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## PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN JOSEPH CONRAD'S LORD JIM

In the present paper I examine a certain part of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*: it is the jump which is structurally in the very centre of the novel. This action and its description, which is not longer than 20 pages, is the centre, the crucial point in the work. The actions preceding the jump and the jump itself can be explained by astrology, while the results of the jump are rather psychological.

When examining Jim's reasons for his abandoning the ship some powers beyond our understanding are inevitable. When we try to find scientific reasons for his 'escape' we must soon realize that all these attempts fail and from science and logic we must turn to mythology, superstition and astrology.

Theories explaining phenomena like the Genesis and the destruction of our Earth existed decades ago, too. And not only scientists and philosophers but artists developed their set of ideas as well. One possible answer to great changes in nature and in man was given by Yeats. He claimed that our history moves in 2000 years' cycles or 'gyres'. He called these astronomical units 'world months'. These units differ from each other, but they have common features as well. Each cycle prospers in the middle and decays towards the end. Each world month or 'aion' consists of great historical periods. These units are closed, the transition from one world month to another is accompanied by disasters and catastrophies.

Now, in the 20th century we can experience the transition from the Fishes to the Aquarius. Our cycle, the Fishes, that began with the birth of Christ, was dominated by Christianity. The chaos, anarchy and destruction that marks the transition from one cycle to another can best be represented by the violence and destruction of the First World War. We do not know anything about the coming gyre, only a couple of things are sure: with Aquarius, which is the next world month, a totally new life will begin, it will be followed by incidents that will change the whole world and the whole of humanity, it is going to be a kind of Apocalypse for men.

But these changes that happen at a macro-cosmic level in the life of humanity, do happen at a micro-cosmic level as well, i.e. in the life of the individual, because the individual cannot get rid of the influence of history and society.

In my essay I will examine these changes in the life of Joseph Conrad's character, Lord Jim.

The first picture we have of Jim is of a very simple but honest young man. As Conrad characterized him: 'He was spotlessly neat, apparelled in immaculate white from shoes to hat,<sup>1</sup>. The choice of words is not accidental here. Conrad uses the words 'spotlessly' and 'immaculate' very consciously.

The fact that Jim always wore white clothes is emphasized several times throughout the whole novel. This might symbolize his honesty, naivety and moral cleanness, but at the same time it is in contradiction with Jim's actions.

Jim originally came from a parsonage, which is very important, as he, a son of a parson had high moral principles to which he was always true. Then the question rises: why and how could a man with a stable personality, constructive will and high moral principles leave his ship and men to their destruction? What made him come to a decision that was so unlike him?

One possible answer can be found in the power of the crowd. Man, as an individual can think and decide consciously. But however educated or intelligent someone is, one's mind deteriorates and dissolves in the crowd, because the crowd is unconscious and in it uncontrollable instincts take over the power in man. As Béla Hamvas writes, "The group is feeling and acting as one soul."<sup>2</sup> While the individual's actions are conscious, clear and sensible, the unconscious actions of the crowd are confused, blind and dim. If human existence becomes dominated by the crowd it blurs and declines. And whenever the crowd takes the upper hand the result is always negative. The individual becomes part of the crowd, and if he fails to overcome becoming an annihilated part of the crowd, he becomes primitive, dominated by instincts. This is what happened to Jim, too. At the crucial point of the novel Jim is unable to decide. His individuality and consciousness disappear in the crowd. He relates it to Marlow in the following way:

'I could hear them knocking about, down there, and a voice as if crying up a shaft called out 'George'. Then three voices together raised a yell. They came to me separately: one belated, another screamed, one howled. Ough!<sup>3</sup>

And Jim cannot get rid of the influence of the crowd.

'I heard as if I had been on the top of a tower another wild screech, 'Geo-o-o-orge! Oh, jump!<sup>4</sup>

Although Jim loses control only for a couple of seconds, this will influence the rest of his life. Jim is Conrad's Hamlet, but while Shakespeare's figure is indecisive till he is convinced by his father's ghost, and then becomes active, Jim is indecisive only for one moment, and then becomes passive, waiting for his destiny. The only thing he actively takes part in is his own death, which can be understood as a queer way of committing

suicide. In spite of this dissimilarity Jim and Hamlet have common features. One of these in Jim's and Hamlet's character is that both are very destined to do something, but neither of them know what.

When Jim jumps he dives not only into the boat, but at the same time into a totally new life as well. Just like those who are baptized, Jim gets out of this situation with a new character and a new psyche. At an individualistic level this was his transition from one existence to another. The first part of his life was closed and a new period begins. This new period is not necessarily better, on the contrary, just remember the negative effect of the crowd.

Jim dives in a physical and in an abstract sense as well. His mind, the order and the light go down with his jump, instinct, disorder and darkness rule. Conrad describes Jim's feelings in the following way:

'He had landed partly on somebody and fallen across a thwart. He felt as though all his ribs on his left side must be broken; then he rolled over, and saw vaguely the ship he had deserted uprising above him, with the red side-light glowing large in the rain like a fire on the brow of a hill seen through a mist.' She seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat ... I wished I could die," he cried. "There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well - into an everlasting deep hole ..."<sup>5</sup>

This 'everlasting deep hole' which occurs later in the novel a couple of more times might remind us of the black holes existing in our Universe. These black holes are still unknown to us but it is imaginable that we can disappear through these holes, we can leave the Solar system and enter another. In a certain sense Jim leaves his earlier existence through this 'deep hole' and starts a new life.

Another factor that might have made Jim leave the Patna was beyond him as well. Jim had always been waiting for the great chance to show his heroism, to do something extraordinary. And he, just like the figures of folk tales, is given three opportunities. The first two come at an early age, when he is too young to handle them and misses both. The Patna accident is the third opportunity to rise above the mob, to do something heroic and memorable. But Jim is indecisive again. He tries to explain everything to Marlow and wants the sailor to understand the reason behind his actions.

"Do you suppose," he said, "that I was thinking of myself, with a hundred and sixty people at my back, all fast asleep in that fore-tween deck alone - and more of them aft; more on deck - sleeping -

knowing nothing about it - three times as many as there were boats for, even if there had been time? ... What could I do what?"<sup>6</sup>

At the time of the relating of the incident Jim still cannot believe that all this happened and that it happened to him. He is always dreaming, living in a world of fantasy, but by the time he relates the whole story, everything belongs to a lost past. As Stein and Marlow realised Jim was a romantic dreamer. And not only romantic but naive and uncorrupted as well which later led to his destruction. These features enable Jim to believe in the changeability of the unchangeable and to watch himself almost as an outsider. As Marlow relates it: "

"He was silent again with a still, far-away look of fierce yearning after that missed distinction, ..... sniffing the intoxicating breath of that wasted opportunity."<sup>7</sup>

"He was very far away from me who watched him across three feet of space. With every instant he was penetrating deeper into the impossible world of romantic achievements."<sup>8</sup>

Jim is paralyzed by the decision. He was sure that to save all the passengers was impossible and this way there was no responsibility on him. Jim protests against the thought of saving himself. The only thing that haunted his mind was the eight hundred pilgrims and seven boats. He did not want to leave the ship and he was not afraid of death or at least not of death in a physical sense. Jim might have felt that something worse would befall him, that is, death in a moral sense. He tries to convince Marlow that he did not leave the ship out of sheer cowardice, but because of some inexplicable reasons:

"Do you think I was afraid of death?" he asked in a voice very fierce and low. He brought down his open hand with a bang that made the coffee-cups dance. "I am ready to swear I was not ... By God - no!"<sup>9</sup>

But what frightened him more was the uncontrollable actions of the crowd. Jim, as it turned out later, could not control his instincts and subconscious. That is why he feared the crowd of pilgrims rushing at the news of the disaster. Jim visualizes the rushing crowd, the panic and the screams. The vivid picture his imagination draws for him is so terrifying that it makes Jim leave the ship. This is the way Marlow retells the reader Jim's experiences:

"His confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic, the trampling rush, the pitiful screams, boats swamped - all the appalling incidents of a disaster at sea he had ever heard of."<sup>10</sup>

I think from this point Jim is not an agent, just a patient. He was in doubt only for a second and he can no longer influence his fate. He is only tossed here and there by his

destiny. What will happen is just the opposite of what he wanted. He wanted to form his own life by his conscious will, and what he achieved instead of this was the fatality of actions.

Dorothy van Ghent draws an interesting parallel between Jim and King Oedipus in her essay on Lord Jim. She writes that 'Oedipus's solution of the problem of "how to be" was the same as Jim's: he fled in the opposite direction from his destiny and ran straight into it.'<sup>11</sup>

Though Jim always wanted to become a hero, somebody who stands out and differs from the crowd, he achieved just the opposite of it. He became an outcast of the society, someone who flees from port to port haunted by his own memories.

Marlow himself feels that by the time of his jump Jim was losing control of the events. He tells Jim: "It is always the unexpected that happens."<sup>12</sup> But as a matter of fact by this time what happens is not unexpected at all. Conrad made way for this statement and we can feel that Jim's destiny is sealed.

The jump, which I have already referred to, from the light to the dark, from the well-known to the un-known is hinted at relatively early in the novel. Jim, whom Conrad characterizes as a 'gifted poor devil with the faculty of swift and forestalling vision' 'could depict to himself without hindrance the sudden swing upwards of the dark skyline, the sudden tilt up of the vast plain of the sea, the swift still 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.'<sup>13</sup>

In my opinion Jim's character gets more and more primitive, simplified and flat. He gets obsessed with one single idea, that is the idea of his personal tragedy. He watches the events almost like an outsider who is unable to interfere with the course of the events. It seems as if some unknown power played its menial games with him, robbing his self-control and will-power. He is spell-bound, his legs seem to be glued to the spot when watching the events in fear. Although Jim is shocked by the sight of the ship and the struggle going on aboard her, he cannot just keep his eyes shut. He says:

"I made up my mind to keep my eyes shut, 'he said,' and I couldn't. I couldn't and I don't care who knows it."<sup>14</sup>

Jim's consciousness, his personality is by now struggling with a stranger within. And Jim is already too weak to defeat these forces and make his own will overcome them. The next step is that he realizes the rule of the 'infernal powers' over him. This paralyses him more and more, so much so that he gives himself over to his destiny. Marlow's interpretation of the events goes like this:

' .... from his relation I am forced to believe he had preserved through it all a strange illusion of passiveness, as though he hadn't acted but had suffered himself to be handled by the infernal powers who had selected him for the victim of their practical joke.'<sup>15</sup>

The question that rises here is whether it was out of Jim's weakness that he could not do anything against the events or it was absolutely impossible to do anything in those circumstances. My answer is in connection with astrology. Jim with this Patna incident reached the end of the first period in his life and had to enter a new one. The accident on the community level is the Patna accident, and on an individual level his own moral defeat. Just as humanity cannot do anything against a coming Apocalypse, Jim was at least as unable to change his own destiny. He only realizes what happened to him a lot later. Although he knows he jumped, he simply cannot understand or explain it to himself. We can be sure he acted mechanically, automatically partly out of his conscious will that lifted its head from the nothingness and out of the power of black magic that worked upon him. Jim relates the events to Marlow like this :

'I had jumped ...' He checked himself, averted his gaze ...

'It seems,' he added ....

'Looks like it,' I muttered.

'I knew nothing about it till I looked up,' he explained.'<sup>16</sup>

It looks as if Jim was torn between two parts: his body and his mind. His body is ruled and manipulated by powers beyond his control, while his mind only keeps a memory of the incidents. As he himself realizes later, it was only his body that jumped and not his mind. Marlow believes Jim, what is more, he tries to convince us that it could only happen this way:

'And that's possible, too. You had to listen to him as you would to a small boy in trouble. He didn't know. It had happened somehow. It would never happen again.'<sup>17</sup>

With this unconscious act a new period starts in Jim's life. Let's not forget that it is a transition from the Fishes to the Aquarius. The dominant element in both constellations is water. And water is present in this part of the novel as everywhere, almost folding the characters: they are sailing out in the ocean and it is raining heavily. As Marlow says:

It was too dark just then for them to see each other, and moreover, they were blinded and half drowned with rain ... The sea hissed "like twenty thousand kettles".<sup>18</sup>

Water, which, as I have already mentioned, is present everywhere, is in its original sense a life-giving element. In its other meaning, that is in the meaning of baptismal water, it should purify and make the person a member of a larger community. But in Conrad's novel the function of water is just the opposite. It brings neither birth, nor re-birth for Jim, but rather if only later, death. Water does not function as life-giver, but as an executioner. It does not make Jim become a member of the society, on the contrary it isolates him.

Every description of the sea-storm is menacing, foreshadowing the coming tragedy. This incident brought a very strange kind of re-birth for Jim. Conrad actually describes the way Jim physically enters his new existence. This description resembles our birth:

'He told me it was like being swept by a flood through a cavern ... for two or three minutes the end of the world had come through in a deluge in a pitchy blackness.'<sup>19</sup>

All in all Jim gets through this confrontation with nature with a totally new personality which later turns into moral and spiritual isolation. Jim is aware of the fact that his life in a way has come to an end. His life continues from this time on on a different level. As he puts it:

'I seemed to believe it. Everything was gone and - all was over ...' he fetched a deep sigh .... 'with me.'

He flees from port to port pursued by his own responsibility. He wears the stigma of his earlier sin, almost like the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, but Jim's sin is burnt deep into his soul.

Stein, who wants to help Jim recover from his self-punishment, offers a very strange solution to the problem of "how to be". Stein suggests, as 'it is not good for you to find you cannot make your dream come true, for the reason that you not strong enough are, or not clever enough ... in the destructive element immerse.'<sup>20</sup>

For Stein the only way out is living according to the ideal, that is the dream, which is on the other hand the destructive element. Stein takes his simile from the sea:

'A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns - nicht wahr? ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up. So if you ask me - how to be?... In the destructive element immerse.'<sup>21</sup>

And Jim follows Stein's advice, submits himself to his dream of responsibility and truth to men. His first tragedy was caused by this exaggerated honesty, and the second, which is more fatal, causes his final destruction. Jim is typically one of those heroes to whom life had given another chance, but when he wants to repent by giving someone else another chance, just like he himself was given, he is destroyed. His destruction is caused by his being different, by this I mean that the faith he put into others was not returned.

Jim realizes that Brown and himself have got something in common: both of them are victims of circumstances, but while Jim's destructive element is positive, Brown's is negative. In an abstract sense Brown, Jim's other self, turns out to be the real destructive element. But this time Jim's destruction is heroic because in the meantime he had gone through long suffering, torment caused by his own guilt, self-imposed exile. He is purified in his death.



## NOTES

1. Joseph CONRAD, *Lord Jim*. Pan Books Ltd., 1976. 9.
2. HAMVAS Béla, *A láthatatlan történet*. Királyi Magyar Nyomda, Budapest.
3. Joseph CONRAD, op.cit. 82.
4. ibid. 82.
5. ibid. 82.
6. ibid. 65.
7. ibid. 64.
8. ibid. 64.
9. ibid. 66.
10. ibid. 67.
11. Dorothy VAN GHENT, *The English Novel. Form and Function*. Harper Torchbooks, 1961. 229.
12. Joseph CONRAD, *Lord Jim*. 72.
13. ibid. 73.
14. ibid. 79
15. ibid. 81
16. ibid. 83
17. ibid. 83
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21. ibid. 153