

*Carnivalization  
and  
Joseph Conrad's Fictional World*

狂欢化与康拉德的小说世界

宁一中 著

1.074

北京语言大学出版社



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# (京)新登字 157 号

## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

狂欢化与康拉德的小说世界/宁一中著.

—北京:北京语言大学出版社, 2005

ISBN 7-5619-1407-5

I. 狂…

II. 宁…

III. 长篇小说—文学研究—英国—近代

IV. I561.074

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2005)第 018729 号



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书 名: 狂欢化与康拉德的小说世界

责任印制: 乔学军

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出版发行: **北京语言大学出版社**

社 址: 北京市海淀区学院路 15 号 邮政编码 100083

网 址: <http://www.blcup.com>

电 话: 发行部 82303648/3591/3651

编辑部 82303393

读者服务部 82303653/3908

印 刷: 北京北林印刷厂

经 销: 全国新华书店

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版 次: 2005 年 5 月第 1 版 2005 年 5 月第 1 次印刷

开 本: 850 毫米 × 1168 毫米 1/32 印张: 5.625

字 数: 146 千字 印数: 1-2000 册

书 号: ISBN 7-5619-1407-5/G·05018

定 价: 22.00 元

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凡有印装质量问题本社负责调换, 电话: 82303590

狂 欢 化 与 康 拉

## FOREWORD

This is the revised edition of the book, which was originally published by Hunan Normal University Press. In the present edition, I have corrected some oversights, made some improvements, and added the appendix, which I think is necessary to the study of Conrad. Since its publication, I have received encouragements and suggestions for revision; quite a number of students have used it as a reference for their theses writing. I am always aware that it is far from perfect, and it needs further improvements. I wish that this book could be of help to those who are interested in Joseph Conrad; meanwhile I sincerely hope that readers of this book would make comments so that I could make it better.

Ning Yizhong

Autumn, 2004

Beijing Language and Culture University

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the process of writing this book, I received help of various kinds from many people. I would like to express my gratitude to my doctoral supervisor Professor Shen Dan of Peking University, my postdoctoral supervisor, UCI distinguished Professor J. Hillis Miller, for their expert suggestions and criticism. I am grateful to Professor Bernard-Donals of Columbia University, who several times sent very useful materials by Bakhtin and on Bakhtin; to Professor Jiang Jiansong, who, when at Cambridge University, sent me materials on recent Conradian studies. I am especially thankful to Professors Zhang Zhongzai, Zhou Xiaoyi, Liu Yiqing, Li Shuyan, Shen Hong, Han Jiaming, for their helpful thoughts and criticisms.

Hunan Normal University granted me a special fund; Professors Jiang Jiansong, Li Songbai, Jiang Hongxin, and Mr. Huang Lin of the university press did much for the publication of this book. For their kindness, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks.

Finally, I thank my parents, my wife, and my son for their love and support.

Ning Yizhong

Spring, 1999

Hunan Normal University

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# INTRODUCTION

Richard Curle claims in 1914 that "There can be little doubt that Conrad's fame as a novelist rests chiefly upon *Lord Jim*".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, ever since its publication, Conrad's *Lord Jim* has received constant attention from the critical world. While piles upon piles of theses and works are produced to voice different understandings about its linguistic, stylistic and structural features, a more ringing scene presents itself pertaining to the various interpretations of the nature and the main themes of the work. The questions generally asked are: Is it an autobiography (or self-confession in the disguise of a novel), a romance (or adventure story), a tragedy, or even a comedy? What is the major moral implication? Is it honour, isolation, betrayal, bravery (or cowardice)? What are the relations between the author, narrators, and characters? Answers and the approaches to inquiry are multitudinous and expectantly different.

Gustav Morf is among the first critics to apply the psychoanalytic approach to the study of *Lord Jim*. In *The Polish Heritage of Joseph Conrad*, he claims that *Lord Jim* is a "psychoanalytical novel written before psychoanalysis was founded."<sup>2</sup> Believing that *Lord Jim* is essentially a confession expressing Conrad's own feelings at

leaving Poland, he takes the Conrad/Jim identification as far as possible. In his reading, Jim's story up to his jump is modelled on that leading to Conrad's naturalization as a British subject; "Lord Jim" is "Pan Jozef," as Conrad was called by the servants back in his childhood. The sinking ship is itself Poland; Conrad's uncle urged Conrad to leave Poland for seven years before he finally did so, and this for Morf is behind Jim's reluctance to jump from the Patna.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Jim and Marlow's exculpation of Jim's jump is Conrad's defense of himself against the charges of his deserting Poland. Bernard C. Meyer goes even farther in his psychoanalytical interpretation of the Conrad/Jim relation. In his *Joseph Conrad: A Psychoanalytic Biography*, he claims that Jim's sense of guilt at his jump from the Patna is the expression of Conrad's own guilt at leaving Poland that the desertion of a shipful of pilgrims represents the abandonment of his people; that Jim's surrendering his life to Doramin is the result of Conrad's believing that he is responsible for the death of his mother, thus the novel-writing is in fact a compensatory act. Meyer holds that Jim acts out Conrad's guilt about his mother: the immersion in the sea signifies a nostalgic wish to return to the womb.<sup>4</sup> Such Freudian criticism has its limits as well as merits. The Freudian model, which works on subconsciousness, draws on the dream images interpreted by the patients in the waking state. Thus it is the patients' interpretation of the dreams, not the dreams themselves, that shape the dream images into words. The "subconsciousness" is therefore rightfully doubtful. As far as the connection of the author and his creation of the work are concerned, it is not the subconscious material that goes directly to the formation of the work. The creation undergoes the interplay between the subconscious material and the interpretation of that material in a given rhetorical shape and in a given socio-historical context. The personal experience may be traceable in the work but it is already in an aesthetical form and in a fictional world. The "primordial" material, if recognizable at all, is between familiarity and estrangement. Therefore finding out the traces is possible but absolute identification might be far-reached and even absurd.

Unlike the critics who take a psychoanalytic approach to *Lord Jim*, David Thornburn labels Conrad as an adventure story writer like Robert Stevenson, and he sees the pattern of the traditional adventure bildungsroman characteristic of Stevenson reappear in *Lord Jim*, only in a more complex form: in the former, it is “a mature but humble figure helping a younger man towards maturity, but in the latter, it is an older man who discovers in a younger one the standard of himself.”<sup>5</sup>

Ian Watt finds similarities between Conrad and Wordsworth. He contends that Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* is modelled on Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.<sup>6</sup> Carl Nelson, on the other hand, suggests that the diction and imagery of “The Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan” are present in the early chapters of *Lord Jim*, basing his argument on a comparison both in imagery (heat, scorching sunlight, phantoms, life-in-death, false calm) and in dramatic organization: Marlow is like the ancient mariner telling his tale to the after-dinner audience, while Jim labours under his guilt the cause of which is at first sight obvious (in that he did jump from *The Patna*) but which is in due course shown to be unknowable.<sup>7</sup> However, this view meets with objection from Douglas Hewitt who thinks that when Conrad’s true significance is appreciated, he would no longer be seen as a writer of sea-story and a Romantic spinner of yarns about exotic places.<sup>8</sup> This view is shared by Crankshaw who holds that Conrad is not to be seen as “anything so confined as a writer of exotic romance, and that he is in the front rank in the history of the English novel. Crankshaw emphasizes the study of the “spiritual aspect” of Conrad’s work, the way in which the manifestations of the human spirit are explored in depth.”<sup>9</sup>

Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan sees *Lord Jim* as something in between the heroic-epic mode and modernity. It is the tension between the epic outlook and the modern one, he argues, that brews the dialogic quality in the novel under discussion, as well as in *Nostromo* and *The*

*Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. The heroic-epic ingredients, he writes, are the insulation of the characters in the exotic settings away from modern Western civilization; the political and military rivalries which trigger the action and endow the narrative with an epic scope; the superhuman, semi-divine stature of the protagonists, their heroic feats, and the dependence of a whole community on their performance of their respective roles as leaders, all of which can be seen as "generic markers" investing the protagonists with the aura of epic heroes. But Jim, Nostromo, and Lingard are fallen heroes. After being presented at various points in their respective stories as legendary leaders of communities, as saviour figures, they fail to live up to their heroic stature. By placing their private ethical choices over and above those which are required of them by their respective social roles, they bring about the disintegration of their communities and the collapse of the epic-hero narrative mode which has sustained them.<sup>10</sup> While acknowledging the epic side, Erdinast-Vulcan detects the other side — the novel side of these novels, because the protagonists are not completely epic heroes:

The epic hero is 'a fully finished and completed being ... hopelessly ready-made. He is all there, from beginning to end he coincides with himself, he is absolutely equal to himself. He is furthermore completely externalized, there is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and his external manifestation.' The protagonist of the novel is 'either greater than his fate, or less than his condition as a man' as 'one of the basic internal themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the hero's inadequacy to his fate or situation'.<sup>11</sup>

Thus he concludes that *Lord Jim* and the other two novels are eventually pulled down from the level of epic to that of the novel. And what we have in the work is a process of "novelization." In the specific case of *Lord Jim*, the two parts of the Patna and Patusan, he argues, undergo "a shift from an epic mode to a modern one."

After citing arguments of critics of both the “first generation,” including eminent scholars like Thomas Moser and A. J. Guerrard, who largely avoid the ethical problematics of the novel, and posit a stable ethical code by which Jim’s story is to be judged, and the “second generation,” including T. Tanner, C. B. Cox, J. Hillis Miller, who regard the novel as a distinctly modernist expression, whose moral judgment is well-nigh impossible, and whose ‘meaning’ is thus construed as the “Absence of Meaning,” the invalidation of all metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical certainties. Erdinast-Vulcan holds that “while the novel is undoubtedly foregrounded against the spiritual and ethical malaise of modernity, it is not merely a reflection of the modern temper but an active if desperate, attempt to defeat it by a regression, to a mythical mode of discourse. This regression, effected by the transition to Patusan, is at the core of the structural rift in the novel.”<sup>12</sup> There are insights in Erdinast-Vulcan’s arguments, but we can hardly agree with him when he divides the novel into two absolutely separate parts, with each in a distinct genre, treating the protagonist Jim as two different heroes. We can not agree on the point that the novel is of “a mythical mode.” Nor can we accept the modernist voice that the meaning of the novel is construed as the “Absence of Meaning.” But this is not the place yet for us to elaborate on these problems. We will deal with them in due course.

There is another branch of modernist reading represented by Tracy Seeley who also suggests two sides of *Lord Jim*: “The novel’s disrupted chronology, subjective narrators, and thematic indeterminacy place *Lord Jim* securely among the modernists,” while the protagonist Jim well meets popular expectations of an exemplary hero in romance, who, after heroic difficulty, reaps enviable and predictable rewards: fame, glory, retribution, wealth or power.<sup>13</sup> But the author suggests a combination of the two sides in the concept of “romance”.

“A Romance” describes the whole of *Lord Jim*, and not simply its tale of hapless adventurer far from home, an unself-conscious

romantic who wanders into that most exotic local, a modernist novel. The link between Conrad's romance and modernism is suggested by his observation that it is both high tragedy and inestimable privilege for mankind to aspire to the impossible.

But romance in the medieval sense contains aspirations for the ideal: quest for the Grail, heroism, the perfect lover, the ideal society, the search for happy endings, and the endings are usually happy ones though after many difficulties are overcome. But *Lord Jim* can not be said to have such an ending. With the death of Jim, there appears to exist a kind of tragic atmosphere. This may account for the seemingly natural interpretation of *Lord Jim* as a tragedy.

Douglas Hewitt, in his *Conrad: A Reassessment*, holds that Conrad's novels are tragedies. And he further argues that *Lord Jim* is a tragedy with the central figure Jim cast in heroic mould and isolated from the exterior world.<sup>14</sup> Somewhat similarly, Morf in his 1930 book takes it for granted that the novel is a tragedy, like *Hamlet* as well as a novel of confession.<sup>15</sup> In her essay on *Lord Jim* in *The English Novel: Form and Function*, Dorothy Van Ghent takes up the suggestion that the novel is a "tragedy" and gives a responsive discussion. For her, Conrad's treatment of Jim's problem is "classical" tragedy, comparable to Sophocles' treatment of Oedipus. Oedipus, like Jim, "fled in the opposite direction from his destiny and ran straight into it."<sup>16</sup> Derwent May also maintains that *Lord Jim* stands at the centre of an English tradition of novels which are both moral and tragic and that Jim's effect on the reader is like that of Hamlet on Shakespeare's audience: we "share the compelling need of Jim to act as he does."<sup>17</sup>

While the above views focus on the nature of *Lord Jim*, we have noticed that the discussion of the main themes of the novel constitutes another hot point in the bulk of criticism. There are quite a few who hold that the novel is mainly about "friendship."

Ian Watt, for instance, sees the Jim/Marlow relationship as the core of the novel's achievement and a major reason for its huge reputation.<sup>18</sup> Batchelor comments that the word "friendship" covers a very wide variety of relationships, and in the light of such a concept of friendship, he likens the Marlow/Jim relationship to that of Tennyson and Hallam. Relevantly, he refers to the last ten chapters of *Lord Jim* as Marlow's elegy for his now dead friend, as Tennyson does for Hallam. But Batchelor does not stop at this point. He borrows Tennyson's words in his "In Memoriam" to make the point that as Tennyson's lamentation is for "the whole human race" rather than his personal grief, Marlow's personal relationship, and his personal loss of a good friend, could also be seen as the basis of a literary text that addresses itself to the whole condition of man in the modern world. He further extends the point to the effect that friendship and other large and inescapable features of the human conditions and relevant themes — loneliness, cowardice, honour, courage, dignity, betrayal are also considered in the novel. He thus concludes that *Lord Jim* may be taken as Conrad's artistic way to seek to "communicate universal truths."<sup>19</sup>

There are also critics who, focusing on the relationships between characters, hold that *Lord Jim* is about "Marlow's heroic but in the end, vain attempt to apprehend and express Jim's inner identity and his moral crisis."<sup>20</sup> Martin Price thinks that *Lord Jim* is a work of profound mediation on the romantic hero—"to Jim falls the burden of action and to Marlow that of reflection."<sup>21</sup> To Joseph Beach, "Marlow's varying observations of Jim are like convergent rays of light," focusing rigorously upon the "one point which he wishes to make visible to our imagination."<sup>22</sup> Moser does not confine "the rays of light" to Marlow alone, he sees that many other "lights" are shed on Jim too, thus *Lord Jim* is regarded as the "most mature expression of the theme of the human community."<sup>23</sup>

Richard Curle, however, thinks that the great achievement of *Lord Jim* is its moral clarity: it "raises a fierce moral issue in a very definite

form and carries it through on a high level of creative intensity." In his view, the question the novel asks is a simple one: what is bravery? And it carries as corollary the question: what is cowardice?<sup>24</sup> Thomas Moser sees another theme: that of betrayal, and he regards Jim as the most interesting of the "simple betrayers" (as against the complex betrayers like Decoud): his sin is the most serious and his fall the most poignant because he "ought to have been a true hero."<sup>25</sup>

Significantly, critics like the sharp-eyed but somewhat exhaustive Ian Watt and others have noticed and paid attention to Conrad's "infinality" or "openness." Basing his argument on a comparison between Conrad and James, Watt holds that both of these two writers are aware of the fact that the way a novel ends reflects a general view of life. So both of them "broke with the traditional closed form of ending which attempted a complete resolution of the main problems of the novel's plot and characters."<sup>26</sup> Watt's view finds an echo in Conrad's own praise of Henry James for the openness of his novel:

one is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James's novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final. Mr. Henry James, great artist and faithful historian, never attempts the impossible.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, for James, "universally, relations stop nowhere,"<sup>28</sup> so the artist has no right to give a final ending to the fictional life. But in their artistic expression of the infinality, "Conrad took the incompleteness of the fictional action and the indeterminacy of its moral implication much further."<sup>29</sup> John Batchelor has the same opinion when he says:

...[T]his sense that life goes on, that things are satisfyingly



incomplete and that experience can never be fully “known” and controlled by the consciousness is far more characteristic of Conrad’s own fictions than it is of James’s ... Conrad’s permit the messiness and contingency of real experience to remain unresolved, disordered, and they permit the struggle to know to be itself inherently interesting.<sup>30</sup>

He continues:

The method of *Lord Jim*, in particular, can be characterised as one of ceaseless relativity: the transactions between reader and text, between the anonymous omniscient narrator and Marlow, and between Marlow and Jim, are never still.<sup>31</sup>

That is to say, there is no completeness, no final judgment, no conclusive, dominant, authoritative voice, there is decentralization rather than centralization, relativity rather than absoluteness — these form the trade mark of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*.

To sum up, *Lord Jim* has been interpreted as, among other understandings, an autobiographical confession, adventure story, romantic tale with Quixotic humour, tragedy, and so on; and its main theme is taken to be either friendship, human interactions, honour, or betrayal, among other things; there are also interpretations which see in the novel an absence of meaning, or an indeterminacy of a final moral judgment.

All fit. Each interpretation sheds its light on the novel from a different angle and highlights one aspect. We can not expect to see a rich novel exhausted and leaving no room for further and new understandings. To borrow Shakespeare’s idea in the last two lines of sonnet 18 with some changes, we may say that so long as there are human beings and eyes to see, so long this novel lives, and it will give rise to new readings. Soon after the appearance of *Lord Jim*, Batchelor made the following observation: