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# MARLOW'S GAZE IN *LORD JIM* BY JOSEPH CONRAD: BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOWS

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ABSTRACT

In *Lord Jim* Marlow functions not only as a narrator who spins the yarn about the morally problematic case of the young sailor, but also as an interpreter who struggles to register impressions as faithfully as possible thus translating the visual into the discursive. Marlow's double function establishes the novel as a text about the search to understand and to acquire reliable knowledge about Jim and his dilemma. Levin's distinction of the two styles of vision, the assertoric gaze and the aletheic gaze, offers a neat conceptualization for Marlow's visual practices which affect his interpretation of Jim. Levin defines the assertoric gaze as a fixed stare which involves the hegemony of a single standpoint, whereas the aletheic gaze, decentred and subversive, cherishes ambiguity and tends to roam about to accommodate multiple points of view. Levin relates this distinction to the two concepts of truth that Heidegger examines in his critique of the metaphysics of presence: truth as proposition, correspondence, or correctness and truth as aletheia or unconcealment as well as the two types of discourse, the hermeneutical discourse of poetizing and the discourse of statements. If Plato and Descartes defined truth and knowledge in terms of a total visibility, Heidegger insists that the path to truth involves confronting shadows and recognizing that they are necessary for the disclosure of being. Within this philosophical framework it is possible to reassess both Marlow's failure to form an unequivocal explanation of Jim and his growing epistemological scepticism as a departure from the correspondence theory of truth. The encounter with Jim brings Marlow to interrogate his own strategies of grasping the truth and subverts the focus on light as its visual equivalent.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad; Heidegger; gaze; ocularcentrism; aletheia.

Jim's central position of the protagonist and the seeker of heroic adventure in Joseph Conrad's novel is complemented by Marlow, a confidante who assumes the key role of the perceiving consciousness and becomes a storyteller. If Jim

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makes misguided decisions that propel the plot and bring into relief the major moral questions of the novel, Marlow's commentary transforms the simple account of the flight in the face of danger into a multi-layered, ambiguous tale but also a meditation on what it means to understand oneself and how the mind constructs and dismantles interpretations that are aimed at reaching or merely approximating the truth. Thus, Conrad conveys Marlow's yarn as a particularly complex and sophisticated configuration of perspectives which disrupts the linear narrative structure and replaces it with a more web-like texture. Marlow, whose narrative function has been elucidated in numerous critical insights,[2] pools the opinions of numerous witnesses and in this way constructs an almost uninterpretable mosaic of mutually exclusive utterances. Yet, he is not only a narrator struggling to articulate his judgements in an unequivocal way, but also an attentive observer; he sees and then recounts what and how he has seen. By the same token, Marlow's sight becomes entangled with the process of

[2] In the numerous interpretations of Marlow's function in *Lord Jim*, critics seek to account for the complexities of Marlow's position both as a narrator and an interpreter within the narrative, e.g., Moser who established the practice of defining Marlow in terms of his dual function, Lothe (1991: 135, 135–136, 146–147, 167), or Wake (2007: 7). Moser came up with the definition of Marlow as a perceptive hero who focuses on self-analysis in contrast to Jim, a simple hero (Moser 1957: 15–16). In the critical reception more often than not Marlow's persona is viewed as a modernist device introducing the plurality of perspectives which complicate the solution to ethical dilemmas and turn Jim's case into an epistemological riddle. Most critics draw attention to the significance of such a reflective consciousness that reads complex motivations into the simple character of a young seaman, e.g., Guerard identifies Marlow's crucial role in constructing Jim as the embodiment of the modern, problematic man who struggles to come to terms with his divided self (Guerard 1962: 141). Thus, Marlow's narrative bringing together a variety of contradictory perspectives enhances Jim's inscrutability and conveys his status of an ambivalent character who resists the readers' interpretive effort (Armstrong 1987: 129, 133–134). Moreover, Marlow's commentary gives priority to epistemological processes, prevents formulating any ultimate definition of Jim that would dissipate all the ambiguities and contradictions intrinsic to his portrayal and contributes to the open-endedness of the novel (Faris 1989: 315; Greaney 2004: 83; Lothe 1991: 170). Schwarz argues that Conrad used Marlow to address the gnawing uncertainty that was fuelled by epistemological scepticism (Schwarz 1980: xiv). Other critics prefer to view Marlow as a guarantee of objectivity, e.g., Daleski points out that Marlow's role is to trace the hidden causes determining Jim's failure on the *Patna* (Daleski 1977: 78) and Berthoud shows how Marlow disrupts Jim's self-absorption and counters his temptation to condone himself (Berthoud 1978: 79). Marlow's narrative role is also defined in terms of the Bakhtinian dialogic/monologic opposition. Wollaeger recognizes that Marlow's presence is crucial for dispersing the monologic mode of *Lord Jim* (Wollaeger 1990: 120). Hannah further refines the argument, pointing out that Marlow's style of narrating involves his audience in a dialogue, whereas Jim prefers the monologic mode and seeks to impose interpretive dominance in his interaction with Marlow (Hannah 2008: 41, 44). Examining the biographical contexts, critics note that Marlow represents Conrad's construction of Englishness which relies on identifying himself with the ideal of an English gentleman. See among others Gurko (1962: 114); Najder (1984: 231); Acheraïou (2009: 57, 136–137).

interpretation and never offers the overarching vision. In *Lord Jim* the visual metaphor for this absence of closure relies on destabilizing the oppositions of light and shadow, surface and depth.

The study of Marlow's visual style demands a theoretical framework to justify its link with his epistemological search to establish the truth about the young seaman. The principal framework that accounts for the use of visual perception in Conrad's texts is provided by impressionism[3] which revives inquiries about the schism of the subjective and the objective. The dominance of the subjective component in impressionism raises a number of crucial philosophical questions, for instance whether impressions alone can yield reliable knowledge, whether it is possible to overcome epistemological uncertainty[4] or how to conceptualize the relationship between the mind and reality. In his recent study of Conrad's impressionism, Peters not only draws attention to the importance of visual perception but also relates his interpretation of the issue to the larger philosophical debate on how to understand the way consciousness receives sense data (Peters 2004: 16). Moreover, as Peters argues, impressionism resolves the dilemma central to modern philosophy since Descartes, i.e., the disjunction of the mind and body or *res cogitans* and *res extensa* which evolves into the subject/object duality and cancels the gap between the two by showing how they interact and influence each other (Peters 2004: 18). While Hay points out that Conrad, similarly to Henry James, looked askance at impressionism[5] for privileging the sparkling effects of the surface over the "depth 'analysis'" and for dismissing "hidden human 'mysteries'" (Hay 1976: 54), Peters objects to confining

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3 The use of the impressionistic method accounts for the significant role of sight and visual perception in Conrad's texts (Acheraïou 2009: 80).

4 Epistemological uncertainty that permeates Marlow's narration is expressed through his inability to penetrate the mystery that Jim poses and to come up with an unequivocal exegesis as well as through his tendency to postpone or altogether withhold a definitive opinion on Jim till the very end of his narrative. See among others Daleski (1977: 77); Berthoud (1978: 92–93, 129); Armstrong (1987: 121, 133). In order to address Marlow's epistemological doubts Acheraïou applies the hermeneutic notion of endless interpretation (Acheraïou 2009: 119).

5 The question whether Conrad could be legitimately labelled as an impressionist divided even those who, like Garnett and Ford Madox Ford, befriended him and were closely acquainted with his literary output. If Garnett objected to Conrad's affinity with impressionism (Watt 1980: 173), Ford, Conrad's literary collaborator, in his essay of 1913 "On impressionism", aligned Conrad and himself as well as Flaubert and Maupassant with the movement which he defined as "giving 'the fruits of his own observations alone'" (Watt 1980: 172). Conrad himself was suspicious of theoretical explanations reducing phenomena to abstractions. He insisted that "Theory is a cold and lying tombstone of departed truth. (For truth is no more immortal than any other delusion.)" (*The Collected Letters*, 205) and "Formulas and theories are dead things …" (*The Collected Letters*, 421). On these grounds Conrad objected to simplifying his aesthetic beliefs as impressionism. See Watt (1980: 179).

Conrad's impressionism to a focus on the surface and insists on broadening its definition to include the strategies of exploring depth (Peters 2004: 33).[6]

This tension between fascination with the phenomenal surface and the allure of the essential is exemplified in the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* where Conrad explicitly states that he does not want to reduce his art to registering a variety of multiple details which make up an impressionistic patchwork of the phenomenal. Impressionism correlates with the artist's insistence on grasping sensations and articulating his aesthetic commitment in terms which give priority to the visual: "My task … is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*" (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, x). Characteristically, in his aesthetic credo that he expounded in the "Preface", Conrad creates an opposition between sensitivity to the visual (but also to the audible), typical of impressionism, and the aspiration to reveal the truth behind the flux of sensations. The "forms, … colours, … light, … shadows" of "the visible universe" are a path to discovering "what is enduring and essential", i.e., "the very truth of their existence" (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, vii). Conrad encapsulates the aims of art in the formula: "The task … is to hold up … the rescued fragment before all eyes … and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth – disclose its inspiring secret …" (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, x). The rhetoric of revelation pivots on the dichotomy of surface and depth that manifests itself as the opposition between "enigmatical spectacle" or "the visible world" and a "glimpse of truth" (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, vii, x). Conrad, more often than not, invokes this dichotomy of mutable appearances and immutable essence in order to frame his aesthetic purpose of conveying truth in a work of art as it is articulated in the "Preface".[7] Trying to probe the truth about Jim, Marlow applies ocular strategies which are implicated in undoing the surface/depth dichotomy and point to his growing interpretive uncertainty. The way Marlow practises the gaze and translates his visual perception into the discourse articulating his search after the truth, might be elucidated with a reference to David Michael Levin's reinterpretation of the ocularcentric tradition with its insistence on the conjunction between sight, knowledge, and illumination. Levin analyses how Heidegger's critical assessment of Plato's approach to truth and knowledge

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6 Watts questions the use of the term "impressionistic" to define Conrad's narrative techniques and opts for "absurdist" which explicitly communicates their function of evoking the sense of paradox (Watts 1993: 114).

7 Referring to Conrad's "aesthetics of vision" Wollaeger articulates the writer's dilemma in the "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* as a difficulty of correlating truth and fidelity to visual impressions (Wollaeger 1990: 81). Also see Hay, who claims that in the "Preface" Conrad finds the use of the impressionistic techniques that privilege the surface effects insufficient to convey truth (Hay 1976: 58–59, 63).

involves interrogating the function of visual metaphors which rely on the strict distinction between light and shadows. Plato, founder of the Western ocularcentric tradition, was the first to apply visual terms in order to define abstract concepts, identifying knowledge or *episteme* with pure light and unreliable opinion or *doxa* with shadow. Accordingly, he locates truth in the realm of rational apprehension as distinct from the ontologically inferior, transient world of the senses (Levin 1988: 426; Jay 1994: 26–27). If Plato and Descartes defined truth and knowledge as "a total visibility" (Levin 1988: 426) which excludes any taint of the dark, Levin argues that Heidegger's philosophical project of rescuing being from the reductive metaphysical interpretations entails re-evaluating the crucial role of shadows. This new perceptual and epistemological agenda accounts for the tendency to "heighten, extend and enrich the field of visibility" and "supplement the levels of illumination, multiply its facets, intensify its presence" (Levin 1988: 428).

The longing after a total visibility and shadowlessness fosters the style of vision which promotes the modern subject/object dichotomy. Levin distinguishes contradictory ocular strategies, the assertoric gaze and the aletheic gaze, which are defined by the degree of sensitivity to the interplay of light and dark and by their potency to deny or afford significance to shadows. He derives this distinction from the two concepts of truth that Heidegger examines in his critique of the metaphysics of presence: truth as a proposition or correctness and truth as *aletheia* or unconcealment. Heidegger raises objections against the correspondence theory of truth, arguing that it invokes representation as a model for the subject's engagement with objective reality. Furthermore, by legitimizing the duality of subject and object, truth as correctness demands a precise definition of what stands in front of the subject and, accordingly, it structures their relation as an aggressive confrontation or opposition. However, a construal of reality as a state of affairs caught in a stasis subverts *aletheia*, interferes with unconcealing *Dasein*, and suppresses the plurality of perspectives which constitute the body of knowledge. Hence, the correspondence theory of truth, incompatible with the hermeneutical discourse of poetizing, necessitates the assertive discourse of propositions which crystallizes truth in an immutable representation and in a single dominant point of view (Levin 1988: 426, 432–433, 435–436). Levin relates this Platonic concept of shadow-free knowledge to the discourse of statements and assertions which imposes univocity and cancels "shades of meaning, … polyphonic or symphonic subversiveness, … ungraspable richness and dimensionality" (Levin 1988: 435). Eliminating visual excess and ambiguity, such a discourse invokes the category of certainty to measure the correctness of knowledge, fosters the will to mastery, and encourages the closure of meaning (Levin 1988: 436). Levin identifies the assertoric gaze with a fixed gaze or a stare which legitimizes the hegemony of a single standpoint and cancels the

multiplicity of perspectives; it also erases the shadowy facets of the perceptible universe in order to ensure total visibility. The assertoric gaze is contingent on the subject/object duality which takes the form of the opposition between the observer and the external reality. Thus, it engages with the world by manifesting both the desire to control and a dogmatic bias which render it compatible with the discourse of assertions and with truth as correctness. Unlike the assertoric gaze, the aletheic gaze, inspired by the hermeneutical theory of truth, is "open to the subversions in the play of shadows and reflections", "delights in ambiguities", and cultivates "an awareness of contextuality" which enhances its appreciation of multiple points of view (Levin 1988: 432, 440).

In his narrative, Marlow includes references to the way he looked at Jim during their first encounter. Eager to arrive at an unequivocal truth about the young man, he resorts to the assertoric gaze which construes a stable determinate reality and provides the empirical basis for pronouncing an adequate judgement. Along the lines of the ocularcentric tradition Marlow inscribes his portrayal of Jim within the long-standing network of symbolic associations equating light with truth, knowledge, and the realm of immutable ideals. Since the moment they meet, Marlow concentrates on the attributes that establish Jim as an exemplary seaman (Berthoud 1978: 80), unable to transgress the rules of the marine code: "The young chap, making no movement, not even stirring his head, just stared into the sunshine. This was my first view of Jim. … There he stood, clean-limbed, clean-faced, firm on his feet, as promising a boy as the sun ever shone on …" (*Lord Jim*, 40). Marlow ascribes to Jim the gaze which is directed straight into the sun and thereby testifies to his idealistic aspirations, not unlike his appearance which reflects the fusion of purity, stasis, light, and truth. By hinting at his ability to stand firm, Marlow invokes the symbolism of the vertical which upholds Jim's affiliation with the ideal.

Pondering on the reasons why Jim failed the test of courage and responsibility on the *Patna*, Marlow conflates the ocular metaphor of "a discriminating eye" with the rhetoric which invokes the dichotomy of appearance and essence, the visible yet deceptive surface and the hidden foundation:[8] "My weakness consists in not having a discriminating eye for the incidental – for the externals – no eye for the hod of the rag-picker or the fine linen of the next man. … I never could get up any enthusiasm about these things" (*Lord Jim*, 94). Marlow's confession exemplifies his assumption that to know means to pinpoint the essential and to discard the contingent. In order to apply this procedure of finding the truth and to avoid being misled by the contingent qualities, it is necessary to establish as precise definitions as possible. The necessity to overlook the externals is

[8] Jameson recognizes this dichotomy as one of the crucial components of the metaphysically oriented depth model (Jameson 1991: 12).

emphasized by the choice of the objects which represent the trivial and inessential aspects of reality, "the hod of the rag-picker" and "the fine linen." A similar ocular strategy reoccurs when Marlow consults Stein about the solutions to Jim's quandary: "My eyes followed [Stein's] movements, but what I did see was not the head of the firm, the welcome guest at afternoon receptions, the correspondent of learned societies, the entertainer of stray naturalists; I saw only the reality of his destiny, … that life … rich in generous enthusiasms, in friendship, love, war – in all the exalted elements of romance" (*Lord Jim*, 217). Again Marlow juxtaposes the gaze that merely brushes the surface and relishes in "the externals" of Stein's career, i.e., his status and reputation, against the gaze that penetrates to the core and reveals what he recognizes as essence behind appearances, i.e., conformity with the pattern of romance.

However, the distinction of the external and the incidental which recurs in Marlow's juxtaposition of soundness and integrity against "false pretences" cannot be sustained: "looking at him … I was as angry as though I had detected him trying to get something out of me by false pretences. He had no business to look so sound" (*Lord Jim*, 40). Marlow's shock over being duped by Jim's innocent appearance parallels his anxiety over the misleading nature of sight that manifests itself in "a single glance" and unsatisfactory knowledge it provides: "I would have trusted the deck to that youngster on the strength of a single glance, and gone to sleep with both eyes – and, by Jove! it wouldn't have been safe" (*Lord Jim*, 45). The metaphors which follow this declaration identify Jim's impeccable looks with "a new sovereign" while "some infernal alloy in his metal" (*Lord Jim*, 45) becomes a metaphorical equivalent of his inner truth which signals moral deficiency bearing a camouflage of outer flawlessness. What outrages Marlow and elicits his condemnation framed in a forceful rhetoric of an exclamation, "There are depths of horror in that thought" (*Lord Jim*, 45), is a disjunction of sight and knowledge that prevents the eye from penetrating beneath the surface and frustrates his aspiration to reach the essence. Thus, the failure to unveil Jim's inherent weakness undermines Marlow's initial investment with the ocularcentric discourse by enhancing his disillusionment with apparently reliable sight.

The encounters with the French lieutenant and with Stein illustrate how Marlow, more and more inclined to accept the tentative nature of his interpretations, comes to relinquish the style of vision which relies on the need to grasp the essence of things and to convert Being into representation. Confronted with a variety of contradictory opinions and struggling to apprehend Jim's ambivalence, Marlow pursues a new style of vision which parallels the non-assertive mode of articulating his insights and reflects the awareness that the concept of truth as correctness is futile in his attempts to understand Jim. This change of visual style which affects his interpretive strategy is adumbrated by the

scene in which Marlow consults the French lieutenant about Jim.[9] What endears Marlow to the lieutenant is his predictability and stability that ensure his compliance with the pre-established model of an exemplary seaman: "one of those steady, reliable men who are the raw material of great reputations …" (*Lord Jim*, 143). He believes that the lieutenant, a man of strict principles who embodies duty and high professional ethos, is more likely to withhold subjective opinions and thus clings to facts instead of speculating. Marlow seeks an assertion of truth in the lieutenant's assessment of Jim but, eventually, he finds the seaman's assertive mode of making statements annoying and sterile. Initially, it is his ability to grasp the meaning and to make it unequivocal that captivates Marlow. The lieutenant seems the first and the only one to disclose the truth about Jim's failure of courage. His precision of statement encourages Marlow to dismiss other opinions as biased or inaccurate, to recognize the lieutenant as the most trustworthy authority on the matter, and to accept his judgement as an ultimate and unchallenged revelation. Listening to the lieutenant's laconic words, Marlow discerns the line of thinking that involves the interdependence of truth and rationality:

> '*S'est enfui avec les autres*,' had said the lieutenant. And suddenly I began to admire the discrimination of the man. He had made out the point at once: he did get hold of the only thing I cared about. … His imperturbable and mature calmness was that of an expert in possession of the facts, and to whom one's perplexities are mere child's-play. … He elucidated his meaning and sipped his drink.
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> (*Lord Jim*, 145–146)

The lieutenant's contemplative mode of being, his "imperturbable and mature calmness", invites systematic thinking, careful defining, and making distinctions which are indispensable for passing a verdict rather than a subjective opinion. The etymology of the word "elucidated" suggests that the categories central to Marlow's discourse are embedded within the metaphysical framework that relies on the rhetoric of truth as light, knowledge as a revelation, and total visibility as the suppression of shadow, a visual correlate of doubt: "I was confronted by two narrow grey circlets, like two tiny steel rings around the profound blackness of the pupils. The sharp glance, coming from that massive body, gave a notion of extreme efficiency, like a razor-edge on a battle-axe" (*Lord Jim*, 148). The

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[9] Critics debate how the French lieutenant's perspective contributes to Marlow's understanding of Jim. Generally, they either endorse his reliable judgement of a competent and honourable seaman or object to his inflexible and dogmatic approach. Guerard draws attention to the complimentary terms employed in the presentation of the lieutenant and argues that his unblemished reputation makes his verdict all the more valid and reliable (Guerard 1962: 157). In contrast, Cox dismisses the idea that Conrad singles the lieutenant out as an example claiming that his unimaginative "dullness" subverts the validity of his opinions (Cox 1974: 36).

lieutenant's assertoric gaze which conveys an insistence on the truth as correctness is here rendered through the ocular metaphor of the "sharp glance" whose precision and perceptive power parallels intellectual acuity in the ocularcentric tradition. "[T]wo tiny steel rings" suggest that his mode of looking is centrifugal, prevents any dissipation of the mind or sight, and tends to impose self-discipline that guarantees his conformity with the socially preferable monolithic ideal. This style of vision promotes the belief that moral weakness could be prevented by the supervisory "eye of others" (*Lord Jim,* 147). It is also analogous to the interpretive strategies of the lieutenant who judges Jim by measuring his surprising, incoherent reactions against the absolutist concept of honour. Yet, eventually Marlow rejects the lieutenant's assertion of truth (Wollaeger 1990: 89–90) which has an impoverishing, immobilizing, and simplifying impact on the plural, complex and fluid reality: "Hang the fellow! he had pricked the bubble. The blight of futility that lies in wait for men's speeches had fallen upon our conversation, and made it a thing of empty sounds" (*Lord Jim*, 148). The connotations evoked by the phrases "empty sounds" and "[t]he blight of futility" relate truth to language which does not communicate existential experience since it is affected by the disjunction between a signifier and a signified. Thus, the rhetoric of Marlow's discourse suggests that the assertion of truth usurps power over being and petrifies it into representation, which prevents the stance of openness and derails the project of revealing *Dasein* in the plurality of perspectives. Creating the tighter network of connotations, the "blight of futility" echoes in Marlow's declaration of sympathy for the misguided conduct of Jim, a fellow seaman and "one of us," and in his association of truth with sterility which reinforces his doubts about moral absolutism: "I had no intention, for the sake of barren truth, to rob him of the smallest particle of any saving grace that would come in his way. I didn't know how much of it he believed himself" (*Lord Jim,* 80). Marlow, even though frustrated with Jim's failure to comply with the values that he cherishes, shows enough openness to redefine his search for the truth which seems destructive since it results in sacrificing being to an abstract model.

Jim disappoints Marlow because he defies his attempts to view him as a fixed object of knowledge whose correspondence with a pre-established ideal can be easily verified. Marlow grows uneasy and embittered when Jim resists Marlow's assertoric gaze and forces him to abandon the certainty it offers. Struggling to understand the young seaman, Marlow renounces the gaze which isolates distinct forms and traces the stable core behind shifting appearances. While listening to Jim's confession Marlow contemplates him with an aletheic gaze which is defined as "decentred, drawn into the invisible" and tends to "wander, to come under the spell of shadows and reflections" (Levin 1988: 438). Marlow, unable to pinpoint Jim in a definitive image, directs his gaze at the stars "whose distant

glitter disposed in retreating planes lured the eye into the depths of a greater darkness …" (*Lord Jim*, 128). The decentring power of his gaze turns the apparently flat surface of the nocturnal darkness behind Jim's back into a multi-layered labyrinthine construction of innumerable "planes" demarcated by the ever receding starlight configurations which prevent the eye from focusing on the foreground of the scene. The eye, fascinated with the absence of boundaries restraining its free movement, abhors stasis and relishes roaming deeper into space to confront growing darkness which renders things invisible and thereby subverts the control that the assertoric gaze tends to exert. Instead of approaching reality as an immutable picture, Marlow allows his gaze to rove about and become lost in adumbrations. Inevitably this style of vision reflects the disavowal of Descartes' methodological directive to apply the principle of clarity and distinctness in order to verify that knowledge is reliable.

Facing Jim's opacity, Marlow is unable to construe him as an object that is easy to perceive and comprehend. Unlike the assertoric gaze whose function is to provide a reliable representation, his gaze produces fragmentary visions. Hence, Marlow compares "[t]he views [Jim] let me have of himself" to "bits of vivid and vanishing detail" which, nevertheless, are not sufficient to construct a coherent and complete representation, "giving no connected idea of the general aspect of a country" (*Lord Jim*, 76). In those moments of the confrontation with Jim, Marlow's way of looking amounts to the mode of perception that shatters a picture into fragments and thwarts the promise of a single totalizing perspective bringing the scene under the subject's control. Unlike the assertoric gaze, Marlow's gaze is not directed straightforward at the object in order to separate it as a positum in front of the subject (Levin 1988: 208). The views of Jim caught "through the open door of my room" or "through a rent in the mist" (*Lord Jim*, 176, 128) exemplify Marlow's oblique style of vision. He fails to keep Jim tangible, repeatedly professing his inability to "see him clearly" or "distinctly", to "fix before my eye the image of his safety" (*Lord Jim*, 241, 339, 221, 176). Instead of "immobilis[ing] him under my eyes" (*Lord Jim*, 331), Marlow perceives the "young chap" as an evanescent picture. Hence, at the court inquiry, the moment of reading the sentence which marks the height of emotional and moral tension evokes Marlow's hesitant visual perception: "I looked for Jim hurriedly, as though I had expected him to disappear" (*Lord Jim*, 160). From the moment of meeting Jim, Marlow has to assimilate visual experience that undercuts the strategy of looking at reality as a repository of disconnected objects presenting themselves in their complete form before the eyes of the perceiver. He repeatedly comments that even an intense gaze produces blurred, hazy, visually

baffling images[10] such as "the envelope of flesh and blood on which our eyes are fixed melts before the outstretched hand" or "elusive spirit that no eye can follow, no hand can grasp" (*Lord Jim*, 180). By viewing others as "incomprehensible, wavering, and misty" (*Lord Jim*, 180) creatures, Marlow questions the long-standing ocularcentric tradition that holds sight to be the source of certain knowledge, a guarantee of correct understanding. Frequently Marlow conveys his ocular impression of Jim by invoking the image of mist effacing the distinct shapes and creating the chiaroscuro effect. The "floating outlines" (*Lord Jim*, 224) enhance his nebulous quality which resists being encapsulated in a statement of truth.

Apart from the obstacles such as shadows and mists, it is the unstable relation between light and shadow that thwarts Marlow's perception of Jim, rendering him intangible and, hence, enigmatic. Even if initially Marlow views Jim with perfect clarity suggested by the metaphor "a sea of light", the dominance of brightness is qualified by its function of a foil which brings Jim's black silhouette into sharp relief. What is more, the moment of extreme radiance turns into its own negation, a tide of darkness, as if the two opposites balanced each other in a dialectic coexistence:

> The sustained and dazzling flickers seemed to last for an unconscionable time. The growl of the thunder increased steadily while I looked at him, distinct and black, planted solidly upon the shores of a sea of light. At the moment of greatest brilliance the darkness leaped back with a culminating crash, and he vanished before my dazzled eyes as utterly as though he had been blown to atoms.
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> (*Lord Jim*, 177–178)

Light changes to self-defeating excess that blinds the eye and obstructs perception so that illumination does not produce knowledge as it was assumed by Plato-inspired metaphysics. The "dazzling flickers" which form the background for Marlow's vision of Jim modulate light into the unstable sequence of flashes varying in rapidity and intensity and undermine the symbolic relation between light, immutability, and truth. The observation of the varying degrees of radiance gives rise to the image of light being separated from darkness which, however, no longer stands for the binary oppositions of truth and falsehood, knowledge and ignorance. When Marlow catches the last sight of Jim before leaving for Patusan, he recalls that the excess of light thwarted his ability to see which in the ocularcentric tradition represents knowledge: "My eyes were too dazzled by the

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[10] The imagery of shadows, clouds, and mist in *Lord Jim* is frequently interpreted within the context of epistemological scepticism which reflects the crumbling of the certainties intrinsic to the late Victorian era and nascent modernism as well as the vision of the radically isolated consciousness unable to find rational explanations in absurd and inscrutable reality (Pettersson 1982: 23, 29, 95).

glitter of the sea below his feet to see him clearly …" (*Lord Jim*, 241). Thus, Marlow applies the negative terms which turn brightness that he perceives into obfuscation and invert the metaphysical Plato-based dichotomy of light/truth and shadow/illusion. Such an inversion accounts for Marlow's failure to pass an opinion on Jim in the form of a proposition which should rely on making clear-cut distinctions.

After Marlow finds the French lieutenant's rigorous approach disappointing, he turns to Stein as the most reliable source of opinion on Jim and voices a complete trust in his capacity for making a sound judgement of the ambiguous issue. In his eyes, Stein seems to command enough authority and experience to be able to offer a valuable insight into the case, to resolve doubts, and formulate an unequivocal truth that involves "the conformity of a subject's representation to the givenness of the object represented" (Levin 1988: 422). When Marlow hears Stein's opinion labelling Jim as romantic, he believes that he has finally met the man capable of untangling the interpretive complexities and making the subtleties easy to grasp. Yet, despite all of the declarations of respect for the elderly merchant, Marlow's unstable, playful discourse undermines Stein's position to pronounce an authoritative judgement of Jim. His introductory account of Stein abounds in contradictions that echo the non-assertive thrust of his statements on Jim. Stein's face which has "deep downward folds" and yet gives the impression of "a student's face" (*Lord Jim*, 202) combines youthfulness with maturity or even agedness. Once the contrast produced by these incongruous features of appearance has been achieved, Marlow dilutes the effect by pointing to Stein's agelessness which transcends the clash of incongruities so that, as he claims, "at twenty he must have looked very much like what he was now at threescore" (*Lord Jim*, 202). Other phrases that Marlow uses to weave additional antitheses into his portrayal of Stein suggest incoherence and some kind of Protean nature: "the eyebrows …, together with the resolute searching glance …, were not in accord with his … learned appearance" (*Lord Jim*, 202). This incompatibility is enhanced by the play on the literal and metaphorical meanings of words referring to the vertical position. Stein's "slight stoop" contrasts with his "upright and indulgent nature" (*Lord Jim*, 203) and yet it is not clear whether the physical infirmity brings his moral integrity into relief or undermines it. In order to be more precise about Stein Marlow modifies the metaphor of a man who "carries his life in his hand" into "he had been playing ball with it" (*Lord Jim*, 203). Under the guise of searching for metaphorical adequacy Marlow draws the picture of the man who, similarly to Jim, escapes being labelled, the man whose unconventional life stance is envisaged as a switch from the static gesture of firmly gripping a ball to the dynamic movement of throwing it at random, from the linear shift to the arabesque-like toss.

In his discourse, Marlow accentuates the overwhelming impact of shadows that change the room in Stein's home into a cave: it "melted into shapeless gloom like a cavern" (*Lord Jim*, 204). The image suggests the presence of the focalizer whose gaze, decentred by the clash of light and darkness,[11] fails to fix indistinct blurry patches into a clearly delineated representation and, instead, exults in the dissipation of forms. What is more, the oscillation between light and dark mutates into the opposition of appearance and disappearance which Conrad exploits to imbue his text with spectral visuality. Hence, the gaze that Marlow practises renders the moments of transition from illuminated to dimmed space and vice versa both as a leap into being and the extinction of being; it conjures up one of Stein's servants as "a ghost only momentarily embodied for that particular service" and then makes him disappear "in a mysterious way" (*Lord Jim*, 204). Stein himself seems to Marlow "the shadow prowling amongst the graves of butterflies" who is caught in the rhythm of receding into darkness and manifesting his presence, "pass[ing] out of the bright circle of the lamp" and then again "loom[ing] up in the ring of faint light" (*Lord Jim*, 213, 214). As soon as Stein enters light "the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanishe[s] from his face" as if light effaced truth which was revealed in the dark whereas the shadows seem to open the way towards truth: "His voice leaped up extraordinarily strong, as though away there in the dusk he had been inspired by some whisper of knowledge" (*Lord Jim*, 214). Thus, Marlow's gaze undermines the status of light as a visual equivalent of truth tantamount to exorcising shadow, a symptom of the lack and the embodiment of nothingness.[12] Instead, he comes to associate light with the loss of certainty, one of the basic criteria for considering knowledge reliable, and discovers that "[t]he light had destroyed [Stein's] assurance which had inspired him in the distant shadows" (*Lord Jim*, 214).

In Stein's cave, Marlow frames his newly acquired understanding in visual terms (Cox 1974: 27, 40) that relate truth both to illumination and to adumbration:

> his imperishable reality came to me with a convincing, with an irresistible force! I saw it vividly, as though in our progress through the lofty silent rooms amongst fleeting gleams of light and the sudden revelations of human figures stealing with

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11 The depiction of the scene at Stein's home as the play of light and dark is reminiscent of Plato's cave (Kirby 2001: 221–222) and places Stein and Marlow in the position of the captives who observe shadows cast on the wall and conceive a desire to find their source.

12 The imagery of light and darkness renders Stein's pronouncements on Jim unreliable and, on the whole, functions as a rhetorical equivalent of epistemological uncertainty (Ressler 1988: 38). Dauncey inscribes the imagery of light and darkness within the opposition between the discourse of rationality represented by Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical philosophy and the ambiguous discourse of metaphysics (Dauncey 2011: 32).

> flickering flames within unfathomable and pellucid depths, we had approached nearer to absolute Truth, which, like Beauty itself, floats elusive, obscure, half submerged, in the silent still waters of mystery.
>
> (*Lord Jim*, 216)

Marlow enters the space where his gaze, unable to exercise control over the object and create its reliable representation, meanders and dissipates among the manifestations of light which lose their illuminating intensity, dissolve into unstable, evanescent patterns of "fleeting gleams" or "flickering flames", and thereby offer a discontinuous configuration of "sudden revelations". The oxymoronic phrase "pellucid depths" combining abysmal darkness and transparency baffles perception and dismantles representation as a vehicle for the univocal mode of understanding. In his account, Marlow pursues an implicit analogy between the intensity of seeing "vividly" and penetrating beneath the surface to the very essence, i.e., to Jim's "imperishable reality" and to "absolute Truth" whose ideal nature is emphasized by the capital letter. Still, the "half submerged" truth that the narrator envisages keeps his gaze suspended somewhere between the empirical and the imaginary, between the essential and the phenomenal. In this way, Marlow develops the inconclusive gaze which registers the moment of "approach[ing] nearer to absolute Truth" and manifests its aletheic nature by representing truth not as a correspondence, correctness, or agreement but as an infinite progression reducing the distance, yet never finding its point of destiny.

This aletheic gaze, which does not focus on some definite point in space but rather seeks to transcend the limit of the horizon, makes for the indeterminacy of the image that Marlow employs to convey Stein's conceptualization of truth. The image represents the shadowy, "uncertain" landscape and reveals the vistas which lack any determining boundaries: "The whisper of his conviction seemed to open before me a vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn – or was it, perchance, at the coming of the night? One had not the courage to decide; but it was a charming and deceptive light, throwing the impalpable poesy of its dimness over pitfalls – over graves" (*Lord Jim*, 215). Both the visual indeterminacy of "uncertain expanse" and tentative, indefinable luminosity that renders dawn indistinguishable from twilight add up to evoke the vision of the world which cannot be construed as an aggregate of immutable entities complete in themselves and presenting themselves in front of the subject to be inspected. Stein's "whisper of conviction" confronts Marlow with space which allows the eye to roam freely by liberating his gaze from the constraint of fixing objects and creating their representations. Unlike the sunlight which guarantees total visibility and, hence, connotes the metaphysical promise of reliable objective knowledge, the dim crepuscular glimmer accompanying Stein's articulation of

truth,[13] manifests itself in the playful negotiation between the incongruous domains of the visual and the discursive, of darkness and poesy. By drawing attention to the effect of bewildering spatial dimensions and to misleading light which is associated both with dawn and with "the coming of the night," Marlow implies that the landscape cannot be conveyed in terms of graspable forms and interpreted as stable representation.

The aletheic gaze that Marlow practises while consulting Stein is sensitive to the interplay of light and shadows and corresponds to the dominant discourse of the scene which is marked by the antithetical mode of articulation. Marlow recalls that Stein framed his digression on human nature in an antithetical style invoking the image of a butterfly and highlighting its contradictory properties of fragility and strength: "And so fragile! And so strong! And so exact!" (*Lord Jim*, 208).[14] This rhetoric of antithesis underlies Stein's inconclusive exegesis of Jim that waives any claims to the assertion: "He is romantic – romantic' … 'And that is very bad – very bad… Very good, too'" (*Lord Jim*, 216). Marlow responds to the old sage's comments in an equally antithetical style, claiming that Stein's desire to clarify the dilemma simultaneously obscures it to the point of making it unresolvable: "The case which he had made to look so simple before became if possible still simpler – and altogether hopeless" (*Lord Jim*, 212). In the following comment Stein depicts man as a paradoxical creature whose self-definitions are mutually exclusive and who thrives on conflicting motivations: "'… but man he will never on his heap of mud keep still. He want to be so, and again he want to be so …. He wants to be a saint, and he wants to be a devil …'" (*Lord Jim*, 213). The antithetical style of formulating thoughts as well as the recurring ellipses signal Stein's reluctance to come up with an ultimate formula summing up Jim's identity. It also undermines the expectation that knowledge about Jim and, by extension, about man in general can be articulated by delineating a correspondence between the subjective ideal and objective reality. Both Marlow's and Stein's discourses rely on suppressing the assertive mode of framing propositions that are supposed to provide a correct

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13 On the whole critics view Stein as another commentator whose statement of truth is tentative and qualified by his subjective vision, e.g., Sanchez links Stein's unreliability with his desire to understand the inexplicable which, however, requires the use of the ambiguous discourse (Sanchez 2011: 73). However, Newell argues in favour of Stein's reliability which is evidenced by his lucid evaluation of Jim's plight and a profound insight into the complexities of the case that cannot be unravelled due to human limitations. He refutes the claims that Stein's speech is mystifying and its thrust – relativistic. To the contrary, both Stein's language which relies on romantic images and his romantic vision which is ambivalent, yet not paradoxical, testify to his reliability (Newell 2011: 91–92).

14 The image of a butterfly finds its antithetical equivalent in the image of beetles and both of them represent the juxtaposition of Stein, a romantic man of action, and Jim, who failed the test of fortitude in the emergency (Tanner 1963: 41–42).

understanding of Jim[15] and to highlight those properties that make him the epitome of an ideal seaman.

Marlow's gaze participates in the hermeneutic discourse which, following Levin's interpretation, marks a departure from the concept of truth as correspondence. The discourse he uses to convey his understanding of Jim is saturated with oxymoronic expressions denying the clear-cut true/false dichotomy, e.g., "I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and on the essential sincerity of falsehood" (*Lord Jim*, 93). In his efforts to understand Jim, Marlow accepts simultaneously contradictory perspectives which are related, on the one hand, with sunlight, a figure for finding the truth through rigorously delineated distinctions between concepts, and, on the other hand, with moonlight whose faint luminosity suppresses differences by concealing rather than revealing: "He appealed to all sides at once – to the side turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness, with only a fearful ashy light falling at times on the edge" (*Lord Jim*, 93). By conflating a negative emotion with the dead colour of burnt embers, the adjectives "fearful ashy" qualify the revelatory power of light as well as subvert both its claim to offer a comprehensive vision and its association with truth. In Patusan Marlow continues to relate Jim to the image of moonlight which "gives a sinister reality to shadows alone" (*Lord Jim*, 246) and dissolves the substance of things that become too obscure to be represented in an assertive statement.[16] Marlow observes how his aspiration to assert the truth about Jim turns into a lack of assertion. Instead of a definitive conclusion, he comes up with a number of contradictory interpretations about his "quiet bearing that might have been the outcome of manly self-control, of impudence, of callousness, of a colossal unconsciousness, of a gigantic deception. Who can tell!" (*Lord Jim*, 78). By the same token Jim's utterances interspersed with ellipses undermine Marlow's initial insistence on assertion as well as subvert

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15 Marlow cannot arrive at an ultimate formula of Jim and, thus, blanks, lacunas, gaps that his narrative is interspersed with and that reflect his hesitations to articulate a straightforward understanding call for the readers' active collaboration in making the text (Hawthorn 1979: 52–53). Roussel explores Marlow's discursive strategy of tapping on the ambivalence intrinsic to language and using it in his portrayal of Jim which depends on juxtaposing contradictory judgements and creating paradoxical patterns (Roussel 1971: 102–105). For Marlow's strategy of implicating the reader in the production of meaning also see Acheraïou (2009: 141).

16 The second part of the novel set in Patusan is usually viewed as romance which is incongruous with the first part, its modernist-oriented strategies of representation, scepticism, and epistemological bewilderment. This combination of romance and modernism accounts for *Lord Jim*'s generic heterogeneity (Seeley 1992: 497). Greaney frames the two-part structure of the novel in terms of the deconstructive/sentimental dichotomy arguing that Conrad abandons the sceptical and reflexive modes of narration in his account of the Patusan adventure (Greaney 2004: 91).

his assumption that the truth can be reduced to the appropriate use of words. At the outset, Marlow expects Jim to provide an accurate account of what happened on the *Patna* by admitting his complicity in the shameful desertion and his violation of the seaman's code. He tries to prevent Jim from indulging imaginative flights and demands a strict correspondence between the facts and his explanation of the incident. The recurring ellipses reveal Jim's uncertainty about how to express what he experienced on the fatal night of the catastrophe as well as they frustrate Marlow's longing after univocity: "'I had jumped …' He checked himself, averted his gaze…. 'It seems,' he added" (*Lord Jim*, 111). Thereby, the challenge of Jim's ambiguity triggers the shift to conceptualizing the search for the truth as the hermeneutic project of interpretation rather than the procedure of establishing correctness.

Commenting on his tale Marlow renounces the possibility of providing the closure and deciphering the adequate meaning: "some fable of strife to be forgotten before the end is told – before the end is told – even if there happens to be any end to it" (*Lord Jim*, 35); "And besides, the last word is not said, – probably shall never be said" (*Lord Jim*, 225). By comparing life to a text that resists being completed he undercuts the hegemony of any single perspective. "[T]hat full utterance" which is the chief aspiration of every story-teller resolves into "stammerings" (*Lord Jim*, 225), producing a fragmentary, tentative, and incomplete supplement rather than an unequivocal statement. The assertoric gaze operates by tracing the adequacy between the way the object presents itself and the way the subject states its beliefs or judgements, which requires the assertive mode of articulation typical of the correspondence theory of truth. However, Marlow employs an antithetical style which, by juxtaposing equally valid yet contradictory terms, dismantles this adequacy and thereby represents the hermeneutical, poetizing discourse typical of the concept of truth as *aletheia* (Levin 1988: 435–438). Unable to articulate his insights about Jim in assertive terms, Marlow recognizes the insufficiency of the restrictive discourse that traps him in the dichotomy of either outright condemnation or unconditional justification. At the same time, his complex, multi-layered narrative shifts the emphasis from a psychological portrayal and an ethical evaluation aiming at a precise diagnosis of Jim's failure to the hermeneutical analysis of what it means to understand and what kind of truth can be achieved.

In another attempt to define his role of a storyteller who wants to understand, Marlow compares his task to "speak[ing] for my brother from the realm of forgetful shades" (*Lord Jim*, 316). This formula links his hermeneutic search with the contemplation of all that is denied by an objective existence and lingers on the margin where it is kept out of light and barred from circumspection. The imagery of "forgetful shades" evokes a spectral disembodiment by referring to the erosion of memory which is unable to hold mental objects in their permanent

form and perpetuate their presence. Hence, the comparison, which elucidates Marlow's aspiration to know and tell, offers a hint that truth can be probed through the experience of the marginal, the indeterminable, and the absent. In this way, Marlow conflates the perspectives of a truth seeker and a forgetful shade negotiating between light and darkness or truth and illusion, whose tentative mode of being denies the stable nature of things and undercuts the assertion of adequacy between what is given as objective reality and what the subject perceives. Marlow declares that he succeeded in combining multiple pieces of information and conveying "an intelligible picture" (*Lord Jim*, 343) of Jim in his narrative. Nevertheless, the final scene suggests that he wants this picture to remain unfinished and open for further interpretation, always inviting others to complete the lacunas and to unravel the enigma. In the final lines of the narrative, Marlow repeats his interpretation of Jim as both a figure of unquestionable reality and yet "a disembodied spirit" (*Lord Jim*, 416), formulating his exegesis in a hermeneutical style which draws upon the paradoxes, ambivalence, and play of meanings (Levin 1988: 437). The formula that Marlow coins for his yarn subverts the metaphysical concept of truth as correctness and the revelation of essence. Marlow explains what motivated him to tell Jim's story: "perhaps it is that feeling which had incited me to tell you the story, to try to hand over to you, as it were its very existence, its reality – the truth disclosed in a moment of illusion" (*Lord Jim*, 323). Eager to communicate a full understanding of Jim, he frames his discoveries in terms that conflate truth with "a moment of illusion" and uphold the dialectic of presence and concealment. Moreover, by conflating truth with a temporal evanescence of the moment, Marlow undermines its metaphysical definition as an idea transcending time and space. The connotations that the word "moment" evokes foreground the concept of time chopped into chunks whose brief duration highlights the elusive nature of truth and prevents its petrification into a fixed formula.

The confrontation with Jim's case forces Marlow to interrogate his own strategy of searching for the truth which involves securing a precise correspondence between the object's givenness and the subject's judgement. The gaze that Marlow practises while contemplating Jim and that follows the ever-changing relation between light and shadow negates the subject/object duality which is the basis for construing the world as representation. Consequently, Marlow's gaze questions the frontal ontology which is founded on Platonic and Cartesian rationalism and which underlies the visual practice of placing the object before the subject so that its confrontational position guarantees its visibility and distinctness (Levin 1988: 207–208). The style of vision which Marlow develops when he seeks to cope with Jim's nebulosity, reflects his conceptualization of truth that he associates with the inconclusive process rather than a statement that fixes shifting appearances into representation. The growing visual bafflement that

marks Marlow's interaction with Jim accompanies his transition from the assertoric to the aletheic gaze. Thus, Marlow's aletheic gaze, which dissipates in the interplay of light and shadows, correlates with what Levin calls poetizing discourse with its emphasis on gaps and multiple perspectives that prevent Marlow from seeing Jim in essentialist terms. Eventually, in the confrontation with Jim's opacity Marlow loses trust in the metaphysical conceptualization of truth as a stable reference to the object. The aletheic style of vision and its equivalent, the hermeneutic discourse, which destabilizes the oppositions of depth and surface, of essence and appearance, mark Conrad's texts[17] as a site of resistance to any totalizing interpretation which seeks for the centre and place him within the modernist paradigm that is suspicious of any kind of absolutism.

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[17] Possibly with the exception of the texts belonging to the late phase, such as *Chance* or *The Arrow of Gold*.

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