts a ship—a shadowy ship manned by a crew of Shades. They pass and make a sign, in a shadowy hail. (*Nigger* 216–17)

I have dwelt on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* at some length because its underlying structure seems to me to provide a useful set of tools by which to analyze the events aboard the *Patna*, Jim's culpability, and ultimately also the meaning of the phrase that "he was one of us." From Brierly's point of view, the events that transpire during the night of the shipwreck are exceedingly simple to summarize. Two groups of human beings coexist aboard the *Patna*. On the one hand, there are the white officers, bound into a tightly knit community by their professional

responsibility of keeping the ship safe and afloat. On the other hand, there are the Muslim passengers, who lack both the knowledge and the ability to create for themselves a positive identity through active confrontation with the dangers of the sea. In the words of the contemptible New South Wales German skipper, they are mere “cattle” (*Lord* 12). When the *Patna* founders upon an unknown obstacle, it is the duty of her crew to protect the pilgrims entrusted to their care from further harm. By failing to do so, the officers have shown themselves unworthy of a professional community from which they are consequently expelled through the revocation of their naval certificates.

Closer examination, however, reveals this binarism to be excessively reductive. In an earlier chapter, Conrad had offered the following description of European officers serving on the Eastern seas:

The majority were men who, like [Jim], thrown there by some accident, had remained on as officers of country ships. They had now a horror of the home service, with its harder conditions, severer view of duty, and the hazard of stormy oceans. They were attuned to the eternal peace of Eastern sky and sea. They loved short passages, good deck-chairs, large native crews, and the distinction of being white. They shuddered at the thought of hard work. (*Lord* 10)

Laziness and moral lassitude are unmasked not to be shortcomings of a small group of people unable to live up to the ethos of their community, but rather to have long ago become *constitutive* of this very ethos. In fact, as the testimony at Jim’s trial uncovers, the only people who had been working and upholding their duty the entire time were the two Malay helmsmen, who “had meantime remained holding to the wheel” (*Lord* 61). Exclusion and inclusion thus enter into Agamben’s “zone of irreducible indistinction”—the distinguishing characteristics of the naval community are precisely those that it avows to exclude while the human “cattle” against which it defines itself turns out to produce more appropriate representatives of the governing ideal (*Homo* 9; *Lord* 12).

In light of this complex structure, any reading of the novel that would classify Jim as a failure because he never completes the process of *Bildung* that only steadfast adherence to one’s duties can bestow in Conrad’s fiction has to be rejected as overly simplistic. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Jim’s moral quandary throughout the rest of the story revolves not around something he *didn’t* do, but precisely around something he *did* do, namely to jump into the lifeboat. As I have tried to

argue in my analysis of Marlow's Eastern voyage in "Youth," Conrad often correlates movement through space with a process of psychic maturation and symbolic interpellation: his protagonists lose their innocence and move to the center of their community through their passage from point A to point B. But in Jim's case, this passage is entirely involuntary: in a confirmation of Louis Althusser's well-known theory, symbolic interpellation defeats subjective agency and forces upon it an automatic action that escapes conscious control:

Suddenly the skipper howled "Mein Gott! The squall! The squall! Shove off!" With the first hiss of rain and the first gust of wind, they screamed, "Jump, George! We'll catch you! Jump!" [. . .] I heard as if I had been on the top of a tower another wild screech, "Geo-o-o-orge! Oh jump!" She was going down, down, head first under me. [. . .]

"I had jumped . . ." He checked himself, averted his gaze. . . . "It seems," he added (*Lord* 102).

The burden that Jim will have to carry for the rest of his life is thus the result not of an incomplete development, but rather of an act whereby he assumes a subjectivity that he cannot embrace as his own—that of the cowardly engineer George, who died minutes earlier of heart failure. The naval code of conduct demands that in the case of shipwreck an English officer should embrace death and if necessary go down with the sinking vessel. The German skipper and his ilk repress this responsibility and instead abandon the passengers to a fate that should be theirs. But Jim, precisely in the act of rejoining their "community," carries this death back among them.

Such a reading helps make sense of Brierly's curious reaction when he comes face to face with the young deserter. After the first day of the proceedings, the impeccable officer with the "stiff upper lip" confesses to Marlow his wish that Jim had never stood trial and instead committed suicide: "Well, then, let him creep twenty feet underground and stay there! By heavens! *I would*" (*Lord* 62, 61). Brierly's uncharacteristically emotional reaction stems from a fear that the publicity generated by the trial will drag the English naval community into the dregs: "We are trusted. Do you understand?—trusted! Frankly, I don't care a snap for all the pilgrims that ever came out of Asia, but a decent man would not have behaved like this to a cargo of old rags in bales. We aren't an organized body of men, and the only thing that holds us together is just the name for that kind of decency" (*Lord* 62).

The naval assessor correctly evaluates Jim's transgression as dangerous not so much because it fails to adhere to a communal norm, but rather because it raises the possibility that this norm may have been empty to begin with. His rhetoric, which reduces the pilgrims to "old rags in bales" about which he doesn't "care a snap" at the very same moment that it is supposed to reaffirm the duty to protect them, only underscores this point (*Lord* 62). In an attempt to protect the fragile illusion of community, Brierly wishes for the symbolic death of the man who, by virtue of his jump and his stubborn insistence to live up to his guilt, threatens to erase the distinction between that which is excluded and that which is included in English naval honor. Ultimately, Jim proves to be stronger than Brierly, and the older officer, shaken in his steadfast adherence to professional "decency," will later commit suicide (*Lord* 62).

In summary, Jim's relationship to the community of which he so desperately desires to be a part is greatly confused when Marlow first lays eyes on him during his trial. While the revocation of his certificate excludes him from the elite status held by professional mariners, the circumstances surrounding the court proceedings make clear that the English officer class relies on him as scapegoat onto which to project all those negative characteristics that have long ago undermined its governing ethos. Like the Malay helmsmen, Jim has been barred from the symbolic code by which this community derives its sense of identity and moved into a position that is little better than that of "cattle." But to characterize this exclusion as the result of a failure in development would mean to unintentionally legitimate the debased company that men like Brierly no less than the German skipper keep. To the extent that Jim joins the other officers in the lifeboat, he *has* completed a process of formation. His problem is that this formation was not authentic—that he refuses to accept the moral compromise that men like the skipper accept and that ultimately drives the more upright Brierly to his death. Jim's existence after the *Patna* disaster offers living proof that the boundary between men of "professional virtues" and the "confounded natives" against which they define themselves cannot be rigorously maintained (*Lord* 61). Negative qualities that are supposedly excluded have already infected the very basis of membership, while the virtues that are said to distinguish English officers can also be found among the Malaysians.

Conrad's use of the Bildungsroman form thus arrives at an impasse with the complex story of Jim's jump off the *Patna*. The young man is

neither an unadulterated success like the Marlow of “Youth,” nor an unadulterated failure like the Yanko of “Amy Foster.” Like Marlow, Jim completes a voyage of self-discovery and development, but finds at the end of it neither his authentic Self nor a stable place within a community. Instead, this very same community shuns and isolates him, precisely because its representative members discover in his failures the hidden underbelly of their own supposed success. Deprived of the *Bildungsroman* model, however, Conrad needs to find another narrative form by which to legitimate his principal character, to show that Jim can indeed be said to have authentically been a part of the English community. He finds this form in the oral tales by which the storyteller Marlow presents to his audience his claim that Jim was “one of us.”

III

Biographical evidence shows that Conrad never intended *Lord Jim* to spiral out of control in the way that it did, and indeed, that he continued to add episode after episode against both his better judgment and the advice of his editors.¹⁴ It seems only plausible to speculate that this relentless dynamism of his plot is the result of some psychic compulsion, the frantic desire to suture a gap in the fabric of the narrative that Conrad himself perhaps did not consciously comprehend.

Mark Conroy, in an excellent study on the strategies of legitimation employed by Conrad in his fiction, has argued for the latter’s adoption of storytelling as characteristic of a “*dépaysé*” (stateless person) who “found his exoticism quite ready-made when he faced the British reading public” and suffered from a “nostalgia for a situation in which a more immediate communion between writer and public would be possible” (87). It is the technique of a writer, in other words, who hopes to win for himself an audience by depicting in his fiction the very processes by which such audiences are created. The earlier “Youth” still innocently superimposed this technique on a narrative that in its inner logic obeyed the dictates of the *Bildungsroman*. *Lord Jim*, by contrast, invokes storytelling only after its citation of the more traditional genre has collapsed under the weight of its own internal contradictions.

In what way, then, might storytelling be conceived of as a supplement to the *Bildungsroman* form? The classic treatment of this subject is that of Walter Benjamin, who postulated that a fundamentally antagonistic relationship exists between the ways that novels and oral tales legitimate human communities. The reader of novels, Benjamin claims,

takes on an essentially consumptive attitude towards the stories that are put before him—he “in his solitude seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it as it were. Indeed, he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace” (100). The sense of community that realist novels and especially the Bildungsroman generate through a process of projective identification is thus necessarily always transient. Even at the moment in which he is still “warming his shivering life with a death he reads about,” the reader already demands new material (101).

The storyteller, by contrast, crafts his narratives out of the conviction that every human life contains a mystical kernel, an “experience” that is worth relating to others in the form of a counsel (Benjamin 83). He creates a sense of community not by allowing for projective identification, but rather by leading his audience to the recognition that another human life, as superficially alien as it may otherwise appear to be, can nevertheless contain a moral that may help make sense of one’s own existence. This, clearly, is Marlow’s fundamental ambition: to show that Jim, even though he can only problematically be said to have completed the trajectory of development by which membership in the community English seafaring men is ordinarily legitimated, nevertheless has had an experience that we can identify as like our own. Marlow claims as much in the opening pages of chapter 5, where he insists to have himself known “times when a man must act as though life were equally sweet in any company” (*Lord* 37).

Marlow’s fundamental problem, of course, is that he never manages to arrive at a positive vision of what the counsel to be taken from Jim’s life might be. He notes of his first encounter with the younger man that “[t]he views he let me have of himself were like those glimpses through the shifting rents in a thick fog—bits of vivid and vanishing detail, giving no connected idea of the general aspect of the country” (*Lord* 70). Since he cannot penetrate to the obdurate kernel at the heart of Jim’s character, he is instead forced to surround his principle story with more and more secondary narratives that shed upon it a partial and ultimately inconclusive light. As the anonymous frame narrator of *Heart of Darkness* says of Marlow’s peculiar technique: “[to him] the meaning of an episode was not inside like the kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze” (*Heart* 48).

The second part of *Lord Jim* consequently displays a failure of the traditional art of storytelling in much the same way that the first part displayed a failure of the Bildungsroman. And despite Benjamin’s insis-

tence on the fundamental antagonism between these two forms of narration, the underlying reasons may well be the same. It is interesting to note that the historical event that Benjamin identifies in his essay as having spelled the irrevocable end of storytelling is the exact same one that Franco Moretti singles out as being responsible for the death of the *Bildungsroman*: the First World War. *Lord Jim*, of course, was written long before the war; and no direct causal link between the trauma of the trenches and Conrad's early masterpiece can be established. But neither Benjamin nor Moretti argue from an empirical historiography. Instead, both are interested in the ways in which mechanized warfare reduces the individual to a rudimentary existence anterior to communicable experience (Benjamin) or symbolically meaningful social existence (Moretti). This rudimentary existence is, of course, precisely the "bare life" from which Agamben develops his own theories of the "inclusive exclusion" (*Homo* 7). What I wish to propose, in other words, is that Marlow cannot make sense of Jim precisely because Jim's experience—the experience of "bare life" and its implication in the process by which communities are constituted—remains anterior to any attempt to stake out a collective identity through the communication of any positive characteristic (*Homo* 7).

In this respect, it is important to note that Marlow refuses to speak of the final events of Jim's life, which are the ones in which the young man himself believes he finally accedes to some form of authentic existence. In one of his rare interventions in the second part of the book, Conrad's omniscient narrator comments upon the conclusion of Marlow's oral narrative that "the last image of that incomplete story [. . .] had made discussion vain and comment impossible" (*Lord* 315). Wisdom, the Benjaminian payoff that results from the communication of life experience, has not been achieved. Marlow himself gives a full account of Jim's death only once, in the laconic form of a letter to the mysterious "privileged man" (*Lord* 200). It is a final attempt to argue on behalf of his young friend that ends with the words, "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 astray amongst the passions of the earth, ready to surrender himself faithfully to the claim of his own world of shades" (*Lord* 391). For Benjamin, "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell," for the consciousness of one's mortality lends a special authority to human experience (94). Jim's death, however, and the "proud and unflinching glance" that immedi-

ately precede it, escape Marlow (*Lord* 391). What, then, might be the meaning of this gesture?

The events that lead up to Jim's suicide are a direct consequence of his mysterious charity towards Gentleman Brown, a charity that has attracted much attention in the critical literature.¹⁵ An explanation is surely to be found in those words of Brown's of which Marlow says they were spoken "as if a demon had been whispering advice in his ear" (*Lord* 364). The pirate asks Jim whether he "had nothing fishy in his life to remember that he was so damnedly hard upon a man trying to get out of a deadly hole by the first means that came to hand" (*Lord* 364). Brown, the quintessential outsider, consequently appeals to Jim, who by Stein's near-miraculous intervention has at least temporally been transformed into an exemplary representative of a functional human community, and reminds him that the included and the excluded aren't all that dissimilar. To deny the pirate protection would consequently mean to reenact the hypocritical logic of exclusion that Jim experienced aboard the *Patna* and then later on in his treatment by Brierly, Chester, and others upon his wanderings.

What Jim fails to recognize is that these acts of exclusion are the very precondition for communal coherence and stability. To do away with a binary logic that divides the included from the excluded, the "us" from the "them," means to expose a community to catastrophe—a catastrophe that promptly takes place when Gentleman Brown ravages the defenseless native population. Once news of these events reaches Jim, he is confronted with two possible options. On the one hand, he could flee Patusan, as Stein himself did many years earlier. Doing so would mean to leave behind a fragmented community that—much like it was when Jim first encountered it—is divided amongst itself and has no sense of solidity. For himself, this option would mean the chance for a new beginning somewhere else, and perhaps the eventual harmonious integration into a community that has for now once again escaped him. On the other hand, and this of course is the option that he ultimately chooses, he could finally accept his position as the ultimate outsider as authentically his own, realizing in the process that the very act of exclusion that condemns him allows the native population of Patusan to regain a communal integrity.

Jim's "proud and unflinching glance" signifies that he has finally found and embraced his place in the world; a place, however, not on the inside of a human community, but on the outside as a kind of scapegoat

who through his symbolic death legitimates its social order (*Lord* 391). Much as the death of James Wait, the man of radical passivity, allowed the crew of the *Narcissus* to go on with their everyday hustle and bustle, the death of Jim allows the natives of Patusan to reach a sense of closure. The Bildungsroman can impossibly accommodate this radical subjectivity, for it relates characters to their community by chronicling their voyages of socialization that lead to the inside of the community's signifying structures. The storyteller, however, cannot express this subjectivity either, since his role is to convey "wisdom," a positive life-lesson from which his listeners might derive counsel for their own existence (Benjamin 87). Jim's life, however, achieves significance only in the moment that it is forgotten, because the very act of forgetting it—and the experience that it contains—is what binds a community together. Perhaps then, Marlow is not altogether incorrect. Jim is indeed "one of us"—but only to the extent that he is not.

NOTES

1. See Lewis 97ff. and Parry 196ff.

2. The work of Mark Conroy provides an important exception to which I will return in the third part of this paper. Geoffrey Galt Harpham has also written persuasively on various strategies of legitimation (or, as he calls it, of "mastery") in *Lord Jim* and other stories, but has not addressed the formal and generic concerns that are the principal subject of my inquiry.

3. For further discussion of Burke's reaction to the French Revolution and the influence of his thought on Conrad, see Lewis 70ff.

4. Harpham provides an excellent analysis of Conrad's childhood in Poland and its possible influences on his political and literary development in the first part of his *One of Us*. My essay in many ways grows out of Harpham's speculations on how Conrad "[p]olonizes" the novel (33–70).

5. It is, of course, possible to read the mention of a "stammering stage" in this context not as a reference to infancy, but rather as an allusion to the initial difficulties involved in the acquisition of any foreign language (*Personal* ix). But only two sentences previously, Conrad asserts that "[t]he truth of the matter is that my faculty to write in English is as natural as any other aptitude with which I might have been born" (ix).

6. In his seminal *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach consequently writes about Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* that "[it] would be almost incomprehensible without a most accurate and detailed knowledge of the political situation, the social stratification, and the economic circumstances of a perfectly definite historical moment [. . .] accordingly, the novel bears the subtitle, *Chronique de 1830*" (455).

7. See Anderson 30. Walter Benjamin, whom Anderson credits as a major

source of inspiration, already arrived at similar conclusions in the fifth section of his famous essay on "The Storyteller," in which he comments that "[b]y integrating the social process with the development of a person, [the Bildungsroman] bestows the most frangible justification on the order determining it" (88).

8. Freud recognized as much when, in his 1914 essay "On Narcissism," he introduced the crucial distinction between "primary" and "secondary" narcissism (75). Primary narcissism, a developmental phase in early infancy, is the name Freud gives to the intrapsychic investment of drive energy into the ego that occurs when the toddler develops a sense of Self for the first time. Secondary narcissism, by contrast, denotes that later accomplishment of psychic development by which the subject erects an ideal ego and redirects part of its drive energy towards the attainment of this Self image. Octave Mannoni, in a presentation at the seminar of Jacques Lacan, speaks in this context of the difference between an investment in ontological reality and one in the "realist metaphor" of images (qtd. in Lacan 122).

9. See Brooks 113–42.

10. Raymond Williams speaks in this context of a "knowable community of a transparent kind" (141).

11. Avrom Fleishman has analyzed this constellation in great detail (70–75, 129–32).

12. It should by now be apparent that my reading aims in part to unhinge traditional "identity politics" interpretations of Conrad's novels, and to move to the center of critical attention the question of how an *absence* of identity relates to communal compacts. For an interpretation of James Wait's function that is very different from my own, see Eugene B. Redmond.

13. In recent articles in *Le Monde* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Agamben provides an easily comprehensible personal example of this phenomenon in contemporary societies: he reports that in order to obtain a U.S. visa for a visiting position at NYU during the spring semester of 2004, he would have been required to submit biometrical data (a photo and a fingerprint) to the Department of Homeland Security. Submission to a form of data collection that reduces individual existence to a set of purely biological parameters (a bare life) thus turns out to be the prerequisite for participation in the higher social processes by which free and "open" democratic societies ordinarily define themselves ("Tatouage" 1). Agamben insists that such processes of exclusion, while at first always confined to minorities (such as foreigners) and instituted for the supposed good of the majority, will ultimately come to affect all members of a community and thus truly become "inclusive exclusions" ("Tatouage" 1).

14. Relevant passages from Conrad's letters can be found in *CL* 2:62–303, *passim*. Many are also reprinted in *Lord* 291–305.

15. Thus, Albert Guerard argues that Jim subconsciously identifies with Brown, while Ian Watt maintains that his decision is at least partly motivated by his propensity to take risks (150; 342). Suresh Raval credits a moral relativism that holds sway over Jim as a result of the *Patna* disaster.

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