

Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the fragment:
narrative, genre, history

de Jakob Lothe

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Lord Jim de Joseph Conrad

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Conrad's *Lord Jim* and the fragment: narrative, genre, history

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The late 1890s mark a turning-point in Joseph Conrad's literary career.

On 3 June 1898 Conrad completed the short story "Youth", and as Zdzisław Najder informs us in his indispensable biography, the beginning of *Lord Jim* was almost certainly written before that tale¹. Although he was at work on *Lord Jim*, in December 1898 Conrad also began writing the novella *Heart of Darkness*. Why did he interrupt his work on *Lord Jim*? One reason could be the problems of narrative presentation he encountered as he was writing a text that eventually turned out to be much longer, and far more complex, than at first anticipated. A further reason why Conrad turned from the former text to the latter could be that he discovered, or perhaps rather intuitively felt, that it had become possible for him to revisit, to confront anew his experiences in the Congo eight years earlier in order to give them fictional shape. Perhaps Conrad also sensed, though it may appear somewhat speculative to suggest this, that the employment of Marlow as a narrator and main character in *Heart of Darkness* might prove useful with a view to composition of *Lord Jim* as well.

Marlow's presence looms large in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* – as a key narrative device and also as an essential thematic component. The introduction of Marlow proved highly successful; indeed Marlow's narrative and thematic importance in these two texts

1. Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 248. Textual references are to the Norton Critical edition of *Lord Jim*, 2nd edn., ed. Thomas S. Moser, New York, Norton, 1996.

can hardly be exaggerated. As far as *Lord Jim* is concerned, the idea and introduction of Marlow clearly helped Conrad to complete a novel he found much more difficult to write than *Heart of Darkness*. Yet Marlow's diverse functions in *Lord Jim* are instrumental in changing the text from the initial "sketch" to "tale" – and finally to a multi-layered, frustratingly difficult yet endlessly fascinating modernist novel. This essay proposes to discuss some of the ways in which the complexity of *Lord Jim* is related to, and in part derives from, Conrad's incorporation of other genres into the genre of the novel. A premiss for my argument is that it is in large part Marlow who makes this kind of generic incorporation possible. Two of the most important of these genres are the epic sub-genres of the sketch and the fragment, a third one is that of tragedy, and a fourth one that of romance. In order to delimit and structure this discussion I will focus on the fragment; and I will relate my observations on genre to one of the most intriguing episodes of *Lord Jim*: Marlow's conversation with the French lieutenant. But first I need to link the concept of genre to that of (literary) history, and I propose to do so via the genre of drama.

According to Peter Szondi, a crisis in European drama occurs around 1880. The reason for this crisis is essentially generic: drama is no longer absolute and primary (unfolding as a linear sequence in the present), but relies for its effects on narrative elements incorporated into the dramatic structure. Thus, in a play such as Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881), "the past is not, as in Sophocles' *Œdipus*, a function of the present¹". Szondi's notion of crisis in the genre of drama implicitly accentuates the link between different forms of generic interplay and the ways in which the features or sub-genres of one particular genre can be combined to produce a variety of structural and thematic effects. In the genre of drama, Ibsen's dramaturgic use of the past is partly motivated by his understanding of tragedy as a Norwegian playwright writing in the later part of the nineteenth century. In an essay on Thomas Hardy², I have noted that in the genre of the novel, Hardy's extensive use of classical tragedy cannot be separated from the ways in which he attempted to achieve tragic effects through narrative technique and through the form of the novel. If Ibsen's rejuvenation of dramatic form necessitates his incorporation of narrative elements, Hardy's – and Conrad's – achievements as novelists are also closely related to, though not solely dependent on, experiments in genre.

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1. Peter Szondi, *Theory of Modern Drama*, ed. and trans. Michael Hays, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 16. Originally published as *Theorie des modernen Dramas*: 1880-1950, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1956.
 2. Jakob Lothe, "Variants on Genre," in Dale Kramer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 112.

To make this point is not to minimize the differences between Ibsen, Hardy, and Conrad. But it is interesting to note how, at the same time in the history of European literature, three major authors exploit features of other genres as they experiment with their own genre. Although Hardy and Conrad are very different writers, in both authors generic variations are incorporated into complex processes of structuring and thematic formation. A similar point could be made about Henry James. Although James failed as a dramatist, the experience allowed him to introduce new elements into his fiction.

We tend to think of genre as a means of sub-dividing and ordering different forms of literature. Yet although the definition of a given genre is often typological (i.e., presenting itself as being generally valid), genre definitions are not wholly stable but are subject to change over time. For they are influenced by, and give various forms of artistic response to, historical and cultural alterations. Mikhail M. Bakhtin's classic essay "Epic and Novel" remains one of the best accounts of this problem¹. Comparing and contrasting the novel with the epic – which, for Bakhtin, is characterized by national tradition and an absolute epic distance – Bakhtin puts emphasis upon the novel's dynamism, flexibility, and formal and thematic range. This characteristic elasticity and generic versatility, which contribute to and yet complicate definitions of the novel, derive in part from its tendency to exploit and incorporate elements of other genres into its own. Bakhtin's main example is Fyodor Dostoevsky, but his point is just as persuasive if applied to *Lord Jim*.

Although Bakhtin's notions about the novel are highly original, there is a striking affinity between some of his main points and those made by writers associated with German Romanticism, notably Johann Gottfried Herder and Friedrich Schlegel. For Herder, no genre is more inclusive than the novel because it can, and indeed tends to, incorporate "everything that in one way or another is of interest to the human mind and heart." The novel, Herder goes on to argue, "is poetry in prose"². For Friedrich Schlegel too, the art of the novel is closely related to that of poetry. For Schlegel as for Herder, the novel is a flexible and inclusive genre: a dynamic and expanding literary form capable of incorporating other genres.

I refer to Herder and Schlegel partly because I find it useful to historicize and contextualize Bakhtin's notions about the novel. Yet my main point is to emphasize the affinity, the productive interrelationship, between the genres of fragment and novel as

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1. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 3-40.
 2. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin, 1877-1913), vol. 18, p. 110, my translation.

observable in the writings of the German romantics. Although in their literary practice the German romantics tended to prefer the fragment to the novel (if they did not write poetry), their insights into the novel as a genre are thought-provoking – and potentially interesting for a critic of *Lord Jim*.

Before turning to Conrad's text we can differentiate between three possible meanings of the word "fragment." Gero von Wilpert in his *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur* distinguishes between a *historical* fragment (a literary or non-fictional work which was presumably complete, but of which parts have been lost, e.g., Aristotle's *Poetics*), an *incomplete* fragment (a text left unfinished by the author), and an *intended* fragment (in which the genre of the fragment is deliberately chosen by the author, e.g., Schlegel's *Kritische Fragmente*¹). Of these three main variants, the intended fragment would appear to be more closely related to the genre of the novel than the former two. Borderlines are blurred here, however: is Franz Kafka's *The Trial* an incomplete or intended fragment? As we know, Kafka was unable to finish and publish his novel; and, as the German critical edition of *Der Prozess* makes clear, it has not just one but several endings. Thus, in one sense it is a fragment rather than a novel, yet it would seem impossible to decide whether the book was *intended* as a fragment by Kafka or not. Still, if we apply Seymour Chatman's helpful notion of "textual intention" to this text (thus drawing attention to what Umberto Eco has called "the rights of the text" rather than those of its author²), I would suggest that *The Trial* would have been less original, and probably also less influential, had it been possessed of a conventional and more unproblematic ending. Paradoxically and characteristically, *The Trial's* fragmentary narrative structure makes it a more effective and powerful novel.

The fragment's affiliation with the novel, then, contributes to its peculiarly unstable generic status. This kind of generic instability is also observable in the quotation from Novalis that Conrad chose as the epigraph to *Lord Jim*: "It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely, the moment another soul will believe in it" (1). A possible first comment on this epigraph is that, if considered as a speech act within the framework of Conrad's novel, it is not wholly clear who the speaker is. Since the epigraph is from fragment 153 of Novalis's *Brouillon*, in one obvious sense the speaker is Novalis, the German Romantic poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772-1801). Yet since an epigraph

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1. Gero von Wilpert, *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*, 7th edn., Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, p. 306.
 2. Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 104. Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p. 7.

immediately raises the issue of its relevance or function, the reader is induced to relate the epigraph to the agents involved in the production and the narrative presentation of the text we are reading. There is a sense in which the curiously independent, uncontextualized position of the epigraph – after the subtitle “A Tale” but before the dedication “To Mr and Mrs G. F. W. Hope” – confirms its status as a fragment. As the statement is part of a fictional text, it does not unproblematically represent Conrad. It does, though, indicate that Conrad knew Novalis's work (and on a second reading it suggests an interesting connection with Stein's description of Jim as “romantic – romantic” [131] later on in the narrative). The epigraph does not seem to be spoken by the third-person narrator either, as it precedes his introductory description of Jim. Two further possibilities are that the epigraph is uttered by Marlow or by Jim. This suggestion may appear less than convincing; yet it could be argued that whereas the statement made in the epigraph would appear to go against the grain of the third-person narrator's authoritative evaluation of Jim, it is interestingly related to Jim's wish to be believed (first by the Court of Inquiry and then by Marlow) and to Marlow's wish to exonerate him.

My essential aim here, however, is not to speculate about the possible identity of the speaker (as an alternative to or in addition to that of Novalis) but to underline how structurally formative and thematically productive the epigraph is. The epigraph's interpretative suggestiveness would have been significantly reduced had it been unambiguously linked to, or anchored in, an identifiable textual passage uttered by Marlow, Jim, or Stein. In extremely condensed form, the epigraph illustrates one of Bakhtin's main points about the novel as a genre: that it speaks with several voices, and that no single voice is possessed of absolute authority.

Considered as a fragment, Conrad's quotation from Novalis is an intertextual instalment that is generically related to other forms of narrative such as aphorism and monologue. From a narrative perspective, the epigraph at first seems to be divorced from the mechanics of the novel's plot and narrative intricacies. And yet the epigraph is part of the narrative as it serves as a kind of comment on it¹; its meaning is greatly reduced if it is not related to the following story. In one sense, therefore, the epigraph is not just a prologue to the plot of *Lord Jim*, it is also a kind of epilogue because an adequate understanding of the epigraph presupposes a response to the novel as

1. Although “comment” can be understood as a form of presentation that is neither temporal nor spatial, it is also, like e.g. a descriptive pause, narrated. See Jakob Lothe, *Narrative in Fiction and Film*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 52.

fictional discourse – a multi-layered narrative produced by a series of narrators of whom Marlow is clearly the most important.

As the wealth of readings of *Lord Jim* demonstrate, any critic of this novel becomes another in a series of interpreters, regardless of which aspects of the text he or she chooses to focus on. Conrad's narrative method is at its most effective in this novel. Throughout the text there is a remarkably productive interplay of experimental narrative form and thematic complexity. Marlow's expanding, repetitive narrative seems to be groping for a centre, a stable meaning or ground it never quite reaches. Jim remains “under a cloud” and so does the novel's thematic core or centre. In his fragment no. 242, Novalis comments on the centrifugal tendency of all matter. The human mind, Novalis goes on to argue, opposes this tendency: the way in which the human mind observes and makes sense of the world at once reflects and indicates a centripetal inclination, a search for stability or ground¹. If the centrifugal tendency of matter makes the world appear as a series of unrelated fragments, the human mind – and Marlow as one possible fictional personification of it – seeks to relate the fragments to each other, to explain, to create order out of a myriad of impressions. “Perhaps”, says Marlow,

unconsciously, I hoped I would find that something, some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse. I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible – for the laying of what is the most obstinate ghost of man's creation, of the uneasy doubt uprising like a mist, secret and gnawing like a worm, and more chilling than the certitude of death – the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct. (34-35)

As formulated in this key passage, both Marlow's narrative motivation and the thematics generated through it would appear to revolve around the word “doubt”. For J. Hillis Miller, Marlow's doubt of the sovereign power is the most explicit formulation of the “theme” of *Lord Jim*². This view has much to recommend it. Yet it cannot easily be reconciled with Miller's warning, both in his interpretation of *Lord Jim* and elsewhere, against generalizing so strongly on the basis of

1. “Alle Dinge haben eine Centrifugaltendenz – Centripetal werden sie durch den Geist – dort wirkt der Geist gegen jene natürliche *Neigung der Organe* und zwingt sie sich zu Einer Bildung zu vereinigen [...] um einen Punct her zu consolidieren – er bildet eine Welt aus Nichts – Er bildet erst das *Feste...*” *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975, vol. 2, p. 581.

2. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982, p. 26.

just one passage from a long and complex literary text. Although Miller may be right to note that “Marlow's aim (or Conrad's) seems clear: to find some explanation for Jim's action which will make it still possible to believe in the sovereign power¹”, the doubt which not only motivates Marlow's narrative but also underlies all of it modifies the aim by introducing a pervasive scepticism as to whether it can be reached. The aim of the novel as complex textual intention is not necessarily identical with that of Marlow.

In some ways Marlow's narrative project in *Lord Jim* is remarkably similar to that of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*: in both texts, narrative motivation as well as narrative frustration are augmented by the narrator's unconscious or semi-conscious impression that he is revealing a thematics which tends to absorb himself. If this feature of the narrative makes its implications more profound both for Marlow and for the reader, it also makes it more difficult to isolate Jim's narrative from Marlow's report of it. Jim's narrative is characterized by an intense personal involvement: it is a fervent attempt to explain what the court of inquiry did not allow him to. Yet Marlow's involvement is also strong: as Jim ends his narrative he is “overcome by a profound and hopeless fatigue” (81) which extends into Chapter 12 and colours the mixture of information and reflection preceding the proleptic episode constituted by his conversation with the French lieutenant.

“*Fort intrigués par ce cadavre,*” as I was informed a long time after by an elderly French lieutenant whom I came across one afternoon in Sydney, by the merest chance, in a sort of café, and who remembered the affair perfectly. Indeed this affair, I may notice in passing, had an extraordinary power of defying the shortness of memories and the length of time: it seemed to live, with a sort of uncanny vitality, in the minds of men, on the tips of their tongues. (84)

Marlow's narration of his meeting with the French lieutenant constitutes one of the most fascinating episodes of *Lord Jim*. The way in which his story is interposed between Marlow's commentary is peculiarly effective, and so is the insertion of French words – both as stylistic variation and in underlining the key notions of the lieutenant's account. His perspective throws new light on Jim. Actually, only the French lieutenant and the merchant Stein, whom Marlow meets with later on in the narrative, seem to understand Jim's behaviour. The lieutenant's understanding of Jim turns on the concept

1. Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, p. 28; cf. my *Conrad's Narrative Method*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 153.

of honour. “The honour,” he exclaims, “... that is real – that is!” (91). As Najder has shown, Marlow, whom the lieutenant is addressing, “perceives correctly the basic attributes of the ethics of honour: its inflexibility, anti-emotionalism and anti-pragmatism¹”. In conscience with this ethics of honour, the lieutenant has performed the extremely dangerous but, as he saw it, necessary task of staying aboard the *Patna* for thirty hours while she was being towed to harbour. In an obvious yet important sense, then, he seems to have passed his test – or rather, *this* test – while Jim failed his. Yet although the lieutenant and Jim are clearly presented as contrastive characters, and although one effect of this contrast is to emphasize the gravity of Jim's mistake, the lieutenant's ability to understand Jim's dilemma suggests that his attitudinal distance from Jim is not absolute.

There are several ways in which the French lieutenant episode calls the genre of fragment to mind. The meeting is entirely coincidental; the lieutenant's account is selective and incomplete; it ends abruptly; and there is a narrative ellipsis associated with it. More importantly, although the lieutenant's account is genuinely illuminating and his action approximates to the fixed standard of conduct Marlow has come to doubt, the lieutenant repeatedly emphasizes how strange and difficult the *Patna* case is. It is “*impossible de comprendre*” (85) ... “so that (*de sorte que*) there are many things in this incident of my life (*dans cet épisode de ma vie*) which have remained obscure” (87). Not only does the lieutenant relate an episode, a part of a larger whole. Additionally, the constituent aspects of the episode are hard to identify and difficult to comprehend.

It is a strong indication of the originality of *Lord Jim* that this narrative fragment becomes, as it is presented in the novel's discourse, a significant part of its textual intention. Yet the French lieutenant episode is not the only fragment-like segment in *Lord Jim*. As Marlow conducts several interviews in order to learn as much as possible about Jim, this episode becomes one in a repetitive chain of episodes – expanding the narrative into a novel and cumulatively improving, yet also complicating, Marlow's (and the reader's) understanding of Jim.

The positioning and order of these episodes, and informants, contribute significantly to their thematic effect². Marlow's meeting with the French lieutenant does, however, stand out as particularly important; and I give two more reasons why I think so. My first concluding point is that, considered as a variant on the epic sub-genre of the fragment, the French lieutenant episode provides an illustration

1. Zdzisław Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 89.

2. See Richard Ambrosini, *Conrad's Fiction as Critical Discourse*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 139.

of, and offers an oblique comment on, the transitional quality of *Lord Jim* as a narrative. In his classic essay "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin reflects on the transition in the European cultural tradition from oral to written narrative. For Benjamin, literature is not only one significant manifestation of that tradition but provides an illustrative example of the transition too. Whereas the teller of a story is in the company of his listeners, Benjamin observes, the writer of a novel is isolated, solitary:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience - his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life¹.

As a complexly wrought modernist novel, *Lord Jim* provides considerable textual evidence in support of Benjamin's notions about the genre. Yet although it would appear to be a novel written after the transition outlined by Benjamin, part of *Lord Jim's* narrative and thematic complexity derives from the way in which this multi-faceted cultural change is reflected in the movement of the discourse from repetitive, oral narrative (Marlow addressing his audience on the verandah) to written account (the letter to the privileged reader). The French lieutenant episode occupies an intermediate position in this process, as Marlow's narrative authority here seems to be questioned by a mere fragment, an incomplete story imparted by a minor character.

This observation blends into a second concluding point. The French lieutenant episode is remarkable for the manner in which it presents the thematics of *Lord Jim* in condensed form, yet without oversimplifying it. Considered as a fragment, the episode has, like poetry, a surplus of meaning; and the best example is provided by the key word "honour." For the lieutenant, honour seems to be a quality or an asset that is absolute, embodying a timeless tradition. And yet the concept of honour needs to be situated in time (the Renaissance onwards) and space (Poland, and Europe) in order to be adequately understood. The concept of honour is essentially a positive one in Conrad; it is related to the tropes of fidelity and work. At the same time, the French lieutenant is an officer – a representative of France, a

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, London, Fontana, 1979, p. 87.

European empire. Thus there may be a link, albeit not a very strong one, between the concept of honour and the “idea” which Marlow, in *Heart of Darkness*, presents as a redeeming feature of the ideology of empire.

Better than most novels, *Lord Jim* demonstrates how intertwined are the temporal and spatial aspects of narrative. Better than most novels, *Lord Jim* illustrates how inseparable “A Tale” (the novel's subtitle) is from the telling of that tale.