

## The Straight Line Is Not the Most Artistic Path Between Two Points:

### Graphic Images in Conrad's *Lord Jim: A Tale*.

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#### 1. Introduction

As is widely known, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was twenty years a sailor before he became a writer.<sup>1</sup> *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) is a collection of “memories and impressions” of his experience at sea during the period 1874-1894. Along with other non-fiction works and his correspondence, *The Mirror of the Sea* is a primary source for any critical approach to Conrad's work. He devotes the initial paragraphs of this book to clarify for the reader the meaning of “departure” and “landfall”, two nautical terms that refer to, respectively, the beginning and end of a ship's passage. What is more relevant for the argument developed in this paper is that Conrad, who has in mind “a southern-going ship of *yesterday*” (*Mirror* 4, emphasis added), develops this terminological clarification by having recourse to graphic images in a way that the latter not only stand for or register the ship's progress across the sea as handled by the crew under the captain's command, but are actually identified with it:

It is not the ship that takes her Departure; the seaman *takes his Departure* by means of cross-bearings which fix the place of the first tiny pencil-cross on the white expanse of the track-chart, where the ship's position at noon shall be marked by just another tiny pencil-cross for every day of her passage. And there may be sixty, eighty, any number of these crosses on the ship's track from land to land. (*Mirror* 4. Emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>

The connection between sailing and writing, so close that sometimes verges on a conflation as in the passage above, is a central one for the close reading developed below of the initial chapters of Conrad's *Lord Jim: A Tale* (1900) around the graphic imagery to be found in this stylistically dense part of the novel. The passage from *The Mirror of the Sea* just quoted I take to be a

condensed expression of a very complex and far-reaching analogy between the professions of literature and the sea at work in Conrad's texts that is beyond the scope of this essay to analyse in full. I will begin by providing a selective account of how Conrad's self-conception as a worker in both fields was determined by major historical transformations taking place at the turn of the nineteenth century. Conrad's relation to these rapidly changing working conditions (as explicitly expressed in both his published work and his correspondence) informs the complex texture of *Lord Jim* in ways I examine in the final part of this essay. Although "trace" should be taken here in the simplest sense of the term ("something [as a line] traced or drawn" [*Webster's Dictionary* 1249]), it carries attached to it a whole set of aesthetic, psychological and ethical implications.

## 2. Sailing and writing as analogous professions in Conrad

In the summer of 1912, John Malcolm Bulloch, editor of the illustrated periodical *Graphic*, asked Joseph Conrad to contribute an essay to celebrate the centennial of the launching of the *Comet*, the first British steamer, built on the Clyde shipyards. Conrad declined the offer by stating bluntly: "Thanks. But as a matter of fact I don't write articles on given subjects, and my only feeling about the *Comet* is the regret that she wasn't blown out of the water the day she was launched" (*Letters* 5, 88). Conrad's vehement rebuff might have come as a surprise to Mr Bulloch, who, had he known better (by reading certain passages of *The Mirror of the Sea*, for instance), would not have asked Conrad to write on commission a piece in praise of a steamship. The triumphantly rapid substitution of steam-powered vessels for sailing ships during his career at sea (1875-1894) had reduced his chances to find a berth<sup>3</sup> and, on a larger perspective, had come to occupy a central place in Conrad's imagery as the epitome of modern progress and its evils (alienating work in particular). Conrad witnessed how steam technology was rapidly<sup>4</sup> transforming sea transportation into an industrial, factory-like activity. Furthermore, he was particularly sensitive to the demise of the centuries-old craft of sails for which he had felt an early vocation after reading adventure tales by, for instance, Captain Marryat and James

Fenimore Cooper, two writers of sea fiction who --as Conrad states in “Tales of the Sea” (1898) already establishing a connection between literature and seamanship-- “influenced so many lives and gave to so many the initial impulse towards a glorious or a useful career” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 56). In “Poland Revisited” (originally published in 1915), he contrasted the degrading work carried out on board steamers with the far more fulfilling activity done in sailing vessels: “More and more is mankind reducing its physical activities to pulling levers and twirling little wheels. Progress! Yet the older methods of meeting natural forces demanded intelligence too; an equally readiness of wits. And readiness of wits working in combination with the strength of muscles made a more complete man” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 162).

Conrad consistently maintained that work was, had to be, a moralising force. He has Marlow say in “Heart of Darkness” (1899) that “work” gave you “the chance to find yourself” (85). Almost twenty years later, in “Well Done” (1918), Conrad would define man precisely as *homo faber*: “A man is a worker. If he is not that he is nothing. Just nothing --like a mere adventurer” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 190). Technology, when it went beyond a certain point, thwarted the development and manifestations of each individual’s capacities and aspirations, and, Conrad maintained, had demoralising effect upon men: “Mankind has been since demoralised by its own mastery of mechanical appliances” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 163). Steam technology, the earliest form of truly modern technology, proved absolutely instrumental in the passage from what Karl Marx, in *Capital*, called the “formal subsumption (of productive forces) under capital” to “the real subsumption of labour under capital” (1990, 1026 and 1035). In terms of sea transportation, handling a sailing ship from departure to landfall, even if *formally* subordinated to the capitalist mode of production, was a pre-industrial activity *per se* in that it was subjected to natural rhythms (wind, above all) and was regulated by a set of inherited values and skills that was shared and preserved by the traditional community of the craft. Yet, within the framework of Conrad’s analogy writer-commander (captain, skipper, or officer in charge) developed at some length below, the sailing vessel (the “ship of yesterday” [*Mirror* 4]) left space for the exercise of

the commander's personal abilities and talents in humouring Nature's tests and mastering the crew of sailors with an appointed end in view, whereas handling a steam-powered vessel, as he argues in, for instance, *The Mirror of the Sea*,

has not the same quality of intimacy with nature, which, after all, is an indispensable condition to the building up of an art. It is a less personal and a more exact calling; less arduous, but also less gratifying in the lack of close communion between an artist and the medium of his art. It is, in short, less a matter of love. Its effects are measured exactly in time and space as no effect of an art can be. It is an occupation which a man not desperately subject to sea-sickness can be imagined to follow with content, without enthusiasm, with industry, without affection. Punctuality is the watchword. The incertitude which attends closely every artistic endeavour is absent from its regulated enterprise. It has not great moments of self-confidence, or moments not less great of doubt and heart-searching. It is an industry which, like other industries, has its romance, its honour, and its rewards, its bitter anxieties and its hours of ease. But such seagoing has not the artistic quality of a *single-handed* struggle with something much greater than yourself; it is not the laborious, absorbing practice of an art whose ultimate result remains in the knees of gods. It is not an *individual*, temperamental achievement, but simply the skilled use of captured force, merely another step forward upon the way of universal conquest. (*Mirror* 30-31. Emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>

For Conrad, “[t]he machinery, the steel, the fire, the steam have stepped in between the man and the sea”, have transformed the sea into “a highway” (*Mirror* 72). Steam made sea transportation come close to factory work. The storage of energy available at any time entailed a divorce from nature, an encroachment on human potentialities, and the triumph of the principles of calculability, predictability, regularity and punctuality. As Conrad argues in the passage just quoted, seamanship as an “art” was possible only under sails and attainable only for those few

commanders in whose performance talent matched ambition. In the sea as in writing, the artist, in the exercise of his *autonomy*,<sup>6</sup> is the one person capable of transforming creatively the knowledge and practice of an inherited tradition into something genuinely new and truly admirable. In a passage reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent", Conrad states that a skill that develops into art

is made up of accumulated tradition, kept alive by individual pride, rendered exact by professional opinion and, like the higher arts, it is spurred on and sustained by discriminating praise. [... T]he attainment of proficiency, the pushing of your skill with attention to the most delicate shades of excellence, is a matter of vital concern. Efficiency of a practically flawless kind may be reached naturally in the struggle for bread. But there is something beyond --a higher point, a subtle and unmistakable touch of love and pride beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration which gives to all work that finish which is almost art --which *is* art.

As men of scrupulous honour set up a high standard of public conscience above the dead-level of an honest community, so men of that skill which passes into art by ceaselessly striving raise the dead-level of correct practice in the crafts of land and sea. (*Mirror* 24)

Forced by historical, material changes, artistic seamanship, Conrad lamented, was rapidly exiled from the field of work to be confined to the sphere of sports, yachting, and amateur, pleasure sailing, none of them part of the centuries-old sailing tradition whose members were joined by bonds of solidarity.<sup>7</sup> Coincidentally around the same time (turn of the nineteenth century), publishing also underwent a major transformation neatly summarised by Clive Bloom as follows: "the publishing world had become a publishing industry" (2002, 10).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the rise of the mass-market for literature in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century placed the artistically ambitious writer in a much more difficult position than that of the literary artist of the previous

generations, for whom there was no contradiction between selling and writing according to his/her standards.<sup>9</sup> Q. D. Leavis's statement, pronounced long ago, is still substantially valid in this connection: "Whereas in George Eliot's time literature had paid, that is to say, a serious novelist could make a handsome living without surrendering anything, by Conrad's it had ceased to do so. [...] In effect, cheap novels meant a temptation for the novelist to specialise that Scott, for example, had never been subjected to" (1939, 161 and 163).<sup>10</sup> The autonomy of the literary producer was, therefore, seriously restricted and compromised, and the line separating "purists" from "profiteers" (McDonald 1997, 13-14), "high literature" for the educated from "mass culture" for indiscriminating audiences was sharply drawn (Jameson 1981, 207).

For Conrad there was a basic degree of continuity between his maritime and his literary career. "I have carried my notion of good service from my earlier into my later existence", he wrote in "A Familiar Preface" to *A Personal Record* (1912) (xvii). He compared books written to journeys completed, and pages of manuscript to leagues sailed across the sea in their progress towards an end (*Personal Record* 18). In *The Mirror of the Sea*, he likened the artistic commander to the literary artist in their status as men of action: "an artist is a man of action, whether he creates a personality, invents an expedient, or finds the issue of a complicated situation" (33). The dangers and challenges of a difficult passage were analogous to those faced by a writer composing a novel like *Nostramo* (1904): "the intimacy and the strain of a creative effort in which mind and will and conscience are engaged to the full [is] something for which a material parallel can only be found in the everlasting sombre stress of the westward winter passage round Cape Horn" (*Personal Record* 98-99). Conrad is not saying, of course, that sailing and writing as fine arts are the same. Rather, he is establishing a consistent analogy between two professions that entail sacrifice, fidelity and devotion, that require a degree of autonomy to perform in accordance with the artist's convictions, temperament, self-knowledge and talent, and that demand from the artist the "just appreciation of means and ends which is the highest quality of the man of action" (*Mirror* 33).

Conrad's explicit connection between his two professions has been the object of thorough analyses which frequently revolve around the way maritime values such as "fidelity" and "solidarity" also apply to his conception of the literary craft (Daleski [1977], Berthoud [1978], Bruss [1979], Schwarz [1980], Marengo [1988], Ambrosini [1991]).<sup>11</sup> Mark D. Larabee ends his study of Conrad and the maritime tradition by stating that the craft of the sea provided the guiding values "for his subsequent course of artistic creation" (2010, 73). Joyce Piell Wexler, in the article placed right after Larabee's in the same collection, puts it very neatly when she argues that Conrad's own self-ideal as a literary producer is a combination of "sincerity, keeping faith with his own standards" (sincerity) and the required "connection to a community" of readers (solidarity) (2010, 79). A work of literary art had to produce "an impression of sincerity in the reader" (Wexler 2010, 85), who would share the artist's impressions, visions, emotions faithfully conveyed. Thus, the discerning reader was also a basic component of Conrad's ideal of literary art. The counterpart in the maritime sphere of the writer's ideal audience was, quoting again Conrad's words in *The Mirror of the Sea*, "professional opinion" and "discriminating praise" (24). I return to the central question of the reader below in my discussion of Jim's character.

Steam technology did away with artistic sailing as it fixed in advance a ship's progress in the sea, transformed the sea into "a highway" (*Mirror* 72), which is the perfect image of a preconceived, inalterable course. In steam navigation, as Conrad stated critically, "punctuality" had become "the watchword" (*Mirror* 30). Moreover, steamers were up to the standards of speed and predictability set by the capitalist mode production and trade. Sailing ships were doomed precisely because they were subjected to "[t]he qualms and doldrums and shifting winds of the open sea [which] became the enemies of industrial man, creature of his calendars and clocks" (Headrick 1981, 170). Technological progress transformed professional work into an effortless and dissatisfying activity, another example of what Marx, at his most humanistic, called "alienated" or "estranged labour". In modern capitalist societies, "work is *external* to the worker", Marx denounced, "[i]t is not part of his nature; consequently he does not fulfil himself

in his work but denies himself” (1964, 124).<sup>12</sup> Far from finding oneself, work of this type was a form of self-denial and, reformulating Conrad’s statements, an amoral activity. If fortunate enough, man could find himself only in recreation: the worker “feels himself at home only during his leisure time,” wrote Marx, “whereas at work he feels homeless” (1964, 124). To the frame narrator in “Heart of Darkness”, leisure (pleasure sailing) seems more real than their real work back in the city. Thus, in the case of the Director of Companies, who “was our captain and our host [, ...i]t was difficult to realize that his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom” (“Heart” 45). When Conrad speaks in *The Mirror of the Sea* that steaming is “less gratifying”, “less a matter of love” (30), of engagement in a “laborious, absorbing practice” (31), he is making it the epitome of estranged labour. The fact that Jim gives up hard work on board sailing ships for an easy existence as chief officer of a steamer where he can *find himself* in leisure of the most passive kind (daydreams fed by popular mass literature) is, of course, relevant for an analysis of the graphic images in the Conrad novel.

### **3. In the beginning, the end: devious tracings vs. straight lines**

Conrad’s dismissal of steam navigation as unrewarding, tedious work is extended to writing done without conviction, untrue to the artist’s own impressions and produced in response to material concerns alone. Thus, in the correspondence of the period 1896-1900, his self-fulfilling absorption in the composition of ambitious works such as *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897), “Heart of Darkness” and *Lord Jim* is to be clearly contrasted with his frustration in trying to make of *The Rescue* a popular romance. In his earliest attempt at popularity, he confessed to Edward Garnett on October 10, 1897, that he “wanted to make it [*The Rescue*] a glorified book for boys --You know. No analysis. No damned mouthing. Pictures – pictures --pictures. That’s what I want to do. And I can do that. Can’t I?” (*Letters* 1, 392). But he was both incapable (“I doubt whether I can”<sup>13</sup>) and unwilling (he postponed completion of *The Rescue* nineteen years) to write a work that would simply reproduce the conventions of popular

adventure tales addressed to an unsophisticated, undiscerning readership. The result was complete detachment from the work at hand, from the story he was writing. Thus, whereas with *The Rescue* he felt “utterly out of touch with my work”,<sup>14</sup> in the case of Marlow’s narratives the feeling was the opposite: “The story”, he told Ford Madox Ford on January 3, 1899, in reference to “Heart of Darkness”, “holds me” (*Letters* 2, 146), and to Edward Garnett he wrote enthusiastically on March 26, 1900, that “lately I’ve found I still can write –*it* [*Lord Jim*] comes! *it* comes! –and I am young and healthy and rich” (*Letters* 2, 257). Furthermore, Conrad spoke up in self-defence whenever he felt his autonomy as literary producer was being unduly limited by commercial pressures. Thus, he wrote his agent, J.B. Pinker, on January 8, 1902, in answer to latter’s accusations of lack of punctuality in delivering copy:

I am working twelve hours in the twenty four with the full knowledge of my ideal and of my risk. [...] Pray do not write to me as if I were a fool blundering in the dark. *There are other virtues than punctuality*. Have you the slightest idea of what I am trying for? Of what is my guiding principle which I follow in anxiety, and poverty, and in daily and unremitting toil of my very heart. Come, my dear fellow, I am not one of your 25-year-old geniuses you have in your pocket, or one of you *saleable* people who drive three serials abreast. I am another kind of person. [...] You and I have very different notions of failure. [...] I am no sort of airy R. L. Stevenson who considered his art a prostitute and the artist no better than one. I dare say he was *punctual* --but I don’t envy him. (*Letters* 2, 370-71. Emphases added)

Of particular interest in this connection is the way a story would end, which Conrad conceived in advance so much so that he would accept no interference in the artistic handling of a narrative to its appointed conclusion: “I shall not hurry myself [in writing *Lord Jim*]”, he told his publisher William Blackwood on February 20, 1900, “since the end of a story is a very important and difficult part; [...]it is always *thought out* before the story is begun” (*Letters* 2, 252). In another

letter to his publisher on May 31, 1902, Conrad again underscored this peculiarity of his method against charges of worthlessness coming from Blackwood's heir to the firm, his nephew George, a more business-like person than his uncle: "For, the writing ["The End of the Tether"] is as good as I can make it (first duty), and in *the light of the final incident*, the whole story in all its descriptive detail shall fall into its place [...] This is my method based on deliberate conviction. I've never departed from it". And he refers precisely to *Lord Jim* as the work "*where the method is fully developed*" (*Letters* 2, 417. Emphases added). The history of the composition of *Lord Jim* as drawn from Conrad's correspondence is, indeed, illustrative of how his writing could deviate from a pre-established editorial plan in being faithful to his method. He began writing a story to make up a volume along with "Youth: A Narrative" and "Heart of Darkness" and ended up producing a novel five times longer than initially planned. Contrarily, when Conrad took the road towards popularity decidedly, he was willing to temper his artistic ambitions to consciously meet the demands of the market, despite the fact that he could make claims vis-à-vis publishers on account of his reputation and his prestige.<sup>15</sup> The best example of this is *Chance: A Tale in Two Parts*, the last Marlovian narrative. Published in serial form in *The New York Herald* (1912) and in book form in 1914 by Doubleday, Page & Co., *Chance* was designed and promoted as a work that would appeal to women readers.<sup>16</sup> Conrad was ready to depart from his method and change the ending to make the story a more marketable product, as he admitted in his letter of early April 1912 to his agent, J. B. Pinker: "It makes a 'nicer' ending. I am thinking of the public" (*Letters* 5, 49).

In Conrad's mind, I maintain, handling a sailing ship artistically from departure to her port of destination is comparable to handling a narrative to the author's preconceived point of conclusion. Commander and author must negotiate unpredictable contingencies of, respectively, meteorological and creative nature which are not under their direct control and that must make the best of high seas, strong winds, dead calms, on the one hand, and, on the other, doubt, writer's block or the unchecked emergence of "what [...] gets] itself written".<sup>17</sup> As he told

William Blackwood on August 26, 1901, “my industry [...] seems to depend on something mysterious and even more capricious than the weather” (*Letters* 2, 354). Conversely, punctual production of saleable, popular literary stuff would be (going by the same analogy) akin to taking a steamer with the impelling energy fully stored and ready at hand in her hold along a predetermined straight-line course to her landfall. Both analogies combined and contrasted constituted an element of Conradian poetics in which the author’s own experience, his anxieties as a professional writer and his awareness of major historical transformations are inscribed. As the manner of inscription is oblique, my close reading of *Lord Jim* is guided and justified by two pieces of advice: one comes from John Hillis Miller who, referring to *Lord Jim*, says that “the reader would do well not to be too sure about the existence of insignificant similarities”, meaning recurrences, echoes, repetitions, that may create a pattern on meaning (1982, 36), and the other from Conrad himself who, in mid-October 1910, warned Helen Sanderson that in the art of writing “[t]he apparently irrelevant is often illuminative. You must never be afraid of remote connections” (*Letters* 5, 374).

All the terms of the analogy sailing-writing formulated herein reach a point of essential correspondence in graphic representation, in how the courses of a sailing ship and a steamer are differently registered as traces upon a maritime chart. Looked at from the perspective of this analogy, we can link Conrad’s own definition of *Lord Jim* (the novel that best exemplified his creative method) as “a free and wandering tale” (viii) progressing towards an end established in advance by the author to the inscription on a chart of a sailing ship’s progress to her port of destination as described by Conrad himself near the beginning of *The Mirror of the Sea*, right after identifying ship’s passage with its graphic register:

A Landfall may be good or bad. You encompass the earth with one particular spot of it in your eye. In all *the devious tracings the course of a sailing-ship leaves upon the white paper of a chart she is always aiming for that one little*

*spot* – maybe an island in the ocean, a single headland upon the long coast of a continent”. (*Mirror* 4. Emphasis added)

The devious, indirect, oblique narrative character of *Lord Jim* --particularly, the so-called *Patna*-half of the novel (where we are told about Jim’s abandonment of 800 Muslim pilgrims on board the steamer *Patna* where he worked as first mate and about the legal, professional and psychological consequences of this shameful act)-- has been underscored by critics such as Fredric Jameson who states in *The Political Unconscious* that it is “an anticipation” of what “we have come to call variously textuality, *écriture*, post-modernism, or schizophrenic writing. [... O]ne of the most breathtaking exercises in non-stop textual production that our literature has to show, [...] the realization of a mechanism of well-nigh random narrative free association” (1981, 219). Conrad, himself, recognised in his letter to William Blackwood of August 22, 1899 that the “structure of it [*Lord Jim* was] a little loose”, yet defended the work as “art” and declared that he had “certainly an idea [...] which guide[d him] in his writing” (*Letter* 2, 193-94). At the level of textual style and narrative discourse, *Lord Jim* thus enacts a critique of the conventional adventure tale which is, precisely, the cause of the Jim’s mental derangement as he identifies with the indestructible hero of popular romances and takes this intoxicating identification to the extreme, impervious to the corrective effects of real-life limitations.

In the initial chapters of this formally complex novel, the analogy works in an oblique, latent way, through a network of references to writing, to pencils, to factory production, to steam engines, to the resemblance of the sea to a sheet of paper, to the correspondence between the straight-line progress of a steamship and the lineal narrative progress of popular romances of adventure as reproduced in the mind of the young and quasi-Quixotic titular hero of the novel:

Jim was one of five sons, and when after a *course of light holiday literature* his vocation for the sea had declared itself, he was sent at once to a ‘training-ship for officers of the mercantile marine.’ [...] His station was in the fore-top, and often from there he looked down, with the contempt of a man

destined to shine in the midst of dangers, at the peaceful multitude of roofs cut into two by the brown tide of the stream, while scattered on the outskirts of the surrounding plain *the factory chimneys* rose perpendicular against the grimy sky, each slender like a *pencil*, and belching out smoke like a volcano.

(*Lord Jim* 5, 6. Emphases added)

During the night watch, Jim is alone in the bridge of the steamship *Patna*, where he is working as chief-mate, after giving up the risky and demanding home service on board sailing ships:

From time to time he glanced idly at the *chart* pegged out with four drawing pins on a low three-legged table abaft the steering-gear case. The *sheet of paper* portraying the depths of the sea presented a shiny surface under the light of the bull's-eye lamp lashed to a stanchion, *a surface as level and smooth as the glimmering surface of the waters*. *Parallel rulers with a pair of dividers* reposed on it; the ship's position at noon *marked* with a small black cross, and *the straight pencil-line drawn firmly* as far as Perim *figured the course of the ship* –the path of souls towards the holy place [the eight hundred Muslim pilgrims on board travelling to Mecca] – while the *pencil* with its sharp end touching the Somali coast lay round and still *like a naked ship's spar* floating in the pool of a sheltered dock. 'How steady she goes,' thought Jim with wonder, with something like gratitude for this high peace of sea and sky. At such times 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 had a gorgeous virility, the charm of vagueness, that *passed before him with a heroic tread*; they carried his soul away with them and made it drunk with the divine philtre of an unbounded confidence in itself. There was nothing

he could not face. He was so pleased with the idea that he smiled, keeping perfunctorily his eyes ahead; and when he happened to glance back he saw the *white streak of the wake drawn as straight by the ship's keel upon the sea as the black line drawn by the pencil upon the chart.*

[The sound of the engine-room:] The ash-buckets racketed, clanking up and down the stoke-hold ventilators, and this tin-pot clatter warned him the end of his watch was near. (*Lord Jim* 20. Emphases added)

Jim is the epitome of the undiscerning reader of popular mass literature, incapable of responding adequately to a piece of literary art, a response that constituted Conrad's major aim as a writer. Thus, for Jim, the works of William Shakespeare, the peak of literary excellence, are just pure entertainment: "Best thing to cheer a fellow up" (*Lord Jim* 237), he tells Marlow right before leaving for Patusan. Apart from the more obvious consideration of the Conrad novel as a rewriting of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, from a more specifically historical perspective the effects of Jim's intake ("course") of "light holiday literature" is a good literary example of what some commentators of the time denounced as a "reading problem", "a disease of the individual and social system produced and signified in practices of textual consumption" (Mays 1995, 166). Interestingly, Kelly Mays states how a link was firmly established between reading and steam-powered industrial production. "Urged on by the power of steam", as one essayist said as early as 1867, the industrial production of printed matter, the steam-driven press, was viewed as a sort of monster that swept readers in its mechanic pace (Qtd. in Mays 1995, 169). Readers were often compared to reading machines, to "individuals [that] resembled rather than managed technology and its products" (Mays 1995, 172). Under this critical lens, readers came to be conceived less and less as human beings (balanced, rational and morally responsible individuals) and more and more as both machines and simple bodies: "while reading habits resembled the automatic motions of a machine, they were also and more consistently described with reference to bodily ingestion –eating, drinking, and drug-taking" (Mays 1995, 172). Conrad's novel portrays the

coalescence of all these elements in the character of Jim, whose mental derangement mystifies Marlow and engages him subjectively as a member of the community of the craft, of “the now nearly vanished sea-life under sails” (*Chance* 23). Jim’s intoxication is brought to the fore (“He was of the sort that would drink deep” [ *Lord Jim* 175]) and an oblique parallel is established with the chief-engineer, a drunkard confined to a local hospital in the town in which the court of inquiry into the *Patna* case was held and who, according to the doctor in charge, must be “[s]heeted with boiler-iron inside” (*Lord Jim* 54), a passing remark that connects this man of knight-like appearance (“his face of an old soldier, with its noble and calm outlines” [ *Lord Jim* 53]) precisely to a part (boiler) of a steam-engine.

The progress of the *Patna* and Jim’s alienation from the work on board epitomises Conrad’s view of the sea as a highway in his contrast between potentially artistic sailing and effortless steaming, a type of sea “life [which] is not so much a contest as the disdainful ignoring of the sea” (*Mirror* 64).<sup>18</sup> The straight-line course on the chart is likened to the “heroic tread” of Jim’s daydreams fed by conventional romances of adventure and further connected with the steamer’s emission of smoke (an echo of the factory chimneys compared to pencils) and with the vanishing wake her keel simultaneously traces upon a sea smooth as a sheet of paper:

The *Patna*, with a slight hiss, passed over that plain luminous and smooth, unrolled a *black ribbon of smoke* across the sky, left behind her on the water a *white ribbon of foam that vanished at once*, like the *phantom of a track drawn upon a lifeless sea by the phantom of a steamer*. [...T]he ship, lonely under a wisp of smoke, held on *her steadfast way black and smouldering* in a luminous immensity, as if scorched by a flame flicked at her from a heaven without pity. (*Lord Jim* 16. Emphases added)

The trace upon the chart is the material register of an otherwise immaterial, insubstantial, ghostly set of interrelated elements. Jim’s recalcitrant attachment to his daydreams –for him, they were the “secret truth” and “hidden reality” of “life” (*Lord Jim* 20)-- makes him resist the chastising

effect of professional regulations and disciplining mandates of the law. The refrain “Nothing can touch me” that punctuates the novel (*Lord Jim* 23-24, 241, 246, 293, 325 and 413) is the expression of Jim’s permanent conviction that nothing could overpower his invulnerable position as hero in a book, the defining feature of popular romances of adventure. And, again, we come across scriptural images to represent Jim’s disavowal of anything that would undermine his imaginary heroism. Metaphorically (and, to a certain extent, literally), Jim clings to the possibility, the necessity, even, of the erasure of shameful traces. After his certificate is cancelled by the court of inquiry for having abandoned the *Patna*, he tells Marlow in broken sentences: “I always thought that if a fellow could begin with *a clean slate* . . . And now you . . . in a measure . . . yes . . . *clean slate*” (*Lord Jim* 185. Emphases added). In a tone of self-defeating sarcasm, Marlow tells his audience that the idea of starting anew by erasing our past wrongdoings is a naïve fantasy entertained by radically imaginative characters like Jim: “A clean slate, did he say? As is the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock” (*Lord Jim* 186). Later on, however, when he is about to begin his account of Jim’s exploits in Patusan (a remote inland outpost in Borneo), he is forced to qualify his conviction about the indelibility of traces of the past and uses graphic terms again, this time in a less overt way: “He [Jim] left his earthly failings behind him and that sort of reputation he had, and there was a totally new set of conditions for his imaginative mind to work upon. Entirely new, entirely *remarkable*. And he got hold of them in a *remarkable* way” (*Lord Jim* 218. Emphases added). The slate is provisionally clean for him to mark again, to “re-mark”, and his actions are truly “re-markable” in that he achieves heroic stature as the leader of the people before he meets his tragic end, which Marlow speculates was “an extraordinary success” (*Lord Jim* 416).

Jim stands as the Conradian anti-type of the worker: namely, the “adventurer”. Quoting Conrad’s “Well Done” again: “A man is a worker. If he is not that he is nothing. Just nothing -- like a mere adventurer.” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 190). Jim is a restless egocentric being,

completely voluble, indefinite or inconsistent (that is, lacking a coherent identity or individuality provided by dutiful work alone): “There is nothing in the world to prevent a mere lover or pursuer of adventure from running at any moment. There is his own self, his mere taste for excitement, the prospect of some sort of gain, but there is no sort of loyalty to bind him in honour to consistent conduct” (*Notes on Life and Letters* 190). While Conrad, the artistic worker, succeeded in his effort of handling his “free and wandering tale” against obstacles of all sorts to its prearranged final incident, Jim, the undiscerning reader of popular literature stubbornly identified with a book hero, pursued his straight-line steamer-like course to meet his death: “I feel that if I go straight”, he told Marlow, “nothing can touch me” (*Lord Jim* 325).<sup>19</sup> In the end, there may be an unexpected grain of truth in this narcissistic refrain: only death (“nothingness”) could really touch him.

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of clarity, I use abbreviations to refer to Conrad’s works, while following the author-date format for the rest of authors.

<sup>3</sup> See Mitchell (1962, 217-22) and Watt (1980, 17-18).

<sup>4</sup> Mark D. Larabee (2010) has set the record straight by showing that this process did not take place overnight, as one may believe after reading Conrad. Momentous events like the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which reduced the distance between London and eastern ports 40% and could only be transited by steamers, “did not immediately make either the sailing ship obsolete or the longer route around the Cape of Good Hope impractical” (Larabee 2010, 53). Robert Foulke’s “Life in the Dying World of Sails, 1870-1910” (1986) remains an extremely well-informed study of Conrad’s and other authors’ idealisation of the age of sails and the demise of steam navigation. For a convincing argument of how Conrad reproduces in the contrast sails/steam the polarity at work in patriarchal representations of womanhood see Nayder (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Conrad’s dismissal of steam technology bears strong resemblances with Martin Heidegger’s critique of modern technology. Conrad’s concluding remark above concerning “the skilled use of captured force, merely another step forward upon the way of universal conquest” is somewhat akin to Heidegger’s central idea of “enframing” (*Gestell*) as the technological ordering of being as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) that defines the modern era (Heidegger 1977, especially 12-23). Coincidentally, Heidegger chooses the wind that moves the windmill’s sails and the coal that is burnt to produce steam power in factories to exemplify the contrast between pre-modern and modern technology (Heidegger 1977, 14-15).

<sup>6</sup> I have emphasised the words “single-handed” and “individual” in the passage from *The Mirror of the Sea* to underscore this idea of the shipmaster as “an” artist, in the singular.

<sup>7</sup> In “Youth: A Narrative”, the frame narrator concludes his presentation of the group of five men that included Marlow as follows: “We all began life in the merchant service. Between the five of us there was the strong bond of the sea, and also the fellowship of the craft, which no amount of enthusiasm for yachting, cruising, and so on can give, since one is only the amusement of life and the other is life itself” (“Youth”: 3). If “man” is a worker, “life” is work with a binding moral dimension.

<sup>8</sup> This is not the place to give a full account of all the aspects at work in this process. I refer the reader to the work of some prominent theoreticians and historians in the related fields of publishing, literary production and readership

like Richard Altick (*The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, London: The University of Chicago P, 1957), N. N. Feltes (1986), Peter D. McDonald (1997), John Sutherland (*Victorian Novelists and Publishers*, London: Athlone, 1976), Raymond Williams (*The Long Revolution*, New York: Columbia UP, 1961), or Andrew Milner (*Literature, Culture and Society*. London: UCL Press, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> N. N. Feltes, discussing the serialisation of Hardy's *Tess*, chooses precisely the magazine Conrad turned down, *Graphic*, as one of the examples of the industrialisation of publishing at the time, a process which affected both the writer as producer and the reader as consumer: "fiction writers entered their [*Bolton Weekly Journal* and *Graphic*] pages as hand-loom weavers entered a factory, knowing that within that space the publisher had a wide choice of methods to capitalize 'the goodwill of a novel.' [... A journal such as these] did not address social groupings as it found them, [...] but rather reconstituted their members into a specialized clientele, 'extremely diversified' perhaps, but an audience with 'a market character,' consuming a new kind of 'branded goods'" (1986, 64).

<sup>10</sup> Recently, Joyce Piel Wexler has pointed out in a similar vein that "[a]lthough Thackeray could gather shekels without compromising his standards, Conrad increasingly felt that he had to choose between them" (2010, 85).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Bruss's *Conrad Early Sea Fiction: The Novelist as Navigator* (1979) deserves special attention in this connection. Bruss's book is an important contribution to the discussion around the sailing-writing homology were it only because it takes Conrad's distinction between sailing ships and steamers seriously. Bruss delineates the seaman's process of maturation in the craft of the sea derived directly from Conrad's (mostly autobiographical) essays. In the course of his experiences at sea, the seaman comes to love his ship and to assume the defining values of the maritime tradition of sails. He highlights Conrad's preference for sails over steam and attributes directly the moral standard of the seaman's maturation to sea-life under sails. Despite its subtitle ("the novelist as navigator"), however, the connection between writing and sailing is not developed at much length. Bruss states that, for Conrad, sailing can be artistic: that is, a seaman serving under sails can achieve a degree of self-realisation by being equal to the standard of conduct, and can even, in some cases, go beyond it and become creative and innovative. The navigator can become an artist by broadening the artistry he had inherited from the tradition within which he matures, argues Bruss, yet, in what ways is a novelist analogous to a navigator is an issue he leaves unexplored. In this connection, the identification of the literary artist's navigational counterpart is crucial. Thus, for instance, in the chapter on *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Bruss considers Captain Allistoun and good old Singleton *both* artists because they reaffirm, materialise and enhance in their practice as seamen the inherited values and skills of the tradition of sails. As Conrad himself states in *The Mirror of the Sea*, something other than skill must intervene in the performance of a seaman or of anybody else in a given activity or profession to deserve the adjective "artistic" (*Mirror* 24). For Conrad, it is the ship's master that is the true counterpart of the literary master, and not "sailor" in general, as Bruss seems to infer (1979, 33-34). Only a master —the centre of "authority" on board— can raise to the position of an artist within the tradition of sails and be recognised as one by his peers. As I see it, from the point of view of the Conradian homology sailing-writing, old salt Singleton could never be an equivalent of the artist, only Allistoun, the master of the *Narcissus*, really has the opportunity of becoming one. See Schwarz (1980, 4) on Allistoun, and Conrad (*Mirror*, 31-35) on examples and counterexamples of "the masters of the fine art" of sailing drawn from his experience at sea.

<sup>12</sup> "This is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something alien, not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation, the *personal* physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life [...] as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him" (Marx 1964, 125).

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Edward Garnett, December 12, 1897 (*Letters* 1, 417).

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Edward Garnett, August 3, 1898 (*Letters* 2, 83).

<sup>15</sup> Donovan (2005, 174); Wexler (2010, 78, 90-91, 97).

<sup>16</sup> See Watts (1996); Jones (1999, 144); Conrad, Letter to J. B. Pinker, April 7, 1913 (*Letters* 5, 208).

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Edward Garnett, September 24, 1895 (*Letters* 1, 247). As Richard Ambrosini states in reference to the dynamics of literary production in Conrad: "The individuality of the artist's 'self-expression' is, then, the result of an interaction between self-conscious craftsmanship and 'what got itself written'" (1991, 42).

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of how Conrad "saw the death of a real and living symbolism embodied in the sea as being heralded by the arrival of the steamship" see Mark Stockdale (2006, 2). Stockdale refers to *Lord Jim* as the novel that best exemplifies the changes in the perception of the sea brought about by steam technology: "In *Lord Jim*, the sea is reduced to a surface as 'level and smooth' as the *Patna's* chart, across which the ship follows the pencil-line of her course" (2006, 10).

<sup>19</sup> There is a complex set of images that connects Jim and the *Patna* that I cannot analyse in detail here. I may just refer, for instance, to the adjective “infernal”, which is used both by Marlow in reference to Jim’s mystifying defect which he tries hard to reveal (“some infernal alloy” [*Lord Jim* 45]) and by Jim himself in reference to the “infernal steam” (*Lord Jim* 31) in the *Patna*’s engine room, “the place where the bad boys go when they die” (*Lord Jim* 22). Like Jim’s likeable appearance that hides something inside, the *Patna* “had been painted outside” and hides inside “something invisible, a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable body” (*Lord Jim* 14, 31). In fact, the ascription of this final remark about a fateful spirit of perdition is ambiguous as the reader does not know if it refers to Jim, to the *Patna*, or to both. Furthermore, Jim’s outward appearance as described in the very first sentence of the novel shows his shortcomings (“an inch, perhaps two, *under* six feet), bespeaks some physical defect (“slight *stoop* of the shoulders”), and we are told, he “*advanced straight* at you” in a way “which made you think of a *charging bull*” (*Lord Jim* 3. Emphases added). It is not only the straight-line movement that connects him to the *Patna* and to steam-powered vessels in general, his physical defects and shortcomings are also a minimal reduplication of the *Patna*’s (“lean like a greyhound, and eaten up in rust” [*Lord Jim* 13]) and the comparison with a “charging bull” recalls the image Alfred de Vigny, a poet Conrad’s father translated into Polish, chose to represent metaphorically his negative view of technological progress (in reference to the steamship’s land counterpart, the locomotive, de Vigny wrote: “On the iron bull which smokes, puffs and bellows,/Man has mounted too soon”. “The Rolling House of the Shephard: Letter to Eva (1844)” (De Vigny 2006, ll. 78-79, 311).

The third-person rendition of Jim’s testimony before the court at the point in which he reproduces the mumblings of the captain at a moment of crisis on board the *Patna* hints at steam power as the origin, or cause of the shameful event itself, but this not simply in objective factual terms (the importance of which the narrator diminishes by letting the implied author speak: “They [the three members of the jury] wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him [Jim], *as if facts could explain anything!*” [*Lord Jim* 29. Emphasis added]), but also in terms that entail the subjective engagement of those involved, particularly Jim as first mate and as officer of the watch – terms that Marlow, when he takes over as narrator, would call “the fundamental why, [...and] not the superficial how of this affair” which is the sole interest of the judges to find constrained, as they are, by the precepts of legal discourse and procedures (*Lord Jim* 56):

“He [the captain of the *Patna*] made no definite answer to what I [Jim] had to tell. He mumbled to himself; all I heard of it were a few words that sounded like ‘confounded steam!’ and ‘infernal steam!’ –something about steam. I thought . . .”

He [Jim] was becoming irrelevant; a question to the point cut short his speech [...] *He was coming to that, he was coming to that* –and now, checked brutally, he had to answer by yes or no. (*Lord Jim* 31. Emphasis added)

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