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## White Light: J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* as a war story

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man. For WAR, consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting; but in a tract of time, wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known: and therefore the notion of time, is to be considered in the nature of war; as it is in the nature of weather [...] All other time is PEACE.

(Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan* I.18.8)

War narratives as a rule follow a logic that is based on a paradoxical premise. War is depicted as a set of circumstances or a condition of existence that is the opposite of peace, that is, of ordinary existence: it is extreme and excessive, unreal, distorted, the opposite of what goes on in a civilised human community. On the other hand, war is seen as an ontologically superior realm or condition inasmuch as it allows an insight into something “deeper” than normal existence. War is supposed to yield a deep knowledge about life, a knowledge that could not be acquired in the condition that is called “peace.” The other place (which can be and often is war) is the opposite of ordinary reality, yet it is also more real, a condensed, more intense version of reality.

In narrative terms, this (ontological) difference is usually articulated by means of an initiation story: war is another place (in cases where the war is going on in an exotic or colonial setting, “other” in many other senses, too) into which a reasonably callow protagonist is introduced. His introduction invariably becomes an initiation by the end of which the war-weary veteran, the returning soldier and survivor cannot be unproblematically reinserted into his old life because of his unbearably great knowledge: war veterans are all Marlows and

ancient mariners, bearing upon themselves the marks of that “beyond” from which they have come back. This implies that war initiation narratives somehow “exceed” the confines of ordinary stories of initiation: they imply an unnaturally accelerated process of maturation, where the crossing of the line between innocence and experience leads not to a state of maturity but to premature oldness. The temporal dislocation caused by this structure is often seen and recontextualised by referring to it as “pathological,” but it is also, in narrative terms, privileged, simply because it establishes a gradation in levels of authenticity, reality, experience: even if there is too much knowledge condensed in one place, this place will be the narrative centre of the world, the site of “reality.” Hence the tradition that the pathological state of returned soldiers and war victims (e.g. Holocaust survivors) is seen and revered as reflecting a deeper knowledge or awareness: war trauma might be said to be caused by an overdose of reality.

These narratives are usually stories of (cultural, political, anthropological) critique that expose the deluded myths of the world and civilisation of peace. The dark knowledge afforded by the war disturbingly reflects back upon the world of peace that is initially configured as the opposite of the war condition. Introduction to war is often accompanied by a spatial journey, war is exiled to the dark peripheries of the civilised world (or it is produced automatically by the lawlessness of primitive existence). In such narratives, darkness, war, and periphery turn out to be constitutive of peace and light: the insight afforded by war turns out to be also an insight into peace which becomes a version of war instead of its opposite (for it is naturally the superior truth of war that contaminates or spills over into the paltry truth of peace and not the other way round). The lesson of such narratives could be formulated in Derridean terms: “there is no outside of war” (Il n’y a pas de hors-guerre). War is not the opposite of peace but its excess or other, suppressed, dissembled or disguised by something called “peace.” “The horror” is not limited to Africa or Vietnam, and the revealed truth, as in Conrad, is as often social and political, as it is psychological. The return of the soldier (especially from distant parts of the world) is also the return of the repressed, and it is the horror of this knowledge that is embodied in his ghost-like figure: he has been contaminated by the otherness, darkness of (colonial) war.

*Empire of the Sun* creates the conditions of its readability by offering itself as a representative of war narrative conceived as cultural and anthropological

critique. Is "the Empire of the Sun" like "the heart of darkness" in this sense?<sup>1</sup> Is it an alien place that is gradually revealed as that which we have always known only did not like what it told us? The fact that Ballard's novel has a child for protagonist does not exclude the possibility of reading it along these lines: viewed like this, *Empire of the Sun* would look something like a cross between *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord of the Flies* (with a touch of *The Quiet American*), even more brutal in that it reveals an internal darkness (or a piece of the sun) in children as well as, or rather than, in adults.

This contextualisation of the novel raises the following questions: first, does the narrative follow the logic of an initiation story? Is this a war narrative using the spatial logic suggested in its title only to deconstruct the very binary opposition that is set up by positing a boundary, and therefore two kinds of existential space? Second, how is this translated into the spatial structure of Jim's subjectivity? Does Jim enter the empire of the sun only to recognise himself in it and realise that he has always been in there, that there is no outside? Consequently, is the empire of the sun also, or primarily, a psychological space? Third, do we read Jim as a "returned soldier," as the embodiment of a knowledge that is best suppressed or repressed? Does our reading repeat what happens to Jim in the course of the narrative, his figure allegorically standing for "war" and the reader painfully recognising her/himself in Jim?

These questions place Jim's subjectivity into the centre of the reading activity. His subjectivity – the stake of the text – is what doubles the reading process: we read the horror of the empire of the sun as well as Jim reading and assimilating this horror. The key is clearly to establish relations of internality and externality: if Jim is an "unusual" child recognising himself in war scenarios (the war is internal as well as external), the interest of the reading becomes psychopathological (the study of a sick child) and the empire of the sun is domesticated as a radically alien space, its alienness partly transferred to the sphere of psychopathology. If the war is read as an internal as well as external experience (something that Jim imagines or projects as well as something that happens to him), the entire world of the novel is transformed into a place of psychological

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<sup>1</sup> The connection is also made in one of Ballard's autobiographical sketches, when he jestingly compares his return to Shanghai to Marlow's revisiting of the Heart of Darkness. Ballard, *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews*. New York: Picador USA, 1996, p. 173.

allegory.<sup>2</sup> No matter which of the versions we prefer, Jim's war experience is Jim's Progress, and the various places and figures along the way would be deciphered allegorically as things neither fully external nor fully internal, as possibilities or potentialities within Jim that are realised in the half-projected scenarios of war. The novel, although clearly allegorical, hesitates between the external and internal decipherments, and thus the places and figures in the text retain their allegorical dimension without, however, being rendered to either of the poles that would provide them with a closure.

### INNER SPACE

This hesitation of the text (and of its reading) already indicates a necessary ambiguity towards the initiation logic which presupposes a dichotomy, or at least a hierarchy between various degrees or intensities of reality. Though returning in its articulations to the logic of the initiation narrative, *Empire of the Sun* cannot fully commit itself to such hierarchies simply because its place is not different from the spatial setting that characterises Ballard's earlier fiction. This novel takes place, takes its place in Ballard's "inner space," a locality that is "neither portrait nor landscape, but something in between."<sup>3</sup> Much has been said about the Baudrillardian insight into post-modern hyperreality in Ballard's fiction; what needs to be stressed in the present context is the fact that "inner space" is, its name

<sup>2</sup> The question of reading also has a metapoetical aspect, relating to Ballard's oeuvre. *Empire of the Sun* has been read as the key to Ballard's work. In this sense, the novel repeats and allegorises the reading experience of Ballard's work: "empire of the sun" becomes the earlier work of which now we are being shown the origin. In the face of the central tradition of reading (and domesticating) Ballard's novel, Roger Luckhurst has shown beyond doubt that *Empire of the Sun* cannot possibly be read and domesticated as the autobiographical key to Ballard's early, ostensibly more experimental and unpleasantly "sick" work, as the text that renders the idiosyncrasies of the earlier Ballard somehow humanly understandable and therefore more acceptable – if not artistically, at least as a personal document. Luckhurst has demonstrated that *Empire of the Sun* is nothing of the kind: despite its more accessible formal strategies and autobiographical subject matter, this text is no less radical in its emphasis on the erosion of stable subjectivity and its dependence on pre-formed images and systems of representation (see Roger Luckhurst. "Petition, Repetition, and 'Autobiography: J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* and *The Kindness of Women*." *Contemporary Literature* 35.4 [1994] 688–708, pp. 699–700 *et passim*). In this reading, the dilemma of external vs. internal is repeated on a "higher" or more abstract level without being resolved.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Greenland. *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1983, p. 34.

notwithstanding, a thoroughly phenomenological place, the domain "where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse."<sup>4</sup> In its undecidedness or endless mutuality between interiority and exteriority, Ballard's inner space seems to resemble Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "phenomenal field." "This phenomenal field is not an 'inner world,' the 'phenomenon' is not a 'state of consciousness,' or a 'mental fact,' and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in Bergson's sense."<sup>5</sup> It is important that in this model the world is not simply the product of subjectivity: "it is the identity of the external and the internal and not the projection of the internal in the external."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Ballard's inner space is not a wholly psychological realm: it is a place where the outside world, the individual's desires (and/or pathology) and the culturally processed, pre-formed images and discursive systems meet, merge and spill over into each other. Jim's world – even before the outbreak of the war – is the space defined by this triangle of world, desire, and image. The war begins as a war of images in the German and Allied propaganda newsreels that are a continual and irrepressible presence in Shanghai, insistently clamouring for attention. The films penetrate Jim and he begins to dream of war: "At night the same silent films seemed to flicker against the wall of his bedroom in Amherst Avenue, and transformed his sleeping mind into a deserted newsreel theatre. During the winter of 1941 everyone in Shanghai was showing war films. Fragments of his dreams followed Jim around the city; in the foyers of department stores and hotels the images of Dunkirk and Tobruk, Barbarossa and the Rape of Nanking sprang loose from his crowded head" (11).<sup>7</sup> A process of incessant spilling over is described here, where the pre-formed filmic material is worked over subliminally in Jim's dreams, and the composite products of his dreams and the films in turn begin to seep into the world around him: "The whole of Shanghai was turning into a newsreel leaking from inside his head" (14).

The source of these images that occupy Jim's dreams is ultimately human, but this vague and unlocatable source is similarly caught up in the same endless

<sup>4</sup> J. G. Ballard. Introduction to *Crash*. New York: Vintage, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> All parenthesised references are to this edition: J. G. Ballard: *Empire of the Sun*. London: Granada, 1985 [1984].

triangular circulation that subverts the whole notion of origin. Ballard's world, as David Punter put it, is full of "discarded images:"

Everywhere we have implanted icons – photographs of dead film stars, records of murderous and murdered presidents – supposing that, in the cultural flux, they can be discarded when the time is ripe. But they have a greater material presence and force than we had dreamed: indeed, it is the icons themselves which seep into our dream-time, which provide the points of reference against which our action takes place, and refuse conveniently to slide away into the sand-dunes when we try to elbow them aside.<sup>8</sup>

The images, themselves the products and representatives/representations of inner space, produce subjectivity; the process, however, is not one of simple absorption or consumption. The affective investment (in Ballard, this investment is by definition libidinal) with which a particular subjectivity turns towards the images and objects of the world (or the world and objects of images) is always unpredictable, depending on the triangular flux. The result is an infiltration, a mutual seeping, an erosion of subjectivity as pure interiority. It is in this way that "reality" is being produced: it is neither fully the product of subjective fantasies, nor that of mass-produced images: a composite, symptomatic product, its various elements are more or less powerfully charged or cathected by subjectivity. The images cannot be said to "represent" an outside world or express an inner state: there is a circulation of signifiers along these poles, traversing subjectivity as well, producing it and being produced by it. Inner space is in fact the end of intimacy as pure interiority: "When the young soldier showed him the newspaper he carefully studied the photograph of fighter-bombers taking off from the Japanese carriers, scenes that he seemed to remember from his own dreams" (53); "The terrain of trenches [outside Shanghai] seemed to have sprung fully from Jim's head" (156). This is not simply the insight that even our dreams and desires are mass-produced,

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<sup>8</sup> David Punter. *The Hidden Script: Writing and the Unconscious*. London: Routledge, 1985, p. 10. In *Empire of the Sun*, such images or icons include – apart from the moving ones of the newsreels and Hollywood films – the ubiquitous posters of Chiang Kai-shek, as well as the "partly dismantled faces of Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh" on the cinema hoarding (59) and the spate of advertisements and all-American images in the American magazines stocked by Basie and dropped from the bombers. Jim is an avid and fascinated consumer of all these images and icons: empty inside, he is the perfect perverse consumer, created by the other's desire, in that he immediately and fully absorbs the images (see Dennis A. Foster. "J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority." *PMLA* 108.3 [May 1993] 519–32, pp. 528–9).

pre-empting "any free or imaginative response to experience,"<sup>9</sup> but a fundamental ambiguity of the phenomenological field of inner space that is retained throughout the text: Jim is manipulated by the images and slogans that he so readily devours, but the world takes its place in the zone that is neither a prefabricated cultural system nor the projection of individual psychopathological desires.

"Will modern technology provide us with hitherto undreamed-of means for tapping our own psychopathologies?"<sup>10</sup> asks Ballard. In his work, desire moves along this triangular circuit and moves the circulation. When Ballard speaks about "the death of affect,"<sup>11</sup> I think what he means – certainly what we see in his fiction, including *Empire of the Sun* – is not the death but the displacement or transferring of affect from human objects onto the objects of the physical world as well as onto images (and, in Jim's case, words). With the erosion of pure interiority, all the composite objects of this inner space are susceptible to being erotically charged. It is in this sense that Ballard talks about the need to psychoanalyse what used to be the external world: since it is a composite, and symptomatically produced, text, Ballard suggests that it must be read as a dream-text,<sup>12</sup> supposing the presence of a latent level behind or beneath the manifest text of the world that is compounded of materials from extremely different registers and ontological spheres: wishful projections, fantasies, real and imagined memories, "real" objects, etc.

This is the space of the novel's world, the space into which war intrudes – or which produces the intrusion of war into itself. The relevance of the initiation scheme, which involves a crossing of boundaries from one realm into the other, depends on the place of war in the inner space of the novel – that is, in the space that incarnates and is incarnated in Jim's subjectivity.

#### THE MEANING OF WAR: NARRATIVE RULES

War seems to intrude into Jim's life as a cataclysmic disruption of the world, depriving him of all the stable points of his existence: his parents and servants as well as his home. War is chaos, the removal of boundaries that so far seemed to be inviolable. During the tortuous truck journey that takes a group of European prisoners across long tracts of the no man's land inside and around Shanghai (this

<sup>9</sup> Ballard, Introduction to *Crash*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Introduction to *Crash*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Introduction to *Crash*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Introduction to *Crash*, p. 5.

is one of the eroded boundaries), Jim watches the sky in search of his favourite stars, but “[a]fter a few minutes he was forced to admit that he could recognize none of the constellations. Like everything else since the war, the sky was in a state of change. For all their movement, the Japanese aircraft were its only fixed points, a second zodiac above the broken land” (146). It is a cosmic disruption, involving social displacement (Jim is forced to socialise with people like Basie when “his entire upbringing could have been designed to prevent him from meeting” them [97]) and an existential displacement as well: “walls of strangeness” (50) spring up, separating him from the rest of the world, “[a] peculiar space was opening around him, which separated him from the secure world he had known before the war” (76; see also 65–6).<sup>13</sup> Read in terms of an initiation narrative, the walls of strangeness might represent the necessary stage of solitude and estrangement that precedes initiation, the death of the old self that makes way for the new. On the other hand, this intermediary or transitional stage (of death) does not seem to want to end in the novel, and Jim’s awareness of the walls of strangeness and the condition of separation might simply indicate the fact that he is already on the other side, at home.

War also represents a new world in the sense that what happened before its outbreak becomes irrelevant – and this is important in the context of the initiation narrative –: knowledge equals “war knowledge,” experience equals “war experience.” This is obvious, for instance, when Dr Ransome appears in the detention centre: “Jim decided that he had entered the war at a later stage than Basie and himself. He had probably come from one of the missionary settlements in the interior, and had no idea of what went on at the detention centre” (129). It is due to this war knowledge that Jim is able to earn the fear and respect of even the adult British prisoners: Jim *knows* something they are not aware of, and therefore also allegorically embodies something which they do not like to see: in the camp, for many of his fellow-prisoners he is the “war-child,” the allegorical representative of the war itself, who is often waved away, as if the adults were afraid of being contaminated by some unspecified war virus (the most dramatic example of Jim’s extra knowledge is the episode when he begs water from the Japanese soldiers and drinks it all himself, but only because he knows that the Japanese soldiers will appreciate his joke and reward him with another bottle of

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<sup>13</sup> This dislocated world allows unexpected reversals: Jim is hit by a Chinese amah, and he acknowledges this fact by noting that these women must be strong (68); while he is prowling the streets he is taken for a beggar boy (his first, scaring, mirror image in the novel) (78).

water which he will be able to distribute among the others, aware that his own survival wholly depends upon the group's survival. Jim *knows* that his cruel joke is appreciated only by the Japanese and none of the British prisoners [135]). The distance separating him from the rest of the world is here reconfigured as the distance between himself and his old world ("already Jim felt himself apart from the others" [136]). In terms of the binary initiation logic of war stories, Jim somehow embodies experience as opposed to the others' innocence: it seems that he has gone deeper into the world of war than his fellow Europeans.

As the suspension of certain rules, the war also brings changes that might be welcome for Jim: a series of increasingly more serious transgressions. When he lives on his own in the flat of his parents, their absence is at first not really noted by him: he continues to occupy his accustomed place in the symbolic system of the family, content with the visible traces of his parents (her mother's footprints visible in the talc strewn on the floor), playing his games with the accustomed toys in the accustomed hours and taking his accustomed seat at the family dining table. His small transgressions begin when he takes his model aircraft down to meals; then, fulfilling an old desire, he bicycles around the flat. This process is finally acknowledged by him when he thinks of Basie in terms of his difference from his father: "At home, if he did anything wrong, the consequences seemed to overlay everything for days. With Basie [whom he endows with authority] they vanished instantly. For the first time in his life Jim felt free to do what he wanted" (120).

War, thus, as a removal of barriers, also means the removal of repressive barriers. At one point Jim is watching what could be called the signifying processes of war: the gradual, diligent removal of bombed-out buildings and ravaged machinery and their unpredictable migrations and transformations into the huts and dwellings of the village people. "These strange dislocations appealed to Jim. For the first time in his life he felt able to enjoy the war. He gazed happily at the burnt-out trams and tenement blocks, at the thousands of doors open to the clouds, a deserted city invaded by the sky" (127). These dislocations are the displacements made possible by the totally free circulation of all the components that make up the objects of the world: there is no limit to what can be transformed into what, the regulations of (social, symbolic) movement are all suspended. The grammar of the war, the semiotics of war economy is thus struc-

turally similar to the workings of the primary process: the war creates a (partly psychic) space where the language of the pleasure principle can operate freely.<sup>14</sup>

The new freedom, represented by the authority of Basie (it has to be noted that he shares this authority with Dr Ransome, who, with his Latin conjugations, does seem to stand for the symbolic order in the camp) is also evident in the narrative organisation of the text.<sup>15</sup>

The nuclear event (no pun intended) of the novel is the explosion of the atomic bomb, an event that is supposed to put an end to the condition of existence called war and instead ends up perpetuating it. It is an event that is not over when it has occurred, an event that cannot be said to have an end. The centrality of the nuclear explosion seriously affects the imagery of the novel, as well as its conditions of narrative, in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, events in the novel are without contours (a fixed beginning and end): the explosion forms a hollow at the centre of the text, a gap that spills over into the entire fictional world, into all the major images that dominate Jim's experience of the world/war. This structure cannot be explained by calling it a network of pre-figurations and flashbacks: the narrative and figurative organisation of the text resembles the workings of nuclear fallout: the event, fractured into a myriad pieces, settles upon the entire narrative world, contaminating and inhabiting all its images.

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<sup>14</sup> For all its inadequacy, the metaphor of the primary process well indicates the ambiguity concerning inside and outside in the novel. If the war "speaks" in the language of the primary process, it immediately becomes allegorised as a personification. Where the primary process is spoken (or speaks), there has to be a desiring agent behind this language. Again, the question comes down to identifying that which speaks this language, to a decision between external and internal allegorising. On the semiotics of the primary process, see Kaja Silverman. *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 67-9.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that Jim's parents, the representatives of symbolic authority, are extremely pale figures from the start. We first see them on their way to a party, wearing entirely unserious fancy dresses (the mother dressed up as a pierrat and the father as a pirate), and even before the war the most stable reference points in Jim's psychic world seem to lie elsewhere, outside the symbolic circle of the family. The task of remembering his parents in the camp seems little more than a self-willed element of his survival strategy. The stability of Jim's home at the start of the novel is similarly questionable: he is an English boy who was born in China and has never seen his homeland (his imaginary England consists entirely of popular icons); on the other hand, as a member of the English community, barred from the rest of Shanghai by a boundary that is not only geographical but also social, existential and ontological, he cannot experience the city as his home either.

On the other hand, the explosion works like the negative of an event in Lyotard's sense:<sup>16</sup> it institutes an order of (non-)narrativity that has nothing to do with previous orders of narrativity, and, by contaminating the entire narrative, it provides the 'model' – a radical fragmentation and discontinuity – for each event in the novel.

The most typical narrative micro-unit of the novel is the *encounter*, especially in the vagrant, itinerant sections that make up about half of the text. Locked into the borderline zone of Shanghai and its surrounding area, Jim strays out of one chance encounter into the other, meeting people of all kinds in terms of nationality, class and age. For instance, after his departure from the Olympic Stadium and walk back to the Lunghua Airfield, he meets (or he thinks he meets) the Japanese kamikaze pilot he has admired so long. The pilot is crazily and pointlessly beating the sugar cane and the nettles with his stick, but presents the starving Jim with a mango. Then he cuffs Jim on the head, "waving him towards the perimeter fence as if warning him away from contaminated ground" (281). A few pages later, Jim encounters a group of Chinese soldiers; instead of shooting Jim, they simply look through him and march on (290). Jim then encounters an American fighter with its ejection ports open, "and it occurred to him that the pilot might kill him for fun" (291). Instead, the pilot waves to him and flies off. When he reaches the camp, Jim meets a group of Englishmen who have entrenched themselves in the safety behind its fence. Their leader, Lieutenant Price, instead of admitting Jim into the camp, shoves him away, punching him in the chest with his bandaged hand (293). These four chance encounters (each with the representatives of one of the four nations that acquire allegorical significance in Jim's world) end differently, and there seems to be no way of guessing what is going to happen in each case. Two persons or groups of persons encounter in the no man's land that is the periphery of Shanghai, and the outcome is an act of kindness, a friendly acknowledgement of the other's presence, total indifference and violent hostility respectively (it should be added that Jim is a "blank" in all cases, as well as a child, which means that the active aspect of the encounter is decided by the other party). The outcomes, however, are not different in terms of affective investment. These are encounters between two "objects" or entities in a force field, and what comes out of them is entirely unpredictable, no matter how we try to read them: nothing in our previous knowledge of the text could provide

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<sup>16</sup> See Geoffrey Bennington. *Lyotard: Writing the Event*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, pp. 107–8.

us with a clue as to what will happen. Psychological motivation or continuity is out of the question in the case of three of these events – the Japanese pilot, as a “character,” could be but is not, an exception –, so we must fall back, either upon our extra-textual knowledge of “human nature” or, what is more likely, upon the allegorical reading models provided by the text as to how to read each of the nationalities. This allegorical knowledge, however, does not work either: it seems that in the “encounter,” allegorical possibilities of interpretation (that is, reading possibilities that would make use of formerly acquired knowledge and narrative continuity) are simply inoperable, burnt out by the immediacy of the event. This, of course, should give us second thoughts concerning the allegorical predictability of nationalities that other strands in the text appear to promote.

An earlier chapter is called “An End to Kindness.” In the encounter between Jim and the pilot, the giving of the mango is no kindness in the sense that it cannot be explained with reference to the feeling or affection known as kindness;<sup>17</sup> it is not the result of a disposition, thus it cannot be explained either by the relationship pertaining between the two characters or by their “character.” “Kindness,” giving the mango, is simply one among a set of possibilities that appear when any two characters meet, irrespective of nationality or previous connection; the chances that the pilot beats Jim’s head into a pulp or that he ignores him completely are equally high or low.<sup>18</sup> An aleatoric logic governs the encounters, and thus any encounter is a totally random event not only in the sense of having been brought about by the randomness of war but also in the sense that it has no consequences regarding the further course of events.

The suspension of narrative rules applies also to “continuous” relationships. Basie’s betrayal is perhaps the most dramatic example. In the detention camp, Basie seems to be about to leave in a truck towards one of the prison camps (the detention centre is a place where the sick and weak prisoners are brought to die, and only the few sturdy survivors are taken to prison camps), while Jim is left

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<sup>17</sup> The act of giving the mango is random, but it finds its place in Jim’s internal world as one in a series of seductions by death (like Mrs Philips’s sweet potato given to Jim on the way to the Stadium).

<sup>18</sup> Unwilling to handle this radical discontinuity of character and intersubjective relationships, Spielberg’s film invents a friendship between Jim and the young pilot, inserting the episodes in which they perform acts of kindness for the other (Jim returns the pilot’s model glider from inside the camp, and the pilot saves Jim’s life when he is planting the pheasant trap) into the narrative continuity of “friendship.” The giving of the mango thus becomes “motivated” in terms of a narrative of a friendship, and the subversive discontinuity in Ballard’s novel is domesticated.

behind. Basie immediately "adopts" two English boys instead of Jim, but his spectacular betrayal has no consequences in Jim: "Jim watched him without resentment. He and Basie had collaborated at the detention centre in order to stay alive, but Basie, rightly, had dispensed with Jim as soon as he could leave for the camps" (127). What has happened before has no relevance at all to what will happen, not even in terms of the psychic continuities of guilt or resentment or gratitude; relationships are not conducted in this way. The past does not define the present, and, consequently, a fundamental discontinuity is revealed in "character" as well. This is obvious if we consider how Spielberg's film version handles the same episode. At this point the film once again balks at the implications of the novel's narrative texture: Jim is spectacularly outraged by Basie's betrayal, throwing a childish tantrum, hysterically appealing to Basie who, apparently unperturbed, looks away, bearing the silent disapproval of the British prisoners on the truck. What is more, the film stages a second act of betrayal when Basie, despite his earlier promise to Jim, deserts from the camp without telling him. Jim once again has a hysterical fit. These additions in the film transform the totally unpredictable relationship between Jim and Basie into a continuous narrative and, as a result, make a "character" out of Basie: a knowable person with motivations and "traits" that prepare us for his actions instead of the more sinister implications of the totally random, quark-like creature in the novel who exists in suspended animation between his acts that are not the products of a certain (psychological) disposition or narrative prehistory but of a concatenation of various unpredictable circumstances.

These are the narrative conditions prevailing in the "inner space" experienced by Jim. The question remains, of course, as to the extent to which all this is exterior to Jim's subjectivity. In other words, Jim's "strangeness" has to be addressed.

#### *JIM AND THE ALLEGORIES OF NATION*

Many readers are shocked by Jim's unemotional, muted response to human relationships and affairs as well as by some of his disturbingly unlikely affective attachments. Is Jim's subjectivity abolished or made inhuman by the war? Is he like the boys on Golding's island, the little beast emerging as soon as the repressive laws of civilisation are suspended? Is he a strange, "perverse" child who recognises himself in the landscape and narrativity of the war? This amounts to asking

whether he is supposed to be different from us or be our representative. Is he an allegorical figure of war as difference from us, or war as something in all of us?

The incident with the water suggests that he is different from the other Europeans who remain wary of him throughout the war. He is exhilarated by the war which he often thoroughly enjoys; he grows relatively stronger in the camp, acquires a certain authority – true, an authority of dubious value – among its inhabitants, and refers to the year 1944 as the happiest year of his life (165, 166, 180). Jim's affective life is not non-existent. As with other typical Ballard protagonists, his affections are transferred or displaced into various unusual channels: a fascination with words and images, an overawed interest in war technology, especially aircraft (this in itself is not supposed to be unnatural in male children) and an apparently unaccountable enthusiasm for the Japanese soldiers. It is especially this last infatuation that is hard to accept. There is of course an element of opportunism in it, as the Japanese are Jim's only chance of survival, but one senses a more disturbing element in this strange fascination. Jim's first relevant observation already suggests a deeper layer: "he admired the Japanese. He liked their bravery and stoicism and their sadness which struck a curious chord with Jim, who was never sad. The Chinese, whom Jim knew well, were a cold and often cruel people, but in their superior way they stayed together, whereas every Japanese was alone" (23). The Japanese are thus allegorically presented right from the start as the mirror images of Jim in terms of a fundamental homelessness and solitude. They – or at least their displaced representatives in conquered China – are a nation of existentialists who have somehow come to terms with the irreducible solitude of man.<sup>19</sup> Bearing in mind

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<sup>19</sup> In this passage, the Japanese are defined in their opposition to the Chinese, but a postcolonial reading could use Jim's observation as a comment on the subjectivity of the colonial conquerors. In this sense Jim, unlike the rest of the British community, experiences the colonial presence of the conqueror as a condition of fundamental homelessness and displacement, and he is the only European who is able to recognise himself in the melancholy of the Japanese. The hostility of the English community to Jim could thus also be read as an inability to face, not simply the war, but the fact that colonial existence is always already war existence – what is more, a kind of war existence where the circulation and apportioning of violence happens in entirely unpredictable ways: "the stories of colonialism – in which heterogeneous cultures are yoked by violence – offer nuances of trauma that cannot be neatly partitioned between colonizer and colonized" (Sara Suleri. *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 5). Suleri's conception of the colonial encounter, an event dominated by "the migrant moment of dislocation" (5) and completely dispensing with chronology (7), would be another possibility for a reading of the narrativity of the novel (Hiroshima would then become the ultimate and paradigmatic act of colonial violence),

this "metaphysical" aspect of Jim's attraction to them, it is logical that, for Jim, the par excellence Japanese is the Japanese pilot: his admiration comes to be focused on the figure of a young Japanese kamikaze pilot (189), an obvious and unsettling mirror image. The figure of the pilot represents something essential in what the Japanese seem to stand for in Jim's psyche: "Jim realized that he was closer to the Japanese, who had seized Shanghai and sunk the American fleet at Pearl Harbour. He listened to the sound of the transport plane hidden behind the haze of white dust, and thought again of carrier decks out on the Pacific, of small men in baggy flying suits standing by their unarmoured aircraft, ready to chance everything on little more than their own will" (136). Just like Jim in the water incident, who was "prepared to risk everything for the few drops of water" (136). The Japanese pilot is the existentialist who does everything in the constant awareness of death, of the absolute risk involved in action and ready to risk his self in the solitary struggle against the universe, even willing his own death: the logical culmination of flying (and this gives a disturbing colouring to Jim's otherwise "regular" or "normal" fascination with it) is thus the suicidal mission of the kamikaze flight.

The figure of the kamikaze pilot suggests an even more disturbing aspect of Jim's obsession, and links his admiration for the Japanese to his interest in the technology and machinery of flying. As Dennis Foster remarks (528-9), the relationship between the kamikaze pilot and his machine is extraordinary in the sense that the pilot is part of the weapon: the destruction of the target brings about the simultaneous destruction of the weapon and the pilot in a single discharge. Early on in the novel, Jim leaves behind the frivolous fancy-dress party of the English community to prowl an abandoned aerodrome, and enters the fuselage of a Japanese fighter that was shot down. Jim has been obsessed with the wreck for months, trying to persuade his father to take it home. Inside the "cave of rusting metal" (31), he is overcome by a strange excitement:

A potent atmosphere hovered over the cockpit, the only nostalgia that Jim had ever known, the intact memory of the pilot who had sat at its controls. Where was the pilot now? Jim pretended to work the controls, as if this sympathetic action could summon the spirit of the long-dead

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although it would supply the traumatic spatiality and temporality of the narrative with a perhaps unnecessarily narrow final referent. We are certainly justified to read *Shanghai* as the par excellence colonial space, a traumatic field of displacements, full of the dead who refuse to disappear; it is, however, not inevitable to regard the colonial experience as the only colouring of the text's trauma.

aviator [...] He lifted himself from the cockpit and climbed on to the engine cowling. His arms and shoulders were trembling with all the confused emotions that this ruined aircraft invariably set off in his mind. Giving way to his excitement, he picked up his model glider and launched it into the air. (31)

Jim fills the space within the machine that was once occupied by the dead pilot. This rusty cave is an oddly maternal space that is perfectly filled out by the contours of the pilot's crouching body. In this strange scene (the cave might be another possible allusion to the rite of passage at the centre of initiation rituals) that prefigures the grotesque struggle with the dead Japanese kamikaze pilot towards the end of the novel, Jim attempts to raise the dead pilot by means of filling his space and repeating his actions. That is, he imitates, replaces the dead pilot in order to bring him back to life, in a scene that remains ambiguous in its implications: there is a strong suggestion that what motivates Jim is his fascination for the pilot who, through his death, has been absorbed into his flying machine, and it remains uncertain whether his strange affinity connects him with the live or the dead pilot (the pilot as part of the machine). The most disturbing element of the episode is the fact that this is "the only *nostalgia*" Jim has ever known: the only instance when a painful memory of something establishes a psychic continuity as interiority in Jim establishes this interiority in the space occupied by death.<sup>20</sup> "The intact memory of the pilot" that fills the space of the cockpit might refer to the pilot's memory somehow magically entering Jim (perhaps via the memory of the machine itself) or Jim's memory of the pilot he has never seen. In either case, the only reference to a loving relationship with the past (nostalgia) refers to a past that is entirely alien, placing it outside what one would think of as the space of Jim's interiority. The ambiguity of the scene is indicated also by Jim's climbing out of the wreck: this travesty of a birth that is in fact the result of the

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<sup>20</sup> In the temporality of war, nostalgia is defined by Jim as a particularly dangerous condition, a fixation on/of the past which, as I have tried to show, is simply not relevant in war conditions. Jim thinks with a certain disdain of the English prisoners, who name parts of Lunghua Camp after famous parts of London (167; the strategy recalls that of another Golding hero, Pincher Martin on his barren rock), wasting their time on nostalgia (168) instead adjusting to the requirements of war. In the camp, succumbing to nostalgia every now and then is like a hobby for Jim: he looks after Mr Maxted "out of nostalgia for his childhood dream of growing up one day to be like him" (177). It is probably not by chance that the death march to the Stadium is dominated by the partnership of Jim and Mr Maxted, and that in the Stadium, Mr Maxted becomes one of the most powerful figures of death in the novel.

imitation of death fills him with "confused emotions" that, in the full context of the novel, might be described as erotic.

Jim's fascination for machines is more unambiguously eroticised in his admiration for American planes. "Jim thought intently about the B-29s. He wanted to embrace their silver fuselages, caress the nacelles of their engines. The Mustang was a beautiful plane, but the Superfortress belonged to a different order of beauty" (223). The American planes, however, first appear in the novel (and in Jim's psyche) as silver angels of death, of a seductive and beautiful death, projected by Jim's delirious mind in the detention camp well before they actually begin their attacks against the Asian continent. In the first half of the novel, "seeing the American planes" is the hallucinatory experience of near death and the planes do not lose this affective value or connotation even when, in the second half of the novel, they become a ubiquitous "real" presence in the skies over Shanghai. Jim sees them as erotic objects of streamlined beauty (he is certain that the ventral radiators "had been put there for reasons of style alone" [192]) only after they had been associated with death in his feverish dreams. It is the sight of their beauty that convinces Jim that the Japanese have lost the war ("However brave, there was nothing the Japanese could do to stop those beautiful and effortless machines" [197, see also 223]). In the victorious American aircraft, the relationship between man and machine undergoes a further change: now the beautiful machine is infinitely superior to the pilot. It is the planes that fly and Jim wonders how people as unassuming as the American inhabitants of the camp might be able to operate these complex machines (223). The American planes thus represent a further stage in the evolution of the machine, a stage characterised by a beauty that has hardly any need of human co-operation: if the wreck of the Japanese bomber had absorbed the subjectivity of the dead pilot, in the American planes there is no longer anything to absorb. If the Japanese planes stand for the sudden, "heroic" extinction of the personality through a union with the machine, the American aircraft are born out of the erosion of personality in the first place. They represent different versions or styles of death, the American one being far more advanced.

If we continue the allegorical reading of the nationalities in the novel, the Chinese represent a different attitude to death. They appear as a formless mass characterised by a lack of individuality. The mass is silent but threatening – this is indicated by the fact that when some of its members assume individuality, they invariably bring physical danger (like the amah who hits Jim or the young

Chinese boy who pursues him in the streets of Shanghai, threatening him with mutilation). They are like a shapeless mass of matter, filling out all the available space in its anonymity, their multitudinous presence crushed up against all the boundaries, borders, fences and perimeters (179–80, 291).<sup>21</sup> If the Japanese and the Americans are connected to flying, the Chinese, crouching motionlessly on the ground and not even looking up into the sky, represent gravity and weight, a powerful downward pull. That the Chinese are also connected to death in Jim's mind is obvious from the very beginning: the coffins returned by the tide are referred to in the very first paragraph of the text and become a pervasive presence throughout the novel (11, 29, 40–1, 89, etc.). The cyclical return of the coffins indicates the continuous and irrepressible presence of the dead in the world of the novel, also evident in the fields around Shanghai that are either abandoned battlefields or interspersed with countless burial mounds from which the dead are insistently returning; "the rotting coffins projected from the loose earth like a chest of drawers" (29): it seems that the land of the living and the land of the dead are not properly demarcated.

The Chinese subvert this most important boundary or demarcation line of the novel in other ways as well. First, they are very closely linked with the material world of objects that surrounds them and from which they emerge, but not in the mystifying way that suggests an intimacy between the natives and their homeland, an intimacy incomprehensible and unattainable for the colonisers and invaders. They are associated throughout with one of the novel's most pervasive motifs, that of (organic and technological) debris, refuse, rubbish, waste: the Chinese (exemplified by the multitude of beggars that populate Shanghai like some undergrowth) literally grow out of the debris of the world (like a secretion) and in their turn generate or secrete new rubbish and waste. Jim's cubicle in the camp, protected by its makeshift screen constructed out of refuse, resembles "one of the miniature shanties that seemed to erect themselves spontaneously around the beggars of Shanghai" (172). The Chinese are one with their land in the sense of joining the process of its endless production and recycling of waste material. The Chinese are indistinguishable from other matter: they are silently transformed into waste matter and they return to be recycled and reused in the process that is mightier than any of them. They are themselves waste matter, the debris that is interminably secreted by the land: therefore the difference between death and life is a matter of little interest in their world (as it is imagined and

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<sup>21</sup> See Foster, p. 528.

figured by Jim).<sup>22</sup> Jim is aware of this from the start: speculating about the public hangings, he decides that the Chinese enjoy the spectacle of death "as a way of reminding themselves of how precariously they were alive" (57).

The wisdom of the Chinese is primarily "ecological:" they are human wastage, endlessly regenerating, but also the recyclers of wastage (the beggars live on others' waste). They are the scavengers of this world, and Jim, enthralled by the primary process of the war, is duly fascinated by "the tireless ability of the Chinese to transform one set of refuse into another" (187) and thus start a new cycle. If the signifying process of the war makes possible the free circulation and metamorphosis of all the component elements, its primary materials *and* agents are the Chinese: to become a beggar in the symbolic network of the novel (both Jim and Basie become beggars at one point [113], and so does Dr Ransome [134]) is to become one of the Chinese, indistinguishable from the circulating matter. The metamorphosis perhaps indicates the personal realisation that one is waste material, dead as well as alive all the time, and the acquisition of the ability to enter the process of recycling, to use the rest of the waste matter that makes up the world. This insight appears more radically in the second half of the novel, connected to other images of death in Jim's psyche. Supposing that Jim's fascination with the Japanese, Chinese and Americans is a fascination with death, with an awareness of death that is lacking from the English, one could say that the three nationalities represent three forms of dying: the Japanese pilot dies an existentialist, "heroic" (but not patriotic) death, willing the total extinction of his self in a single moment of discharge. The "American death" is the hallucinatory, beautiful surrender of the self in the face of the beauty of technology and images. The Chinese do not die because they are never fully alive: their life is a slow process of dying in the sense of being transformed into the variety of waste material that is called dead.

This scheme would seem to lend itself to narrative articulation in terms of an initiation story. Jim is initiated into the world of death, confronted on his way

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<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that we are not talking here about some exoticising valuation of the oriental unity, where death is valued as an indispensable, organic part of the cyclical life process: far from a pristine domain of ancient wisdom, this is a waste-land, a disaster area, an inner space that is covered in the wreck and debris of war, where the constant presence of death in life is not the intimation of some metaphysical unity. This is basically a dead world, if Jim desires it, it is so at least partly because he has been fed images of the dead world. Naturally, the Japanese and Chinese of his imaginative landscape are *his* Japanese and Chinese only, or rather the images of the Japanese and Chinese that are emotionally invested by him.

with representatives of dying/death. The problem is that there is not one but several stories of initiation here. One style or conception of dying does not delete another, and in fact each experience of death can be read as a moment of initiation. Such proliferation of rites of passage reflects the general breakdown of narrative continuity in the novel. There are several other factors as well that work against the possibility of conceiving the novel as an initiation narrative.

*THE RETURN OF THE DEAD AND THE RAISING OF THE DEAD*

As I have suggested in my discussion of the narrativity of the novel, the tidy and allegorical national characterology in terms of styles of dying and attitudes to death breaks down in the face of individual events. Death is appealing to Jim in all of its forms, and the central episodes or experiences of death combine the Chinese and Japanese insights into death and dying. The brutal public execution of the coolie who is beaten to death by the Japanese soldiers is one such episode. The execution is a show put on by the Japanese to teach a lesson to their European prisoners: not to assert their power over them but to demonstrate their disdain and superiority (that is why one wonders why the makers of the film chose to replace this scene with two acts of senseless brutality against the prisoners themselves: the savage assaults on Dr Rawlins [Dr Ransome's name in the film] and Basie). This lesson is well taken by Jim (228), but the deeper effect of the execution becomes evident only later. What appeals to him is the way the coolie dies: he does not try to resist but starts a private ritual of dying, singing "that strange sing-song that the Chinese made when they knew they were about to be killed" (227). The Chinese coolie uncharacteristically raises his face to the sky (228) and continues to sing even as the blood is trickling from his mouth. This is not heroism or bravery but a peaceful and smooth passage into death. That is why "the prospect of being killed excited" Jim (238). Wondering about the exact nature of this excitement, he recalls the dying coolie: "For a few last moments, like the rickshaw coolie who had sung to himself, they would be fully aware of their own minds" (238). What appeals to Jim in the execution is the fact that the Chinese coolie took control over his own death, thereby transforming it into the moment of the fullest possible self-presence, where the willing of the extinction of the self could become the most powerful, in fact the only, manifestation of the self's strength.

Death has two contrasting but equally alluring aspects for Jim (or rather, Jim's fascination with death has two major components and both find their correlatives in the inner space of the novel). First, it is the disruption of identity, no longer experienced as a threat for an already eroded subjectivity. The allure of the incessant work of displacement and transformation that goes on in this world is the allure of total immersion in the primary process of metamorphosis, even if this immersion lacks the ecstatic tone of Bataille's celebration of the dissolution in the process of existence by sacrificing discontinuous, individual existence.

On the other hand, the allure of death is the allure of fixity, of the end to endless displacement and metamorphosis, of recycling. These aspects of death correspond to the two phases of death identified by Georges Bataille. In the first phase, that of decay, "death is that putrefaction, that stench [...] which is at once the source and the repulsive condition of life"<sup>23</sup> (80). The second phase is that of whitened bones that "no longer have the intolerable look of decomposing flesh" (80).<sup>24</sup>

*Empire of the Sun* is dominated by the first aspect of death, by threatening and alluring images of decomposing bodies that are not yet distant enough from what is called life to be wholly different, but the other component of death is also present. Early on in the novel, when Jim walks among the lidless coffins returned by the earth of the burial mounds, he is

struck by the contrast between the impersonal bodies of the newly dead, whom he saw every day in Shanghai, and these sun-warmed skeletons, every one an individual. The skulls intrigued him, with their squinting eye-sockets and quirky teeth. In many ways these skeletons were more alive than the peasant-farmers who had briefly tenanted their bones. Jim felt his cheeks and jaw, trying to imagine his own skeleton in the sun, lying here in this peaceful field within sight of the deserted aerodrome.

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<sup>23</sup> Georges Bataille. *The Accursed Self*. New York: Zone Books, 1986, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Bataille, p. 80. In J. G. Farrell's *The Singapore Grip*, a novel concerned with the same period and area (British citizens during World War Two in the Far East), Shanghai appears as the opposite or double of British Singapore: a land of chaos, disorder, "a constant reminder, a sort of *memento mori*, of the harsh world which lay outside the limits of British rule" (London: Book Club Associates, 1979, p. 75). The most pervasive symbol of the transgressiveness and excess of Shanghai is its multitude of "exposed corpses:" "In 1937 more than twenty thousand bodies had been found on the streets or on waste ground in the city. By 1938 with the help of the war the number of corpses collected had risen to more than a hundred thousand in *the International Settlement alone!*" (Farrell, p. 75).

The most seductive images of death imply a smooth, gradual process of dying, the traditional notion of death as a desired peace, as relief from painful change. The sweet potato given to Jim by the dying Mrs Philips is one such seductive fruit of death ("Death, with her mother-of-pearl skin, had nearly seduced him with a sweet potato" [251]). The other agent of peaceful death is Mr Maxted who, dying in the Stadium, simply does not let Jim go with the others. Jim pretends to be dead in order to survive (272), repeating the primeval magic rite of mimicking the object of fear. "Defense in the form of fear is a form of mimicry," write Horkheimer and Adorno. "Every reaction of petrifying is the archaic scheme of survival: life pays the duty of its survival by becoming like the dead."<sup>25</sup> From this moment of mock death – the logic of initiation would have us say – Jim does not differentiate between the living and the dead. This is, once again, the empire of the sun, of the second sun, another border crossing that leads there.

The novel's world is organised by a number of boundaries and borderlines, and this network of perimeters and fences and zones is overshadowed by the fundamental boundary that separates life from death. If we conceive of the novel as a war narrative that is articulated as an initiation story, with the obligatory borderline that separates innocence from experience, ignorance from knowledge, then the passage into the empire of the sun is a passage into a world where death is not an irruption into life but part of it: the crossing of a boundary leads to the region where the primary boundary has already been crossed and is continually subverted. The two major narrative tropes of the novel are "the return of the dead" and "the raising of the dead," and both imply a transgressive crossing of the boundary that is uncrossable (or where crossing has always been a one-way traffic). The basic difference between the two is the difference of agency: the return of the dead is a natural process that is independent of the participants, whereas the raising of the dead conceives the crossing of the border as a miracle, a transgressive act, the violation of the laws of the world. I have already suggested that the lands of life and death are not properly demarcated geographically, the dead constantly spilling back into the world of the living (as with the burial mounds, or in the camp where the buried corpses stick out from below the thin layer of earth that has been scraped over them [205–6, 234]).

In the second half of the novel, the demarcation is subverted in another sense. Jim learns from Mrs Philips that the soul leaves the body before it is buried

<sup>25</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* 3. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 205.

(207), and this enables him to subversively imagine death not as an instantaneous passage or crossing but as a process whose beginning and end are not entirely clear. If it is impossible to say where death begins and where it ends, then it is also impossible to say who is dead and who is alive: different creatures represent different stages of death. Hence the proliferation of ambiguous intermediary figures throughout the second half of the novel, including Lieutenant Price, referred to as a "corpse" (307) and a "spectre" (306) "raised from the dead" (304), "the first of the dead to rise from the grave and start the new war" (304), and the Belgian woman who is "resurrected" by Dr Ransome: "Dr Bowen had said that she was dead, but Dr Ransome squeezed her heart under her ribs and suddenly her eyes swivelled and looked at Jim. At first Jim thought that her soul had returned to her, but she was still dead" (207). It is also this subversive temporal spreading of the process of death that enables Jim to think of himself and of others as already (partly) dead: "Jim's soul had already left his body and no longer needed his thin bones and open sores in order to endure. He was dead, as were Mr Maxted and Dr Ransome. Everyone in Lunghua was dead. It was absurd that they had failed to grasp this" (238). "Perhaps they were already dead? Jim lay back and tried to count the motes of light. This simple truth was known to every Chinese from birth" (249). This is what he refers to as "the real meaning of war" (238). By conceiving of death as a gradual process involving in fact two deaths, a gap is opened in life through which death enters and, in turn, "a small space" (339) can be opened in death through which the soul may return.

If the narrativity of the novel seems to work against both allegorising and reducing the text to the logic of an initiation story, the pervasive and ambiguous imagery of death has a similar destabilising effect. The numerous and often discordant elements of Jim's fascination with death are combined in two powerful images that dominate the second half of the novel. The first is the figure of the American pilot whose fighter explodes over Lunghua, his burning body hurling down towards the airfield. The burning figure in the sky introduces the sun imagery that is so pervasive in the novel and culminates in the second sun of the atomic bomb.<sup>26</sup> "Jim could see the burning figure of the American pilot still strapped to his seat. Riding the incandescent debris of his aircraft, he tore through the trees beyond the perimeter of the camp, a fragment of the sun whose light continued to flare across the surrounding fields" (193). The burning pilot and his

<sup>26</sup> The sun imagery is actually introduced a few pages earlier when Jim feels his warm plate like a "piece of the sun against his chest" (182).

burning machine emit a “halo” of light that somehow remains lingering over the paddies. “For a few minutes the sun had drawn nearer to the earth, as if to scorch the death from its fields” (194). Jim reads the death of the pilot in terms of his own death, the prospect of which he welcomes (194). The “archangelic” (200) pilot is incorporated into his imaginative world and serves as raw material for imagining his own death:

He imagined himself at the controls of one of the fighters, falling to earth when his plane exploded, rising again as one of the childlike kamikaze pilots [...] One day Jim would become a wounded pilot, fallen among the burial mounds and armoured pagodas. Pieces of his flying suit and parachute, even perhaps his own body, would spread across the paddy fields, feeding the prisoners behind their wire and the Chinese starving at the gate [...] Jim stared into the sunlight outside the dispensary window. The silent landscape seemed to seethe with flames, the halo born from the burning body of the American pilot. The light touched the rusting wire of the perimeter fence and the dusty fronds of the wild sugar-cane, bleached the wings of the derelict aircraft and the bones of the peasants in the burial mounds. Jim longed for the next air raid, dreaming of the violent light, barely able to breathe for the hunger that Dr Ransome had recognized but could never feed. (201–2)

This fantasy of his own death combines almost all the images that dominate the novel. The death of the American pilot becomes Jim’s death (the repetition of Jim’s occupation of the wrecked fuselage), which is in turn imagined as part of the endless cycle of falling and rising that entails a metamorphosis, thus it is conflated with the kamikaze death, the explosion of the self (foreshadowed by the “jewelled icon of a small exploding boy:” Jim’s “star-like image” reflected in the cracked mirror while he is standing in one of the abandoned European flats in Shanghai: “pieces of himself seemed to fly across the room, scattered through the empty house” [63]). This solitary, violent death is transformed into the Chinese “ecological” death, the process of becoming recyclable waste material that will be used to feed the less dead (like the excrement in the camp that is used to fertilise Dr Ransome’s kitchen garden), indistinguishable from the other bits of the falling debris. The light that is issued by the dead body becomes a halo that stays in the sky for the rest of the novel, merging with the white light of the nuclear explosion of which it turns out to be the premonition: the fragmented body is transformed into light and illuminates a landscape of death and devastation (derelict aircraft and white bones). The whole image is animated by Jim’s desire,

a longing for the next air raid, a "hunger" that is correctly identified by Dr Ransome as a desire for death.

The other dominant image, apparently more closely connected with the fixity aspect of death, is that of the runway of bones. When Jim and the group of European prisoners arrive outside the Lunghua camp, they are first taken to the airfield where a concrete runway is being constructed by Chinese prisoners. The whole construction site is covered in a pall of ashy white chalk dust (158, 159) that covers everything and everybody who is connected to the construction. Among the prisoners, Basie and Jim immediately join the Chinese coolies: they pick up pieces of stone to take them to the runway, and the "chalky powder" begins to settle on them instantly. Jim stares at the "white surface of the runway" (159) and fantasises that the Chinese are laying down their chalk-white bones "in a carpet for the Japanese bombers" (160). They are building their own body into the airfield, eroding or crumbling slowly as the runway is being built, and from the mass grave new aircraft will rise. In an apocalyptic vision Jim imagines the bodies all going to the pit and imagines himself following them. At this point he refuses to die this eroding, Chinese death and opts for the Japanese style of dying: he begins to run towards "the shelter of the [Japanese] aircraft, eager to enfold himself in their wings" (160). At this moment, a major rupture occurs, and the circumstances of Jim's and the others' survival are never fully explained. The moment is one end to Jim's life; the radical narrative rupture suggests – yet another point of passage – that the camp section is a new existence whose connections with what went on before are tenuous.

The runway of bones keeps haunting the rest of the novel (188) as a possible form of Jim's death: "The whiteness of the runway excited Jim, its sun-bleached surface mixed with the calcinated bones of the dead Chinese, and even perhaps with his own bones in a death that might have been" (233). The allure of this death is present, however, mainly in the form of a fallout: the omnipresence of the white dust that first appears in his mother's deserted room, covered in talcum powder (62; this is also stressed in the film where the footprints against the white powder evoke the overexposed negative image associated with the nuclear bomb). During the death march to the stadium, "a fine film covered their uniforms and webbing, and reminded him of the runway at Lunghua Airfield" (253); as he is lying beside the dying Mr Maxted, the glimmer of the night raids

“cast a damp sheen over Jim’s arms and legs, another reminder of that fine dust he had first seen as he helped to build the runway at Lunghua Airfield” (259).<sup>27</sup>

The white dust or powder is revealed to be the same as the white light, the fallout that pre-exists the nuclear explosion. The whole world is covered in the afterglow of the atomic flash: “Its white glare still lay over the road of their death-march from Lunghua, the same pale light that he could see in the chalky fade of the stadium and in Lieutenant Price’s lime-pit skin” (314). “A white glaze covered the derelict land [...] Jim remembered the burning body of the Mustang pilot, and the soundless light that had filled the stadium and seemed to dress the dead and the living in their shrouds” (276). This is the powder that covers Basie’s face and the strange white hue of Lieutenant Price’s skin, the ubiquitous white sheen that is now the precondition of seeing, the zero degree of experiencing the world. This is brought home at the very end of the novel, when the whitish glaze reappears on the giant movie screens that show images of war to the Chinese. “The second of the screens, in front of the Palace Hotel, was now blank, its images of tank battles and saluting armies replaced by a rectangle of silver light that hung in the night air, a window into another universe” (350). When nothing is projected onto the screen, this nothing is in fact the ever-present white sheen that covers the word, the degree zero, the precondition of representation, a silver light that incorporates the *screen* among the images of death that populate the novel. The empty screen itself becomes another representation (and representative) of the white dust and white light.

This transformation takes place in the empire of the sun, which turns out to be the empire of the second sun. The white sheen or glaze, the white dust that settles on everything, and the silver rectangle of the empty screen, are all synecdochically identical with the light of the second sun. *Empire of the Sun* presents a world illuminated by the light of the second sun, a thoroughly anti-Platonic place. Whereas in the Platonic parable the sun is the idea of the good and of truth, its clarity allowing direct, unobstructed vision and revealing the objects of the world in their deepest truth, in the empire of the sun, in this world illumi-

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<sup>27</sup> A few further instances of the motif of the airfield. As Mrs Vincent lies dying in the stadium, “[t]he night’s rain had washed the last of the dye from her cotton dress, giving her the ashen pallor of the Chinese labourers at Lunghua Airfield” (265). It is to the runway that Jim walks back from the stadium with the intention of finding peace and safety (277–8), of lying down quietly among the derelict aircraft (283).

nated by the second sun, light occludes instead of revealing, derealises the world instead of confirming its reality.

Jim looked down at the powdery talc that covered his legs and shoes, like the undertaker's talc blown on to the bones of a Chinese skeleton before its re-burial, and knew that it was time to move on.

By late afternoon this layer of dust on Jim's legs and arms began to glow with light. The sun fell towards the Shanghai hills, and the flooded paddy fields became a liquid chessboard of illuminated squares, a war-table on which were placed crashed aircraft and abandoned tanks. Lit by the sunset, the prisoners stood on the embankment of the railway line that ran to the warehouses at Nantao, like a party of film extras under the studio spotlights.

(253-4)

The dust, here identified as properly belonging to creatures neither alive nor dead (a skeleton before its re-burial), turns into a layer of light that covers the world, making film extras out of the group of prisoners, and a "mirage" out of their personal belongings in the stadium (263). It is as if Ballard had continued Plato's parable in an unlikely direction: one sun gives truth and life, as well as the possibility of proper naming, but two suns are too much light: after the explosion, the prisoners are "sitting on the floor of a furnace heated by a second sun" (267). The second sun is described as "a piece of the sun" (274) and the light cast by it is "the shadow of another sun" (332). In a world where light kills instead of giving life, a total breakdown of what is the essential ontological boundary in the novel becomes inevitable: Jim, as well as all the other characters illuminated or overshadowed by the light of the second sun, is dead as well as alive; eating becomes a dangerous, contaminating and cannibalistic process. To eat in the presence of death is to devour death, to become one with it; at the same time, food invariably feeds death (303-4).

In the climactic scene of the novel, Jim's grotesque tussle with the dead Japanese pilot, his "imaginary twin" (337), all these images are brought together. Jim first wants to bury the body, that is, to establish and reinforce the boundary between them. It is also obvious that, with the end of the war, Jim is burying part of himself, a double that stands for his war-part or death-part. He is attempting to bury his death wish. Jim then tries to eat, in order to empty the tin can with which to dig a grave for the pilot, but finds himself once more unable to eat in the presence of death, imagining that the canned meat is alive: "This was food that

would devour those who tried to eat it" (339). Suddenly scared of the consuming power of the dead pilot, he punches its face: the violence to the dead body creates a semblance of life in it (a quivering lid, fresh blood pumped from a wound), and this is the profane, disturbing miracle of raising the dead. It is through the attempt to kill the pilot more fully that he seems to be brought back to life. "For the first time since the start of the war he felt a surge of hope. If he could raise this dead Japanese pilot he could raise himself, and the millions of Chinese who had died during the war" (340). Beginning to fantasise about raising all his dead, he keeps pumping: "His hands and shoulders were trembling, electrified by the discharge that had passed through them, the same energy that powered the sun and the Nagasaki bomb whose explosion he had witnessed" (340). It is a strange resurrection that is powered by the atomic bomb, and it is a strange raising of the dead that begins by the raising of the figure of death. The episode with the Japanese pilot is obviously an internal fight (not unlike Humbert Humbert's grotesquely and gruesomely unreal scene with his double, Quilty, in *Lolita*). If the scene begins by Jim trying to bury that part of himself which represents death or a desire for death (burying or killing thus paradoxically amounting to an assertion of life), Jim's vision of raising the dead becomes the sign of his inability to exist outside the empire of the sun: to raise his double, to give life to it, is to succumb to his fascination with death. He wants to "raise the Japanese aircrew lying in the ditches around the airfield, and enough ground staff to rebuild a squadron of aircraft" (340). That is, he wants to perpetuate the war, to live forever in the empire of the sun.

This is the final paradox of the empire of the sun: the act of raising the dead becomes the expression of a profound, ambiguous fascination with death. In his desire to be a miracle worker, Jim wants to resurrect the possibility of his own death.

All these styles and seductions of dying represent various aspects of Jim's fascination with death. The power of the novel resides in the radical undecidability of the origin of this fascination. Jim, the "war-child" (209), is in some way a figure of death but this allegorical function is fractured into shards: he is different from the others and is the others, this fascination with death is disturbing because of its unlocatable origin in the phenomenal field, because we cannot entirely blame it onto an outside world that corrupts or distorts Jim's psyche, but nor is it the projection of Jim's psychopathological perversion or death wish. Jim is certainly not an allegorical figure of a collective death wish.

There are too many border crossings, too many deaths and returns from the dead for the initiation logic to remain intact. The novel is not the account of his allegorical journey from a world of life ("peace") into a world of death ("war").

Nor is it, however, the allegorical story of his journey or passage from the state of not knowing this into the state of knowing this. "Heart of Darkness"-type of deconstructive initiation stories use the narrative form in order to subvert it: the two realms that are immediately established by the narration of an act of passage ("peace" and "war," say) are posited only to spill over into each other. The spilling reveals the essential secret identity of the suppressed sphere of darkness and the centre that gains its identity from the suppression of such darkness. Nevertheless – I am loosely following here Paul de Man's account of the workings of text as allegorical narrative<sup>28</sup> – such narratives repeat or reproduce the very error that they expose: by placing in the centre of the narrative (perhaps only as a narrating voice) a subjectivity who experiences the deconstruction of the binary opposition as a moment of insight, the two realms of innocence and experience, ignorance and knowledge (the knowledge of the untenability of initiation narratives), are re-established as authentic, nameable moments in the story of the self. We have seen that Ballard's narrative does not allow this recovery of binarism and the concomitant narrative organisation. The narrativity and imagery of the world under the second sun, the structure of the "inner space," do not allow the transferring or displacement of authenticity from the first level of the narrative to a higher level. Jim, the central consciousness in the novel whose subjectivity is clearly the stake of the text, is not a "returned soldier," because his subjectivity is not a closed space that can be examined detached from the space it inhabits, and because the narrative logic of the novel does not allow the continuity that would be implied by the psychological logic of crossing the borderline between innocence and experience.

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<sup>28</sup> Paul de Man. *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 162, 199, 205.