

# Don Quixote rides again: Illusion and delusion in Conrad's *Lord Jim: A Tale*

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“You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote. That’s what you are.” (Conrad, 1946b, 44) Fifteen-year-old Konrad Korzeniowski (Joseph Conrad) heard these admonitory words from the lips of his tutor, a Krakowian college student instructed by his maternal uncle (Tadeusz Bobrowski) to convince his nephew to give up his wish to be a seaman. The link between young Conrad’s desire to become a sailor and the renowned knight of La Mancha is not a casual one. In his writings, Conrad generalises the particular case of his vocation for the sea by focusing on romances of adventure as the main cause prompting young men to join the maritime profession. Thus, for instance, in the autobiographical work in which the words of his dear tutor are quoted (*A Personal Record*), Conrad refers to Victor Hugo’s *Toilers of the Sea* as his “first introduction to the sea in literature.” (1946b, 72) In “Tales of the Sea” (1898) – an earlier piece written when he was already engaged in the composition of *Lord Jim: A Tale* – Conrad speaks of how Frederick Marryat and James Fenimore Cooper, the creators of sea fiction, “influenced so many lives and gave to so many the initial impulse towards a glorious or a useful career”. (1949, 56) Later essays like “Well Done” (1918) or “Geography and Some Explorers” (1924) highlight the role played by romances and books of exploration in triggering young men’s desire for a life of adventure at sea, Conrad’s included. In the latter he calls Núñez de Balboa, Tasman, Torres, Cook or Franklin “the first grown-up friends of my early boyhood”, their nautical feats having been an inspiration for him. (Conrad, 1955, 10) In “Well Done,” the imaginative nature of the force impelling young boys to follow the sea is clearly underlined: “Chance or desire (*mostly desire*) had set them apart, often in their very childhood, and what is to be remarked is that from the very nature of things this early appeal, this early desire, had to be of an imaginative kind.” (Conrad, 1949, 184, emphasis mine)

Conrad uses quite systematically the word “illusion” to refer to the frame of mind in which the youngster leaves home for the sea. This state of purely narcissistic exultation derives from an identification with a hero in an adventure book.<sup>1</sup> The prototypical youngster in Conrad’s works assumes the image

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of “identification” is used everywhere in psychoanalytical theory to refer to the process at work in the formation of the “ego”. Suffice it to recall the way Jacques Lacan defines the mirror stage in his famous essay: “We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification* [...]: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image”. (1977, 2) For a technical definition of “identification” See Laplanche and Pontalis. (1985, 205-208)

of the indestructible hero of adventure books and expects to continue to be one in the real context of the maritime profession in which the adventurous circumstances he had read about are to be reproduced. This is the realm of “fantasy-making” to use Freud’s term in his essay on the two principles of mental functioning. (1957, 42) In it, the reality principle is suspended and the mind works by following the pleasure principle alone. Mediating restrictions – all the components of the reality principle, from physical limitations to the rules imposed by society – are not operative, so much so that the actual self and the ideal (omnipotent, perfect, heroic) become one.

In *Lord Jim: A Tale* (1900), the title-hero’s maritime vocation and his early days on board ships bear the characteristic marks of Conradian illusion.<sup>2</sup> The third person narrator (who speaks in the initial chapters of the novel and introduces the narrative of the hero’s last days much later in the text) gives the following account of how Jim, living in his father’s remote parsonage, declared his intention to follow the sea:

when after a course of light holiday literature his vocation for the sea declared itself, he was sent at once to the ‘training-ship for officers of the mercantile marine.’ [...] He could see the 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.

On the lower deck in the babel of two hundred voices he would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind the sea-life of light literature. He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line; or as a lonely castaway, barefooted and half naked, walking on uncovered reefs in search of shell-fish to stave off starvation. He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men – always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book. (Conrad, 1946c, 5-6)

However, the model of formation of the seaman derived from Conrad’s texts establishes a second stage (“initiation”) in which the overlapping of reality with the fantasies of illusion is to be surmounted and (if anything) confined to the private realm of daydreaming and/or evocation where it is kept from interfering with professional obligations and the rest of real-life restrictions. In a section of *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) titled “Initiation” Conrad gives an account of the major turning-point in his sea career. He was working as third mate on board a ship when they came across a Danish brig about to sink in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Conrad was appointed commanding officer of one of the two boats sent in rescue of the nine Danish sailors and recalls his reaction on seeing the state of exhaustion and helplessness of these brave men:

The cynical indifference of the sea to the merits of human suffering and courage, laid bare in this ridiculous, panic-tainted performance extorted from the dire extremity of nine good and honourable seamen, revolted me. I saw the duplicity of the sea’s most tender mood. [...] I had looked coolly at the life of my choice. Its illusions were gone, but its fascination remained. I had become a seaman at last. (1946a, 141-42)

“Initiation” means, therefore, the acceptance of the mediation of the reality principle: that is, the discordance between the imaginative mind and the external world, the falsity of one’s own heroic indestructibility, the indifference of the sea to men’s efforts and fantasy projections, and the necessity to abide by the laws of the craft. The youngster must trade the immediate identification with the book hero for the identification with the model of seaman invested with the features of the law. Heroic grandeur disengaged

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<sup>2</sup> In connection with this see Bruss (1979), Mitchell (1986), Hampson (1992, 116-136), Cox (1973) and Watt (1980, 342-43).

from the real circumstances of the profession must be substituted by what Conrad calls in “Well Done” “seamen’s primitive virtues”: alertness, self-confidence, responsibility, endurance, courage, hardihood, self-possession and sobriety (to name just a few). (1949, 192) This is the passage from what Freud, in his monographic essay on narcissism, calls the “ideal ego” to the “ego-ideal”, a terminological distinction that Lacan establishes in a more systematic way in *Seminar I*. (Freud, 1952, 407; Lacan, 1988, 129-142) The youngster internalises the norm of the craft and finds compensatory satisfaction in the (for the most part, yet not completely) unadventurous, prosaic life at sea. Thus, he becomes what Conrad calls in the same section of *The Mirror of the Sea*, “a real seaman”: that is, a seaman of the reality principle.

But, as the third-person narrator at the beginning of Chapter 2 of the novel tells us, Jim found no compensation in sea life, “whose only reward is in the perfect love of the work.” (1946c, 10)<sup>3</sup> He remains attached to his identification with the literary ideal of his dreams, and when the opportunity to act heroically comes on board the steamer *Patna*, he fails and is looked upon as a criminal coward (he had joined his fellow officers in their defection from the steamer carrying eight hundred Muslim pilgrims and a native crew). To Jim’s disgrace, the ship is rescued and towed safely to an Eastern port by a French steamer. A court of inquiry is held to look into the case and Jim is the only officer giving evidence before the court.

On the quite night right before the local steamer *Patna* runs against an unidentified derelict in the Arabian Sea, Jim, on the bridge, is given over to his illusion of heroic adventure and divine omnipotence. “At such times,” the third-person narrator tells us, “his thoughts would be full of valorous deeds: he loved these dreams and the success of his imaginary achievements. They were the best parts of life, its secret *truth*, its hidden *reality*. [...] They carried his soul away with them and made it *drunk with the divine philtre* of an unbounded confidence in itself.” (Conrad, 1946c, 20. Emphases mine) Later on, Captain Charlie Marlow, telling the story of his anxiety-ridden involvement in Jim’s case to an audience of white men, sketches the process of formation of a normative subject of the craft in terms similar to those used by Conrad in the texts referred to above:

“There is such magnificent vagueness in the expectations that had driven each of us to sea, such a glorious indefiniteness, such a beautiful greed of adventures that are their own and only reward! [...] *In no other kind of life is the illusion more wide of reality* – in no other is the beginning *all* illusion – the disenchantment more swift – the subjection more complete.” (1946c, 129. First emphasis mine)

The problem with Jim – what defines and determines his predicament throughout the novel, including the period spent as a commercial agent in the remote outpost in Patusan in the Island of Borneo – is his incapability in keeping the realm of illusion separate from that of reality which belies his heroic grandeur and with which he should come to terms. (“Initiation” [“disenchantment” *plus* “subjection” in Marlow’s words above] never takes place in his case).

Jim’s illusion throughout the narrative is, indeed, characterised by its excess, by his unmovable and irrepressible tendency of forcing the scenario of his heroic omnipotence upon the reality of facts and norms, of keeping the reality principle off the boundaries of the pleasure principle. It is this propensity to subsume reality under the sphere of illusion in spite of their non-coincidence what

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<sup>3</sup> For Conrad, the ship’s routine must be worthy of a seaman’s love: “He who loves the sea also loves the ship’s routine.” (1946a, 7) On the other hand, sea-life is not completely unadventurous: adventure may come to seamen, but, of course, in it is not the product of pure voluntarism as Jim thinks. As Conrad states in *The Mirror of the Sea* (referring once more to Don Quixote): “No adventure ever came to one for the asking. He who starts on a deliberate quest of adventure goes forth but to gather dead-sea fruit, unless, indeed, he be beloved of the gods and great amongst heroes, like that most excellent cavalier Don Quixote de la Mancha. By us ordinary mortals of a mediocre animus that is only too anxious to pass by wicked giants for so many honest windmills, adventures are like visiting angels. They come upon our complacency unawares.” (Conrad, 1946a, 155-156)

makes Jim cross the dividing line (theoretically drawn by Freud and – more or less explicitly – by Conrad and Marlow) separating “illusion” from “delusion”. “Illusion,” Freud writes in *The Future of an Illusion*, is, like “delusion,” “derived from human wishes.” (Freud, 1989, 39) Yet, unlike delusion, which is by definition “in contradiction with reality” (as in Don Quixote’s case), illusion “sets no store by verification” as “its relations with reality” are to be disregarded. (Freud, 1961, 39-40) Bearing this in mind, we should interpret the third-person narrator’s words quoted above *literally*: for Jim, his “imaginary achievements” are the “hidden reality” of “life,” more real than reality itself. Likewise, we would do well not to miss the connotation of intoxicated omnipotence as characteristic of his mental state in the narrator’s phrase when he says that Jim’s “soul” was “*drunk with the divine philtre of an unbounded confidence in itself.*” (Conrad, 1946c, 20, emphases added) Indeed, Jim carries the logic of intoxicated omnipotence to its ultimate consequences when, failing to be up to his position of charismatic leader, he meets his death at the hands of the Patusani chief Doramin while uttering for the last time his famous refrain “Nothing can touch me.” (Conrad, 1946c, 413)<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, the connection between the workings of Jim’s mind/soul and the state of more or less immoderate drunkenness is a recurrent one in the novel. When Marlow (in his oral tale) advances Jim’s future success (which would end up in failure, of which Marlow gives a written account to the “privileged man”) he states: “‘Felicity, felicity – how shall I say it? – is quaffed out of a golden cup in every latitude [...] He was of the sort that would drink deep’”. (Conrad, 1946c, 175)<sup>5</sup> A bit later, Marlow speaks about his concern of how Jim “would go out” in Patusan and says: “‘He wouldn’t let me forget how imaginative he was, and your imaginative people swing farther in any direction [...] They do. They take to drink, too.’” (Conrad, 1946c, 224) Yet, the longest and most relevant instance of the connection between Jim’s excessive imagination and drink as examples of delusive intoxication is the one found in Chapter 5 of the novel, which marks the beginning of Marlow’s oral tale after four chapters of third-person narrative. Among Jim’s fellow officers of the *Patna*, the chief engineer is the one that receives the greater attention in the text. He is a drunkard whose demeanour the third-person narrator had previously compared to “the imbecile gravity of a thinker evolving a system of philosophy from the hazy glimpse of a truth”, just one instance of Conrad’s view of pure intellectual speculation as useless and, even, pernicious. (Conrad, 1946c, 24)<sup>6</sup> Before the court of inquiry was held, the chief-engineer had been drinking for three full days at the end of which he ran into the street panic-stricken by horrid hallucinations, was sent to hospital and taken care of by one of the resident surgeons there. Marlow went to the hospital to visit a friend and had a conversation with the chief-engineer in order to know more about the affair of the *Patna*. On hearing the name of the ship he had defected, the engineer is startled and states that, because he is the possessor of outstanding powers of eyesight, he could see the ship sinking “full of reptiles,” which were now the “[m]illions of pink toads” under his bed ready to attack him and which, at the end of the interview, do “trample” on him. (Conrad, 1946c, 51 and 54)<sup>7</sup> This hallucinating, delusive character is associated with the figure of a heroic cavalier akin

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<sup>4</sup> See Conrad (1946c, 23-24, 241, 246, 293 and 325) for other instances of this refrain-like phrase.

<sup>5</sup> Not knowing yet at this point the tragic outcome of the story, Marlow somehow tempers the connection between Jim’s mind and intoxication by saying immediately afterwards: “I found him, if not exactly intoxicated, then at least flushed with the elixir at his lips.” (Conrad, 1946c, 175)

<sup>6</sup> See also *A Personal Record* (1946a, 92); *Nostramo* (1947, 379); or Conrad’s letter to Edward Garnett of March 15, 1895 (1983, 205).

<sup>7</sup> The “[m]illions of pink toads” the chief-engineer says are under his bed are, of course, the hallucinated counterpart of the eight hundred pilgrims on board, and their attack on him stands for his fear that they would start a row once they became aware of the danger. For Ian Watt, the reason why Conrad is giving such a detailed account of this meeting is that he is using “symbolic deciphering,” a technique that is more demanding for the reader than the impressionistic “delayed decoding” used by Conrad in the famous passage of the sticks-that-happened-to-be-arrows in “Heart of Darkness.” Watt does not go any further in his examination of the implications of Marlow’s conversation with the engineer than simply stating that in the latter we find a pre-figuration of Jim’s fears “that the pilgrims on the *Patna* might panic if the alarm were raised.” (1980, 275)

to Don Quixote: “a long individual in a blue flannel coat, as dry as a chip and no stouter than a broomsitck, with dropping grey moustaches”; “a pretty notorious personality”; “[h]is lean bronzed head, with white moustaches, looked fine and calm on the pillow, like the head of a worn-out soldier with a childlike soul”; “his face [was that] of an old soldier, with its noble and calm outlines”; ending with the surgeon calling him “Noble-looking old boozier”. (Conrad, 1946c, 40, 46, 50, 53, 55) Alcohol makes him both an omniscient observer and a terrified, helpless being. The same applies to Jim, but instead of alcohol, his intoxicants are romances of adventure. (Notice how Jim’s reading material was introduced by a word that connotes ‘body ingestion,’ ‘food or drug intake’: “a *course* of light holiday literature” [Conrad, 1946c, 5. Emphasis mine]) Like the engineer, Jim also saw the *Patna* “going down, down, head first under me. ...”, as he tells Marlow. (Conrad, 1946c, 110) And, as Marlow is to witness in his interview with the youngster at the Marabar House, both Jim’s omnipotence and his sense of helplessness before imminent disaster find their source in his forestalling imagination, in his pre-empting power of (quoting Marlow) “foresight” induced by his reading. (Conrad, 1946c, 95).<sup>8</sup> So, while Marlow saw Jim “penetrating deeper into the impossible world of romantic achievements”, he did also become aware of how

[h]is confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic, the trampling rush, the pitiful screams, boats swamped [...] the sudden swing upwards of the dark skyline, the sudden tilt up of the vast plain of the sea, the swift rise, the brutal fling, the grasp of the abyss, the struggle without hope, the starlight closing over his head for ever like the vault of a tomb – the revolt of his young life – the black end. (Conrad, 1946c, 88 and 96)

Captain Marlow’s interest and involvement in Jim’s case derives from the mystifying anomaly that the youngster represents from the professional point of view as the latter’s behaviour subverts the traditional patterns of normative subjectivity that ruled the seamen’s practice. The keen interest of the resident surgeon in his alcoholic patient mirrors and prefigures Marlow’s disorientation in his professional concern for Jim’s case. This is the doctor’s diagnosis as told to Marlow:

“A curious case. D. T.’s of the worst kind. [...] The head, ah! The head, of course, gone, but the curious part is there’s some sort of method in his raving. I am trying to find out. Most unusual – that thread of *logic* in such a delirium. *Traditionally* he ought to see snakes, but he doesn’t. *Good old tradition’s* at a discount nowadays. Eh! His – er – visions are batrachian. Ha! Ha! No seriously, I never remember being so interested in a case of jim-jams before. He ought to be dead, don’t you know, after such a festive experiment.” (LJ 55. Emphases mine)<sup>9</sup>

The doctor is interested in the workings of his patient’s mind and tries to unravel the logic of his hallucinations, which do not fit the standard descriptions of traditional medical science that were part of his professional training. At the beginning of the following chapter of the novel – coming immediately after his brief encounter with the resident surgeon – Marlow states that all those who attended the inquiry and who were in any way related to sea (sailors and waterside businessmen) were driven there by an “interest” that “was purely psychological” (LJ 56). But, Marlow goes on saying, their expectations were frustrated by the way the judges conducted the examination, because the latter, constrained by the precepts of legal discourse, were simply interested in the objective facts (“the superficial how”) and not in the psychological reasons (“the fundamental why”) (LJ 56). Marlow’s criticism of the judges

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<sup>8</sup> See in particular see chapters 7-9 of the novel. (Conrad, 1946c, 77-111)

<sup>9</sup> Recent medical study on *delirium tremens*, states that snakes are the most frequent hallucinated animals along with cats and dogs. W. E. Platz, F. A. Oberlander and M. L. Seidel, “The Phenomenology of Perceptual Hallucinations in Alcohol-Induced *Delirium Tremens*,” *Psychopathology*, 28/5 (1995), 247-255.

chimes in both with the third-person narrator's ironic comment on the uselessness of facts in Chapter 4 and with the resident surgeon's interest in the workings of chief engineer's mind:

“the questions put to him [Jim] necessarily led him away from what to me, for instance, would have been the only truth worth knowing. You can't expect the constituted authorities to inquire into the state of a man's soul – or is it only of his liver?” (LJ 56-57)<sup>10</sup>

Like the surgeon, Marlow is interested in the psychological, mental side of the affair (in Jim's “soul”) and not only in the purely factual, measurable, organic part (“his liver”).<sup>11</sup> For the surgeon the chief engineer is the “[m]ost extraordinary man I ever met – *medically*, of course” (LJ 55. Emphasis mine). Like a researcher busy with a case-study, the doctor hopes to find some rational explanation for his anomalous hallucinations. Marlow's interest, however, goes beyond the doctor's scientific curiosity for the object of his professional concern, from which the latter maintains a clear distance (both scientific and ironic).<sup>12</sup> Jim's behaviour affects Marlow personally as a member of social group: it threatens to disrupt the whole set of values and patterns of conduct that seamen internalise and from which they obtain a sense of identity. While the doctor is “medically” concerned with “the logic in [... the chief engineer's] delirium,” Marlow is “unconsciously” and “ardently” involved in Jim's case and comes face to face with what he dubs “a sort of profound and terrifying logic” at work in the youngster's mind that would lead the latter to an eventual suicidal act in Patusan (LJ 55, 50, 51 and 342).

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<sup>10</sup> “They [the three judges] wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts for him [Jim], as if facts could explain anything!” (Conrad, 1946c, 29) This disavowal of the value of facts sounds rather odd in the lips a third-person narrator which, traditionally, was supposed to occupy the objective position of a view from nowhere specifically. It is important to add that such a statement is made in Chapter 4, at the end of which the third-person narrator gives the floor to Marlow, a first-person narrator subjectively involved in the story he is telling.

<sup>11</sup> Needless to comment on the connection between hepatic diseases and alcoholism.

<sup>12</sup> It may be argued however that the doctor's irony and laughter are a sign of nervousness and a symptom of the loss of his identity as derived from a scientific practice whose solidity is equally eroded by the engineer's atypical hallucinations.

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