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SARTRE AND CONRAD:

LORD JIM AS EXISTENTIAL HERO

ALTHOUGH A FEW CRITICS have recognized a relationship between the works of Conrad and the existential philosophers, those comparisons that have been made have dealt with vague, humanistic banalities about "man's condition" rather than with specific works and quotations. As a result, even the most notable of these critics, Adam Gillon, has left us with indefensible abstractions asserting that in Sartre's vision "men have nearly lost their humanity", while Conrad's vision is full of "compassion", and "Sartre's view of man's birth as a wrong that can be righted eliminates happiness", although Conrad's view offers the possibility for the "happiness of self-sacrifice".¹ If, however, we are going to identify Conrad as an existentialist (or to differentiate him from one) we must avoid such generalities; by contrasting *Lord Jim* with existential works, this paper will deal with the development of Jim from a "lost youngster"² to an existential hero, as he confronts the dilemmas of modern man (aloneness, despair, meaninglessness, and guilt), and thereby "masters his fate" (p. 227).

Marlow tells us that Jim is a "lost youngster, one in a million—but then he was one of us; . . . and yet the mystery of his attitude got a hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself . . ." (p. 69). Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, said "God is dead. . . . We have killed him, . . . but I come too early, my time has not come yet."³ In the same way, Jim has come too soon, but he is still a "modern man", "one of us", who is no longer under the higher laws of God or the rigid structure of society.

Conrad continually emphasizes the loss of the ultimate authority, even in his narrative technique. Marlow is not an omniscient narrator; none of the characters in the novel is omniscient. They all present their subjective viewpoints, because they can not enter into Jim's consciousness; they can not give an objective sense of truth. There is, in fact, no truth; there are only multiple points of view because truth, in *Lord Jim*, has become internalized.

If there is no objective truth, no preconception of mankind, Jim must

determine his own fate. There is a great gulf between his visions of himself and what he is, in reality. Jim's attempt to change those dreams into reality, his desire to combine the real with the ideal, becomes the thematic conflict of the book. For, as Sartre says, "there is no reality, except in action . . . man is the sum of his deeds. Existentialism puts everyone in a position to understand that reality alone is reliable; that dreams, expectations and hopes serve to define man only as deceptive dreams, abortive hopes and expectations unfulfilled."⁴

Conrad set up a network of abstract visions for Jim, all of which lead only to his downfall. In the first chapter, when Jim is standing his watch, he thinks of himself as a hero. "He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; . . .—always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book" (p. 7), ". . . he felt sure—he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and seas" (p. 9). Conrad uses the subjunctive "would" and refers to Jim as a "hero in a book", not a real man.

What prevents Jim from acting like a hero is his own consciousness, his awareness of the absurdity and chaos of the modern universe. "That man there seemed to be aware of his hopeless difficulty" (p. 26). That sense of hopelessness caused Jim to have "spent many days stretched out on his back, dazed, battered, hopeless, and tormented as if at the bottom of an abyss of unrest" (p. 11). In addition, Jim sees "nothing but the disorder of his tossed cabin" (p. 11). This immobilization is the "fatal shock" that Carl Jung talks about; it is the loss of the sense of order in the universe. This condition is what Sartre (p. 294) calls "abandonment" when he quotes Dostoevski's Kirilov, in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If God does not exist, everything is indeed permitted." "And man is, in consequence, forlorn, for he can not find anything to depend on, either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, he is without excuse." Sartre goes on, "Man is condemned to be free, condemned because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty; from the moment he is thrown into the world, he is responsible for what he does" (p. 295). Jim experiences this abandonment after he jumps ship. "When your ship fails you, your whole world seems to fail you; the world that has made you, restrained you, taken care of you. It is as if the souls of men floating on an abyss and in touch with immensity had been set free for any excess of heroism, absurdity or abomination" (p. 88).

Sartre warns us that this abandonment must not lead to quietism, but

Jim is at first left helpless by the disorder. "He told me that his first impulse was to shout and straight away make all those people leap out of sleep into terror; but such an overwhelming sense of his helplessness came over him that he was not able to produce a sound" (p. 63). Jim attempts to deny responsibility for himself when he explains, "I had jumped . . . so it seems" (p. 81), but he must reject this attempt, for as Marlow tells him, "If you keep up this game, you'll very soon find that the earth ain't big enough to hold you—that's all" (p. 140).

If Marlow condemns Jim for running, he understands what Jim is running from and that he, himself, is unwilling to face the same confrontation. Talking about Jim's predicament, he says "This is one of those rare cases which no solemn deception can palliate, which no man can help; where his very Maker seems to abandon a sinner to his own devices" (p. 71). Later in the novel, Marlow talks to Jewel about the inevitability of Jim's leaving her, about the transiency of Jim's power on the island. He says

"It had the power to drive me out of my conception of existence, out of the shelter each of us makes for himself to creep under in moments of danger, as a tortoise withdraws in its shell. For a moment I had a view of the world that seemed to wear a vast and dismal aspect of disorder, while in truth, thanks to our unwearied efforts, it is as sunny an arrangement of small conveniences as the mind of man can conceive" (p. 225).

Marlow's ability to deceive himself relates to Conrad's idea that man constantly deceives himself by remaining unconscious. Sartre calls this self-deception *mauvaise foi*, or bad faith, but both Sartre and Conrad maintain that man can not live his entire life asleep, without consciousness. "Nevertheless", Marlow maintains, "there are few of us who have never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand so much—everything—in a flash—before we fall back again into our agreeable somnolence" (pp. 103-4).

Jim is not like Marlow or everyone else, because he cannot remain in "somnolence". He is intensely aware of his condition, and so he is responsible for himself and must remain alone. Fifty years before Conrad wrote *Lord Jim*, Soren Kierkegaard explained the concept of aloneness, of man's individual responsibility for himself:

. . . a crowd in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impotent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction . . . for a crowd is an ab-

straction and has no hands; but each individual ordinarily has two hands. . . . For every individual who flees in cowardice from being an individual, such a man contributes his share of cowardliness to the cowardliness which we know as the crowd.⁵

Marlow recognizes Jim's sense of individual responsibility and sees it as an admirable part of his character, although he knows that it also leads to Jim's despair. "Woe to the stragglers! We exist only in so far as we hang together. He [Jim] had straggled in a way; he had not hung on; but he was aware of it with an intensity that made him touching, just as a man's more intense life is more touching than the death of a tree" (p. 160).

The responsibility for Jim is a great one, for, as Sartre says (p. 291) "it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the responsibility for his existence squarely on his shoulders." Marlow's words are not so different when he says "He made himself responsible for success on his own head" (p. 189). We know that Jim will take the responsibility willingly, though, for he says he "knew the truth, and I would live it down—alone, with myself" (p. 96).

The willingness to face himself brings Jim to search for meaning in his own life, a meaning which is personal and internalized. Searching, however, requires the recognition of a temporary vacuum, or as Marlow describes Jim when he arrives in Patusan, he looks "like a lonely figure by the shore of a sombre and hopeless ocean . . . a speck in the dark void . . ." (p. 124). We also know that Jim has to find his meaning for himself, a meaning within himself. "Once he got in [Patusan], it would be for the outside world as though he never existed. He would have nothing but the soles of his own feet to stand on, and he would have to find his ground at that" (p. 167).

Not only does Jim see the necessity of the search for meaning, but so does Marlow when he finally says

Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life. I don't know how much Jim understood, but I know he felt, he felt confusedly but powerfully, the demand of some such truth or illusion—I don't care how you call it, there is so little difference, and the difference means little (p. 160).

Here Marlow shows the necessity for man (in general and Jim in particular) to search for meaning, but the quotation also points up the difference between

understanding and feeling, his belief that meaning has nothing to do with intellect; it has to do with emotion.

How does Jim go about finding this meaning? Sartre says "Man is the sum of his deeds" (p. 300), and so it must be Jim's deeds which convert his dream into a reality, which give a meaning to his life. This relates to Conrad's view that it is not Jim's intellect which leads Jim to the acceptance of himself, rather it is his commitment to a life of action. Marlow tells us that Jim has the courage one needs to act: "I mean just that inborn ability to look temptation straight in the face—a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows without pose—a power of resistance . . . an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors . . . Hang ideas" (p. 34). Toward the end of the book, Marlow remembers Stein's words, "In the destructive element, immerse. . . . To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—always . . ." (p. 240). And so it is with Jim. Jim makes his abstract dreams into reality by acting, by following his dream. "How does one kill fear, I wonder?", Marlow remarks to Jewel. "It is an enterprise you rush into while you dream . . ." (p. 192).

So Jim takes on the dangerous responsibility of leading the people of Patusan. "If I am to do any good here", he tells Marlow, "and preserve my position . . . I must stand the risk" (p. 180). And stand the risk he does. "As he had got the Bugis irretrievably committed to action, and he made himself responsible for success on his own head . . ." (p. 212). And on Patusan, Jim does not miss his chance. When the crucial battle comes, "he was bound to get on top of that hill and stay there, whatever might happen" (p. 192).

Related to Jim's commitment to action, we see his ability to confront death. Jim's fear of death, in the beginning of the book, is a cause for his immobilization. He sees death as determined by some outside force "which means to sweep the whole precious world utterly away from his sight by the simple and appalling act of taking his life" (p. 10). When he accepts death, though, "everything redounds to his glory; and it is the irony of his good fortune that he, who had been too careful of it once, seemed to bear a charmed life" (pp. 204-5). It is his decision to defy death, which leads him from being "satisfied nearly" to finding fulfillment in life. He gives Brown an opportunity to leave the island, but Brown comes back and the order of the island is consequently destroyed. Jim then knows that he must face death courageously, so "in that very moment he had decided to defy the disaster in the only way it occurred to him such a disaster could be defied" (p. 294). He tells Jewel,

“. . . There was nothing to fight for. He was going to prove his power and conquer the fatal destiny itself” (p. 295). And so Jim dies, but he has finally made up for his chance missed.

If Jim dies, why should we not look at his death as a nihilistic outlook on life? In the author's preface, Conrad calls *Lord Jim* a tale of “lost honor.”⁶ It is exactly that. When Jim regains his honour, his life becomes meaningful. Marlow says “We want a belief in its (life's) necessity and justice, to make a conscious sacrifice of our lives. Without it, the sacrifice is only forgetfulness, the only way of offering is no better than perdition” (p. 243). How do we know that Jim's sacrifice is necessary and gives his life meaning? The French sailor gives a clue when he says “I contend that one may get on knowing that one's courage does not come of itself. . . . One truth the more ought not make life impossible . . . but the honor, monsieur! The honor—that is real—that is. And what life may be worth when the honor is gone, I can offer no opinion . . . I know nothing of it” (pp. 106-7). “And what is the pursuit of truth, after all?” asks Marlow. “And yet, is not mankind itself, pushing on its blind way, driven by a dream of its greatness and its power upon the dark paths of excessive cruelty and excessive devotion?” (p. 251). Here we see why Jim (and modern man) must live on in a seemingly meaningless universe. The pursuit of truth, or the meaning of life, is no greater or smaller than man's dream and the devotion to that dream. As Camus says, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill man's heart.” Man's greatness, then, lies within himself, for he must defy that meaninglessness with the honour within himself, for “There is no fate which can not be surmounted by scorn.”⁷

Camus' greatest novel, *The Stranger*, written forty-two years after *Lord Jim*, is the epitome of the existential novel. Yet Meursault, the hero of the book, is not so different from Jim. A comparison between the two books merits a paper in itself, but a few comparisons will serve our purposes well. Meursault is the stranger, the outsider, someone completely alone. He commits an act instinctually, killing an Arab, just as Jim jumps ship without consciousness. Neither Jim nor Meursault (as in the following description of his shooting the Arab) feels responsible for the acts in his own mind.

I was conscious only of the cymbals of the sun clashing on my skull, and, less distinctly of the keen blade of light flashing up from the knife, scarring my eyelashes, and gouging into my eyeballs. Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the sea, while the sky cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave,

and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. . . . And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.⁸

Here, Camus makes several references to the passive act of shooting the Arab, reminiscent of Jim's "I had jumped . . . so it seems" (p. 81). He talks about the trigger *giving*, the butt of the revolver *jogging his palm*, the *fateful rap*, and his own *undoing*.

Meursault is a character who moves from a state of unconsciousness to a conscious awareness of meaning in his own life. He exists outside the social order, has no ambition because he doesn't care if he is promoted or not, cares nothing for marriage, ignores traditional mourning practice for his mother. He, like Jim, exists unto himself, without the social structure; he is totally internalized. He is a "straggler" in the same way that Jim is a straggler, in his aloneness and subjective value system.

What brings meaning to Meursault's life is again the defiance of death. In fact, his death is a matter of honour, the "lost honour" he wins back through defiance. When he is about to be executed, he says, "I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, that I was happy still. For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope for was that on the day of my execution there should be howls of execration."⁸ We also notice Jim's remarks about being "satisfied . . . nearly" (p. 233), and recall that the only way he can be satisfied is "by defying the disaster". So, we can answer Marlow's final question, "Is he satisfied quite now, I wonder? We ought to know, he is one of us" (p. 300). Jim is satisfied because his honour has been regained; his final act of defying death makes him accept himself, just as Meursault is fulfilled by his defiance of death.

This brings us to one last comparison, one which can better explain the phrase "he is one of us" (p. 300). Meursault, in the passage quoted above, speaks of feeling "more brotherly" and, earlier in the book when he throws the priest out of his cell, he says

"Every man alive is privileged; there was only one class of man, the privileged class. . . . What difference could it make to me . . . since the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses, since one and the same fate was bound to choose not only me but thousands of millions of privileged people, who like him (the priest) called themselves my brothers. . . . All alike would be condemned to die one day; his turn, too, would come like the others."⁸

Meursault, too, is one of us. He is one of the race of modern men, and al-

though he is a stranger, he shares something with the human race; he feels "less lonely" because he is a man among men. Jim, too is a man among men. We are like Jim and Meursault simply because of the "universality of the human condition" (Sartre, p. 304). We all face the same fate.

Moreover, Jim's commitment to the people of Patusan and his relationship with Jewel prove his kinship with mankind. He tells Marlow "You take a different view of your actions when you come to understand—when you are made to understand—every day that your existence is necessary to another person" (p. 217). Sartre explains this condition in a different way. "The man who discovers himself directly in the cogito also discovers all the others, and discovers them in the condition of his own existence. . . . Thus at once, we find ourselves in a world that is, let us say, that of inter-subjectivity" (p. 303). We know that Jim wanted a "helper, an ally, an accomplice" (p. 69), and we know that Marlow believes that "in our hearts we trust for our salvation in the men that surround us, in the sights that fill our eyes, in the sounds that fill our ears, and in the air that fills our lungs" (p. 18). Thus, just as Camus says, "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men."⁷ And this is why Jim is one of us, for he has determined his own fate, he has learned to accept himself among men. "This universe henceforth without a master seems neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. We must imagine Sisyphus [and Jim] happy."⁷

NOTES

1. Adam Gillon, "Conrad and Sartre," *Dalhousie Review*, Spring 1960, pp. 71, 68.
2. Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*, Riverside Edition (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) p. 69. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Gay Science", *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, 1958), pp. 96-97.
4. John Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism", *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1956), p. 300. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.
5. Soren Kierkegaard, "On Himself", *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1956), p. 93.
6. Joseph Conrad, "Author's note", *Lord Jim* (Garden City, New York, 1921), p. ix.
7. Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus", *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York, 1955), p. 91, 90.
8. Camus, *The Stranger* (New York, 1946), pp. 75-76, 154, 152.