

9. WEAKNESS AND DIGNITY IN CONRAD'S *LORD JIM*

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ABSTRACT. Conrad's *Lord Jim* presents not only a paradigmatic case of weakness of will, but an equally paradigmatic case of the enormous difficulties that attend fitting weakness of will into our other moral attitudes, particularly those relating to moral worth and moral shame. Conrad's general conception of character and morality is deeply Aristotelian in many respects, somewhat Kantian in others. The essay traces out the intuitive strengths and philosophical difficulties that both an Aristotelian and a Kantian conception will have before the problem of weakness of will, and argues that the ambiguity in Conrad's treatment of Jim's case is the reflection of the clash between these two equally compelling, incompatible conceptions of the self and moral worth.

Nabokov in several places speaks quite critically of what he calls 'the novel of ideas.' His feelings on the subject were unusually passionate; almost certainly they led him to underrate writers such as Mann and Dostoevsky. But it is not at all hard to see his general point. Long passages of improbably conducted philosophical dialogue hardly furnish the surest route to an impression of naturalness. Further, there is usually a sense of a 'double life' in works of this sort. Abstract forays into conceptual questions tend to lie uneasily alongside the more familiar subjects literature also takes up, such as the exploration of certain characters, various social contexts and relations and so forth. The overall impression is often of two rather separate enterprises, each absorbing in its own right, but here rather crudely bolted together.

Whatever we think of Nabokov's criticism, he was certainly wrong if he thought this fate was inevitable to any work interested in difficulties which, for lack of a better word, we might call philosophical. An enduring conceptual puzzle and the drama of a particular life may sometimes be deeply intertwined without any sense of artificiality. Such is the case I believe with Conrad's *Lord Jim*. The interest we take in Jim as character goes hand in hand with our interest in attempting to understand a certain kind of moral failure and the troubling resonance this phenomenon has for our overall moral sensibility. And the conceptual puzzle Conrad explores takes on the urgency it does in *Lord Jim*

because it is convincingly tied to a particular life. The conceptual puzzle here of course takes as its starting point a special kind of moral weakness, one where we also have almost overwhelming reason to think of the agent as both able and in this case quite anxious to perform the good. The personal story centers around the various forms of self respect available to someone who has unhappily failed in just this way.

In what follows, I want to argue that Conrad's sense of moral life--and so of moral failure--is shaped considerably by what turn out to be conflicting Aristotelian and Kantian themes. In the end, though, *Lord Jim* is also the story of finding one's moral way independently of any conception, a task it seems is forced upon us as it were given all that we require from the standpoint of self worth. The sense of ambivalence so many readers have noted in *Lord Jim* is, I think, partly the reflection of Conrad's conflicting intuitions on the subject of character and responsibility, intuitions we may correlate (roughly) with Aristotle and, up to a point, Kant, respectively. But some of Conrad's most deeply felt convictions here seem to find no clear home anywhere, and this fact, most troublesome of all, is also the subject of *Lord Jim*.

I will be concerned then first to map out these two somewhat warring aspects of Conrad's view, saying something about the form their philosophical appeal takes for Conrad in *Lord Jim*. I will then take up where I think Conrad's sensibility requires they be not so much left behind as suspended, regarded critically from a standpoint less easy to define. Finally, I will say something about where I think these concerns, and the somewhat tortuous journey they engender, make their way most powerfully into *Lord Jim* as a work of literature.

I.

Before making out the claim that Conrad's view of moral life is in some important sense Aristotelian, some account of what I take the Aristotelian view to be is in order. Although Aristotle's *Ethics* is one of the richer works in moral philosophy, and understandably at the center of a great many controversies, Aristotle's overall project is I think fairly clear. Central to his view is a certain conception of *character*, a conception that articulates a form of human excellence binding upon us all, though motivationally compelling only to those who have in some sense already embraced it. That is, this excellence of character is one all of us are justly measured against. But, depending upon the habits we have formed, the dispositions we have developed, we may or may not be able to see its authority or embody its demands. Wherein does this authority lie? Aristotle's picture of excellence is rooted in certain things a person does, and so may do well or badly, but there is also a deep link between these activities and what we say a person is. Thus, to use the examples Aristotle himself relies on, we may have relations with loved ones, with other citizens, with ourselves over a lifetime and so forth. If we possess the requisite virtues, such as courage, temperance, justice and the like we will be able to face and order the demands these bring in a way someone deficient in such things cannot. But here, of course, a certain elusiveness enters in, for this is not a straight-forward appeal to self interest. A crucial feature of moral excellence lies in understanding what *kind* of life is genuinely worth leading in the first place, and the virtues do not 'enable' us to lead that life so much as they are constitutive of it. We are not courageous or just 'in order

to' get what we want, if by that we suggest our ambitions could be independently described. Our happiness lies in leading a life characterized by the qualities of justice, courage and the like. The moral life is deeply tied to advantage, but we cannot begin to describe the kind of advantage this is without drawing heavily on a conception of life that is itself normative.

Secondly, this description is ultimately a picture of completeness. Clearly not everyone will want a life characterized by substantive relations with others, nobility in action, freedom from duplicity and so on, and such persons will have no reason to find attachment to the virtues especially attractive. But not to want these things is to make a profound mistake, though of a piece with this error is having the sort of sensibility that will never see it as such. To be without the ability or desire to sustain worthy relations with others or act courageously in demanding situations is to be in some deep sense incomplete, defective. But again, this is not something we know by some abstract rule of reason so much as by looking well and comparing--and only those with the right moral understanding or wisdom will see this comparison aright in the first place.

The deep affinity between this conception of moral life and that of Conrad's is striking. There are of course important differences: the usual setting with Conrad is one of solitary struggle far from whatever support civilization provides. Our difficulties in Conrad's world are not of the sort that ordinarily arise given the course of life in some stable polis. And with this shift in background landscape there are occasional shifts of nuance in our paradigm of personal excellence as well. The gentrified Athenian of practical wisdom often gives way in Conrad to a somewhat rougher, less civic minded article. These differences in setting are in part of course simply the reflection of the gulf that separates a literary enterprise as personal as Conrad's from the philosophical context surrounding Aristotle's inquiry into the good for man. But in part, these differences simply reflect what has happened to those commitments Aristotle so forcefully articulated. The concern with the kind of finely-edged moral excellence that lies at the center of Aristotle's *Ethics* is now no longer found unselfconsciously amidst everyday civic and social life. It is now most at home rather far away from what bourgeoisie society has become. (The one glimpse of London we get in *Lord Jim*, through the eyes of Marlow's 'privileged listener' runs: "from the depth of the town under his feet ascended a confused and unceasing mutter. The spires of churches, numerous scattered haphazard, uprose like beacons of a maze of shoals without a channel"¹) These ideals are no longer the concern of a culture or an age but the pursuit of scattered individuals, largely solitary, remote from its demands. With Conrad, the Aristotelian ethos becomes transformed in so far as it becomes transplanted. But by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this shift in scene is not so much idiosyncratic as it is appropriate, given what this sensibility involves. And so with Conrad we have the Aristotelian ethic but projected: on to a context that is foreign, uncertain, possibly treacherous, and so, for just these reasons, especially fitting and absorbing in a way no other can be. The nature or moral excellence, and why it matters, remains the same. For both, moral performance is admirable only when it stems from a person's natural and unflinching attachment to a certain conception of themselves, a conception which in turn embodies an undeniably compelling ideal of human character. And for both, whether or not this attachment holds is

the most important question we can ask. In Conrad, its presence in others gives rise to relief, trust, the possibility of intimacy (note Marlow's encounter with the French Captain or with the clerk De Jongh): its absence occasions either contempt or a kind of alert caution, the need for guardedness (for example, before Cornelius, the Indian captain, and of course, Gentleman Jim Brown). With the central importance of character comes an understandable obsession with character types. Conrad continually (to some, almost to the point of irritation) speaks of a world divided along these lines by 'us' and 'them,' delineating the many varieties this division may take with extraordinary subtlety and care. Aristotle elucidates his moral theory by repeatedly elaborating upon the differences between the impressive or virtuous man and the many types of those that fall short. What counts in this life is being the right sort of person. What we are concerned with is how well we or others match up against this conception. Marlow's first account of Jim is explicitly tailored to leave us in no doubt as to where in this scheme Jim falls.

I liked his appearance; I know his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us. He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith, and upon the instinct of courage. I don't mean military courage, or civil courage, or any special kind of courage. I mean just that inborn ability to look temptations straight in the face—a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows but without a pose—a power of resistance, don't you see, ungracious if you like, but *priceless*.²

The kind of confidence with which Marlow speaks here introduces another, again somewhat Aristotelian, theme of Conrad's. While character is something private, an inner disposition, it is given, unmistakably, in 'looks'. The practiced observer 'sees' or 'reads' men as straight-forwardly, as confidently as one could wish. Marlow's encounters with others are characterized by an almost instant surety of judgment, a knowing grasp of gesture, bearing, behavior. The world is decisively colored in moral terms. Cornelius, the crew of the *Patna*, the French Captain are all immediately recognized for what they are. Nor is Marlow unusual in this respect. This is an ability Stein, the French Captain and Marlow's audience all share. Of a piece with the right character is a steady eye for character in all its forms. In Conrad we are exactly as we appear, for those who know how to look, where 'knowing how to look' goes hand in hand with knowing how to be. 'Practical wisdom' is not simply knowing what is truly worthy, it is being wise about the world, where this means having a kind of critical acuity towards others. (It is no accident that Jim's murky history as moral agent finds its final expression in a fatal act of misreading.) Marlow expands on his verdict by adding:

he was the kind of fellow you would, on the strength of his looks, leave in charge of the deck--figuratively and professionally speaking--and I ought to know.³

The impersonal 'you' is important, for Marlow not only speaks to the moral community, he speaks for it. Jim is immediately recognizable as a member where this means not only as attached to the right ideals of conduct as any, but, apparently, as capable as any of carrying them

out. And so there is an immediate, almost irritating perplexity over how he comes to be so deeply tainted.

I thought to myself--well, if *this* sort can go wrong like that. . .and I felt as though I could fling down my hat and dance on it from sheer mortification as I once saw the skipper of an Italian barque do because his duffer of a mate got into a mess with anchors.⁴

The others, Marlow is quick to note, unquestionably 'fitted' the shame they are credited with, 'the tale that was public property.' Jim, however, is strangely yet thoroughly out of place. By speaking of Jim's 'looks' or 'appearance' Marlow refers, of course, to all that is available to the skilled observer, and more than anything else it is Jim's behavior that separates him so clearly from the others and impresses itself upon Marlow. Jim exhibits nothing like either the hollow self-righteousness of the captain or the smirking complicity of the engineer, but, what is most significant, neither can he be said to express any sense of shame. There is no attempt to appeal to Marlow--or anyone--as someone penitent over some weakness or vice ("He seemed ready to start whistling a tune"⁵). It is this that strikes Marlow as both so incongruous and impressive: one would think, Marlow muses with some exasperation, that "he had no business to look so sound." Jim appears as one who in *no* way belongs here. There simply is no indication of any deficiency in the background. And more important, from this and from other, more detailed encounters, Marlow judges Jim to be in some sense entitled to this sense of himself. The stage is then set for the puzzle that will occupy Conrad for the first third of *Lord Jim*. How it is that one like *this* came to 'run away with the others'? Of course, Conrad is at great pains to present this as anything but the 'morbid curiosity' that one man may take in the misadventures of another. Such curiosity may indeed produce a novel, but not the one Conrad wishes to write. For Conrad, this puzzle and its many strands has a deeply felt if not always clear urgency in its own right. On one level one might say Jim's case is absorbing simply because once the conception of character and motivation at the center of Conrad's world is extended to Jim, it becomes maddeningly unclear just how his failure ought to be described. This in turn makes it hard to know just what sense of responsibility is appropriate, what avenues of self worth are available, and so on. Moral conundrums are themselves intriguing in Conrad's world, and *Lord Jim* has no shortage of wholly absorbed yet exasperated judges. But uncertainty over Jim's case retains its grip upon us because it turns out I think to reflect a deeper set of difficulties with those conceptions of character and responsibility we naturally draw upon in order to make sense of it. Concern with Jim's case leads to difficult, perhaps unsolvable questions over which account of the moral world we want to give. And it may be that what *Lord Jim* is about on one level at least is living well with our inability to resolve these questions satisfactorily.

II.

The problem of weakness of will is not strictly speaking one confined to moral theory. It is a problem for philosophy of action since it arises anytime an agent is said to perform voluntarily an action which he judges to be on the whole not the one he wants. 'What he wants'

need not name that which either he or anyone holds to be morally good. But the problem may arise within the context of morality with special force, particularly if our moral theory be of a certain sort. Why? Because on some views, what it is to be a fully empowered rational agent is given its paradigmatic expression in moral life, and so if things go wrong there, they have gone very wrong indeed. Finding moral action the paradigmatic expression of deliberative rationality is on one hand simply a reflection of the importance moral life is said to have. We may be said to attend to our choices here with more than ordinary care. But more fundamentally, the close tie between moral and rational action reflects the connection mentioned earlier between what it is to be moral and what it is to be a person. Aristotle speaks of the virtuous man as embodying man's distinctive *telos* and so as simultaneously giving us the best expression of what man really is. In Conrad this sentiment tends to be expressed negatively, as it were: moral deviants are invariably characterized as grotesques. (The German Captain is seen as a swollen beast, Cornelius a beetle, 'Holy Terror' Robinson a skeleton, and Gentleman Brown a raving ghoul. Of the Patna crew Marlow says dismissively, "I did not care any more than if they had not been visible to the naked eye. . . . They were nobodies." But it is not always this way. With the account of Stein, a life "he had known how to follow with unfaltering footsteps. . . rich in generous enthusiasms. . . in friendship, love, war. . ." ⁶ Conrad could not weave moral excellence together with being a man more smoothly). Unsurprisingly, for those such as Conrad and Aristotle who embrace this conception, those who are virtuous are more than anything else this virtuousness. We are nowhere else as self expressive, nowhere else as fairly judged. Thus the dispositions of the virtuous man cannot be seen as on a logical par with those of the immoral man. They are not, in the former case, simply woven into a man's character; this must be seen as an unusually finely honed and steadfast character to begin with. And to have this character is to be prepared in certain cases to prefer its self expression even to survival. The virtuous man does not do anything so absurd as to take pleasure from dying in battle, but he does meet his death (under certain circumstances) gladly.⁷ He cannot be 'made' to flee, for to be this sort of person is simply to prefer to face death. Preferring to shirk and live would require nothing less than being a different person, someone with a very different motivational structure from the one he in fact has. There are then certain things the virtuous man just will not do. And part of what it is to be virtuous is to be the sort of man who can be confident about just this point.

What then is it to fail? How can we be attached to the virtuous act, be in a position where we are not only capable of performing such an action but anxious to do so, in no clear way compelled by external forces, and either fail to act rightly or, worse yet, perform an ignoble act in its stead? Aristotle, here as elsewhere, begins his analysis with Plato, who seemed to believe some version of the view that necessarily we always do what we want, and so failure could not possibly exist. (We never fail to do or get what we want, but only at some points err in so far as we want the wrong things.) It is well known that this analysis was unsatisfactory to Aristotle, who judged it 'in glaring contradiction with notorious facts'. We may fail to want the right things, but this is not the only way to go wrong. We may be weak, where this means we may know what is right in the sense that we sincerely affirm the right propositions, but as of yet (or characterologically) we cannot integrate this knowledge into our personalities.

The moral weakling may say he has knowledge but that is no proof that he has it. . . For knowledge must be worked into the living texture of the mind, and this takes time. So we should think of incontinent men as like actors--mouth-pieces of the sentiments of other people.⁸

So far so good, but what of the good man, the man who *has* worked this knowledge 'into the living texture of his mind'? Surely sometimes it is he and not the weak man who fails. At this point, Aristotle makes a well known distinction. Moral knowledge is seen as two-fold, forming a 'practical syllogism'. We may know what Aristotle calls the universal premise, for example that 'all acts of such and such a type are bad'--where 'know' here means not simply assent to a claim but characteristically exemplify what this claim entails in action--but for some reason we are 'ignorant' with respect to the particular before us, i.e., that here now is an act of that type. Typically, the reasons for this 'ignorance' are said to be certain kinds of passions, such as lust or rage:

for within the case of having knowledge but not using it we see a difference of state, admitting of the possibility of having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the case of a man asleep, mad or drunk.⁹

the last premise both being an opinion about a perceptible object and being what determines our actions, this a man either has not when he is in the state of passion, or has it in the sense in which having knowledge did not mean knowing only "talking" as a drunken man may utter the verses of Empedocles.¹⁰

Thus it is clearly possible for us to be good in the fullest sense yet fail on a given occasion. Knowledge of, or better yet, attunement to 'that which determines our actions' is temporarily knocked out from us. Our characters however, anaesthetised in the background, remain describable as virtuous.

But this analysis really does not get us very far. We have in fact dealt only with those cases which, though candidates for weakness, turn out in the end to be something quite different. If we push Aristotle's criticism of the Socratic position, a deeper agreement (and all the attendant problems) seems to shine through. To explain failure is to explain how it came about that at some moment one was not capable of success. And so here too, in at least one ordinary sense of the term, 'failure' does not exist: it is never true to say both 'A could have done X in situation S' and 'A failed to do X in situation'; the latter renders the former impossible. A failed at some particular moment to be the *kind of person* who was capable, in situation S, of doing X. Given that he has this nature and not some other, was in this situation and not some other, he failed to do X because X was (then) not in his power to do. It may be objected that this cannot be quite fair: we may be capable of doing X but not want to. And our not wanting to be characterological, as it is for the evil man, or momentary, as it is for the good man, who though just, temporarily wants to satisfy, say, his passion for revenge. He *could* be just, we might say, but at that moment he doesn't want to be. ("I know indeed what evil I intend to do. But stronger

than all my afterthoughts is my fury" claims Medea.¹¹) But this move changes nothing. The question 'could he have *wanted* something else?' is obscure in exactly the way as 'could he have done something else?' is. Yes, in the sense that he could have been or might become a different, more virtuous person, one who in that situation would want something else. But given that he has *this* temperament (now), he wanted (in this situation) this thing and not some other.

The central intuition behind this conception is that we are our character. Once all our dispositions, motivational preferences, abilities with respect to these and so forth are described, there can be no 'self' left over. And so what we do is express (or sometimes discover) the nature we have. Of course, we may find we do not like the self we express, but such a judgment must be seen as a further feature of the character we have. Certainly such a standpoint may come to dominate; we are free (if not too far gone) to *develop* differently. But given the nature we do have at any particular point, it is incoherent to speak of our being 'free' at that point to express any other (how can we express any nature but the one we now have?) which is to say, to act other than in those ways that reveal it for what it is now.

Again, there is a great deal in Conrad that relies on just this picture of moral life and the self. In so far as we are identical with the characters we have, moral judgment takes place in a richly colored world of full disclosure as it were. In judging what is revealed, there is no hidden self we miss. To revert to an earlier point, those we meet in *Lord Jim* are given to us completely, and Conrad's works as a whole are suffused with a special sort of epistemological confidence regarding the possibility of character assessment. 'This is the *kind* of thing we have here' is the tone Conrad takes again and again, striving to elucidate in a manner alternately reminiscent of an art critic and taxonomist just where the subtle delineations between this kind and others lie. More importantly, though, this conception of character makes available to us a special kind of dignity in so far as we are successful moral agents. We can take pride in ourselves precisely because we have come to acquire *this* character, one which will inevitably express or reveal itself to be this way in this sort of situation. In Conrad's world one accomplishes something in one's moral life not so much by having performed some impressive action (many of the virtuous in *Lord Jim* from the clerk who contemptuously dresses down the German captain to Brierly and Marlow have no such action mentioned to their credit) but by having come to acquire one kind of nature over another. We are the right combination of the right intentions plus the requisite strength. But ironically, while this conception of character and moral success makes possible one extremely compelling form of self respect, it renders another equally crucial form of it completely unavailable. And it just this that comes out so sharply when we turn to Jim.

At first glance, it might seem right to assimilate Jim to what Aristotle would call the weak man. A great deal is made of his youth, his inexperience:

He was gentlemanly, steady, tractable, with a thorough knowledge of his duties; and in time when yet very young, he had become chief mate of a fine ship, without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man¹²

and his 'too lively' imagination:

He was not afraid of death perhaps, but I'll tell you what, he was afraid of the emergency. His confounded imagination had evoked for him all the horrors of panic, the trampling rush, the pitiful screams, boats swamped--all the appalling incidents of a disaster at sea he had ever heard of.¹³

Nothing in the world moved before his eyes, and he could depict to himself without hindrance the sudden swing upwards of the dark sky-line, the sudden tilt up of the vast plain of the sea, the swift still arise, the brutal fling, the grasp of the abyss, the struggle without hope, the starlight closing over his head forever like the vault of a tomb--the revolt of his young life--in the black end. . . .Who couldn't? And you must remember he was a finished artist in that peculiar way, he was a gifted poor devil with the faculty of swift and forestalling vision.¹⁴

But to interpret Jim as straightforwardly weak must I think be wrong. In the first place, there is too much in the description of Jim before his leap from the *Patna* that goes against this. Conrad spends a great deal of time making painstakingly clear that Jim's behavior there marks him decisively as exceptionally steady, as 'one of us'. Noble, composed, thoroughly unafraid, all in a situation of extraordinary difficulty:

He passed his hand over his forehead. 'The thing stirred and jumped off like something alive while I was looking at it.' 'That made you feel pretty bad,' I observed, casually. 'Do you suppose,' he said, 'that I was thinking of myself, with a hundred and sixty people at my back?'¹⁵

'Eight hundred people and seven boats--and no time! Just think of it.' He leaned towards me across the little table and I tried to avoid his stare. 'Do you think I was afraid of death?' he asked in a voice very fierce and low. He brought down his open hand with a bang that made the coffee cups dance. 'I am ready to swear I was not--I was not. . . By God--no!'¹⁶

'Somehow I had no mind to be surprised at anything. All this seemed natural--and awful--and awful. I dodged that miserable maniac, lifted him off the deck as though he had been a little child, and he started whispering in my arms: "Don't! don't! I thought you were one of them niggers." I flung him away, he skidded along the bridge and knocked the legs from under the little chap--the second. The skipper busy about the boat, looked round and came at me head down, growling like a wild beast. I flinched no more than a stone. 'I was as solid standing there as this,' he tapped lightly with his knuckles the wall beside his chair. 'It was as though I had heard it all, seen it all, gone through it all twenty times already. I wasn't afraid of them.'¹⁷

He stood on the starboard side of the bridge, as far as he could get from the struggle for the boat. . . .The boat was

clear. Only then he turned to look--only then. But he kept his distance--he kept his distance. He wanted me to know he had kept his distance; that there was nothing in common between him and these men. . .Nothing whatever. It is more than probable he thought himself cut off from them by a space that could not be traversed, by an obstacle that could not be overcome, by a chasm without bottom.¹⁸

If the term 'weak man' is to be applied intelligibly, it cannot be applied to someone exemplifying this sort of performance. Perhaps it would be more plausible to see Jim as essentially, even thoroughly, virtuous but somehow here overwhelmed. Certainly there is much in Conrad's account of those last moments on the *Patna* that might suggest this reading--there are few accounts anywhere in literature more compelling than the one Conrad gives us of the unnerving combination of circumstances that characterize Jim's last moments there. But this reading of Jim cannot hold up either, and for reasons which also mitigate against seeing him as weak. After all, the differences between the weak man and the virtuous one is in the end simply the difference in the points at which their dispositions to do the good break down (as both are credited with the same desire) and there is at least one sense in which Conrad does not want to say Jim was 'overwhelmed' at all.

Let us look a bit more closely at what it is, on this conception at least, to be overwhelmed. There is first the case where we might prefer to say someone is not so much overwhelmed as breaks down before external forces 'no one could endure' such as torture. Here we approach examples of action so involuntary that any substantive connection between them and the one who is forced to perform them quite disappears; whatever agency there is here has essentially shifted to the one who applies the force. More interesting is the second kind of case where the good man finds himself acting on impulses or desires that are recognizably *his*, but are not impulses or desires he would, in a cooler moment, prefer to act on in the situation he did. Typically, these impulses or desires have what might be called a twofold rationality. That is, they aim at ends the agent here in some sense wants and these wants are themselves intelligible. Thus, one such who acts out of rage or lust that moment wants such things, and we have no difficulty understanding someone's wanting them. We are not talking about pointless actions, but of acts which aim at something the appeal of which the agent has previously recognized, but so far resisted giving authority to. Aristotle speaks of incontinence almost exactly this way when he says

Now there may be simultaneously present in the mind two universal judgments, one saying (for example) 'You must not taste' the other 'Every sweet thing is pleasant.' When this happens and then the minor premise 'that thing is sweet' presents itself, then in spite of the fact that the first universal bids you to avoid the thing in question desire leads you to it. So it turns out that a man behaves incontinently under the influence (in a sense) of a rule. . .¹⁹

Thus failure is seen as giving in to the wrong but comprehensible want at the wrong or inopportune time. What feelings can we have about this? Certainly we can regret we acted as we did--if we are virtuous, this is inevitable--but again, we must be clear on just what the

nature of this regret can be. Of course we can regret that our character was such that we wanted these things in this way at that time. But, as we had this character at that moment and not some other, we cannot regret that we, exactly as we were, did not act otherwise. And so we really cannot make sense of what is ordinarily meant by *remorse*, the feeling that not only did we act badly, but exactly as we were, it was in our power to have acted differently. Given the particular motivational structure that was true of us at that time and the particular situation that impinged upon us exactly as it did, we were 'overwhelmed,' (which is to say, either one desire came to dominate over another or our ability to execute our desire gave out) and if this combination of circumstances were replicated exactly, necessarily we would replicate the same result as well. To feel we could have acted differently is on this view to feel only that a somewhat different character than the one we had that time is possible for us (perhaps the one we have now, given our recently enhanced sense of the danger or shame going wrong over such a choice involves). It is not to feel that this character as it was could equally well have given rise to two distinct outcomes, one worthy and one not.

Yet I believe this is exactly what Jim *does* feel. But before taking up Jim's feelings in more detail it is crucial we recognize how far we are with Jim's case from the sort I have described above. There is no way in which we can say he is 'tempted' by the actions of cowardice. There is no sense in which he is presented as desirous to save his life; nor is there any sense in which he acts according to a 'contrary rule' that expresses a comprehensible want. He is not struggling with an unworthy desire, not because he is unusually strong, but because there is no evidence of his having any such desire in the first place. Marlow speaks of Jim thinking of his life about to end, but at no point does anyone speak of Jim having had such feelings as *temptations*. Whatever he does, he does not 'succumb to a lesser want,' for the action of running away has no appeal for him whatsoever at any point. As he is not torn or fighting off some rising cowardice, the straightforwardly resolute behavior he exhibits is possible. But the problems with seeing Jim as overwhelmed do not end with how we are to describe his motivations before he jumps. To return to the earlier point, more important is how we are to see the sense he can have of himself afterwards. At one point Conrad writes:

suddenly he lifted his head; he sat up; he slapped his thigh. 'Ah! What a chance missed! My God! What a chance missed!' he blazed out, but the ring of the last 'missed' resembled a cry wrung out by pain.²⁰

Now strictly speaking if we say Jim was overwhelmed, this is a very peculiar sentiment for him to have. On a strictly Aristotelian view of character he has 'missed a chance' only in the sense that the state of his character might have been different from how in fact it was. He might have been a stronger person and *this* now possible future person would not have acted as he did. But in that case, it is only in the extended sense mentioned earlier that it is 'he' who had this opportunity to begin with. And that he was (then) able to have acted otherwise is not something Jim believes alone. The French Captain's remark 'so that poor boy ran away with the others,'²¹ Marlow's concern, Stein's sympathy lose all their poignancy on any other reading. There is no deep incongruity in the juxtaposition of Jim with 'the others' if his failure was

something he could not help but do. It must also be stressed that Jim is not seen by Marlow or Stein as someone trying to show he has it in him to *become* a stronger character. He is not yearning for the chance to reform or *improve*. That is not what Patusan is all about. (There is also his remark that he resisted suicide afterwards only because 'it would have ended nothing. No! The proper thing was to face it out-alone for myself-wait for another chance'.) All this suggests I believe that he is trying to show, somehow, that he already *is* (or was) completely competent, that he has lacked nothing all along, that he, exactly as he was, had all the ability he needed to exhibit courage. That is to say, that he was fully virtuous to begin with. But for this to be so, for this even to be possible, we must have a very different conception of ourselves and our actions available in the background.

III.

Such a conception is offered by Kant or at least by one reading of Kant. The Kantian picture of course is not the only alternative to Aristotle, but it is I think the one most appropriate here. I do not think Conrad is 'Kantian' in anything like the sense he may be thought of as Aristotelian. The emphasis on character, on the impressiveness or lack thereof of our responses and inclinations, the almost aesthetic quality our judgments of others take is all very far from Kant. But the affinities there are between Kant's conception of moral life and Conrad's sensibility are striking, and no full assessment of that sensibility can set them aside. Most fundamentally, there is in Conrad a repeated insistence on the special, almost other worldly, authority of morality and the moral law, what Conrad in remarkably Kantian language calls 'the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct.'²² And the expression 'fixed standard' suggests another deeply Kantian theme: the moral law's transcendental immutability. Further, one can find in Conrad a rather Kantian picture of moral motivation and the bearing motivation has upon moral worth. Genuinely worthy actions are those performed for no reason beyond its being the case that our duty requires it, and if it does require it, this fact alone commands unswerving fidelity. The Malayan lascars who remain at the helm despite their sense of 'something evil befalling the ship,' and most vividly, "little" Bob Stanton, who loses his life persisting well beyond the bounds of what is reasonably called for in attempting a rescue, exemplify this picture of almost otherworldly moral attachment. We do indeed do our duty 'for its own sake' in Conrad, and when called to do so, nothing else counts but our immersion in this standpoint.

Finally, Conrad and Kant share something more elusive and I think more modern. The nature of our moral life is for both essentially solitary. Central to Kant is that each moral agent think of himself as completely sovereign law giver as well as subject. Each of us obeys a law generated only from ourselves, in so far as we are understood to be rational moral agents.²³ Thus in acting morally, we express our complete 'autonomy.' What counts is not so much which particular action we do, certainly never how it works out, but why we do it, the nature and purity of our motivation. And this nature is something each of us turns to to be wholly equipped to assess for himself. The result is a kind of radical interiority. The moral realm is given whole by each moral agent who struggles with and assesses his inclination in an arena no one else

can see. On a Kantian view, the drama of our moral life is played out entirely within parameters given by these two aspects of ourselves: the range of inclinations and dispositions that make up our character on one hand, the capacity to test these against an objective conception of the moral law--and so of ourselves--acting accordingly on the other.²⁴ In Conrad as well, our moral life is essentially a deeply personal struggle conducted in isolation. Marlow, Stein, the French Captain, Brierly: all of them are presented as men who have worked out their moral identity very much on their own. All share a sharply honed but deeply private sense of self evaluation. They are not overly concerned with results as such; what counts is how well one measures up against that standard one privately applies to oneself. But while this standard is rooted in the private, it is also transcendently objective, categorical. Marlow emphasizes this picture of moral assessment when he notes:

We are snared into doing things for which we get called names and things for which we get hanged and yet the spirit may well survive--survive the condemnations, survive the halter by Jove! And there are things--they look small enough sometimes too--by which some of us are totally and completely undone.²⁵

But perhaps Stein expresses this best when he interrupts Marlow's praise:

Stein lifted his hand, 'and do you know how many opportunities I let escape; how many dreams I had lost that had come in that way?' He shook his head regretfully. 'It seems to me that some would have been very fine--if I had made them come true. Do you know how many? Perhaps I myself don't know.'²⁶

This picture of the moral agent as testing himself against an objective standard he alone brings to the sphere of his actions--a standard which in turn expresses his dignity as moral agent--goes hand in hand with a certain moral psychology. On the Kantian view, the self confronts his immediate character as an entity in some sense separate from himself. Our character is something we have; it is not 'all there is to us.' However passionate or persistent our inclinations may be, in virtue of being rational moral agents we are able to measure them against this other aspect of ourselves, the moral law, and act accordingly. ('So terribly effective,' Marlow notes, 'by its assumption of unlimited power over natural instincts.'²⁷) Thus a Kantian conception offers us a radically different picture of the self and freedom. We are not, or not only, whatever combination of preferences and dispositions make up our character; we are also, and fundamentally, our ability to assess these from the moral standpoint. We are free not simply in the sense that our characters may be unhindered, but in the sense that we may ascend to a transcendental or 'noumenal' standpoint where we are undetermined, where we regard our nature critically, where we are free to do otherwise.

At first glance it would seem that something like this picture of self and action is just what we need. On a Kantian view we are not 'overwhelmed' by our inclinations; rather we freely choose to give them authority--we could equally well have chosen not to. It is not the case then that given Jim's character in those circumstances, he could not

help but jump. He was able not to, he did 'miss a chance.' But this reading, while certainly helpful in some ways, only pushes the problem up elsewhere. If we say Jim was free with respect to his inclinations, the question then arises, why then does he act as he does? The problem is not that no explanation is immediately apparent, but that no explanation seems available in principle. Certainly we cannot say his inclinations were of such and such a character or of such and such a strength and *that* is why he gave into them, because their character and strength is in the end irrelevant. We are free with respect to them regardless of their make up. The problem here is a familiar one with a Kantian picture of action: the moral or free self in Kant must be understood both normatively and descriptively: 'descriptively' in that it simply is not determined, it is outside of and so free with respect to anything in the empirical world; 'normatively' in that the free self is given by conformance to the moral law and so necessarily expresses itself morally. As a result, we will have no difficulty in saying why one freely acts morally, as to do so is to act for the sake of duty, to express ourselves rationally and so forth. But it seems impossible to understand what reason we can offer for our free failure to act this way. As soon as we attempt any explanation we seem to be caught in a fork. Suppose we say A failed to act morally because of reason R or inclination Y. We then ask was A free with respect to R or Y or not? If he was not then neither was his failure. Or, he does not 'fail,' but rather inevitably comes to express such and such an outcome in such and such circumstances. But if we say he was free with respect to R or Y, then R or Y in themselves can explain nothing. It is now in his choosing them that the explanation must lie, but if we attempt to explain this, to give a reason for why he chose this way rather than that, the entire enquiry must begin anew. If our failure is to be free, if it is to be *ours*, it seems then that it cannot be explained.

But what is a problem for philosophy is at the same time something of a way out for us, though it leaves the world far less secure, for paradoxically, it is just this, or something like this that I believe Conrad wants to say. Certainly Jim has flaws of character. He is no god. But in the end these 'flaws' explain nothing, at least with respect to the *Patna*. Neither he nor Marlow is willing to say they *forced* him to fail, that given this nature in this situation he was in some sense 'doomed' to disgrace or the like. Far from it. He missed a chance precisely because exactly as he was he could have shown the required courage. And herein lies the source and explanation of his sense of self worth, his holding himself 'aloof from all the others.' He can regard himself with dignity because he can think himself as having been 'good enough' all along. But if this thought entitles him on one level to a sense of dignity, it must also require of him the deepest, the most thoroughgoing sense of shame. He can point to no attribute of character, no feature of circumstances as accounting for his failure, for he and everyone else must also believe he was perfectly able to have overcome any of these, to have acted otherwise. He cannot name anything and say '*this* is why I failed.' To do this would be to explain it, and he must believe there can be no explanation, that he can have no excuse, that he equally well could have done otherwise. For the failure to be thoroughly *his* (and not fobbed off on his circumstances) it must be thoroughly inexplicable, the result of an inscrutable act of will. For Jim to feel he was fully able to have done otherwise, and so be able to regard himself with the utmost dignity, he must feel there are no mitigating factors that can explain why he failed, and so he must also take on

an utterly unqualified sense of shame. We 'survive the condemnations, survive the halter' if we know we did all that anyone could have done. We feel shame if we believe we could have done more. But to feel that we, exactly as we were, could have done more is to feel there can be no explanation as to why we did not. Our failure must be inscrutable, inexplicable. To be able to feel the sense of shame we want, we must also believe we cannot understand why we acted in such a way as to make it appropriate.

It is just this I think that lies at the heart of Marlow's obsessive interest in Jim. One is drawn, understandably and irrevocably, in two incompatible directions. Marlow hopes on one hand to find "some profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse." If we could, the case has ended. It is perhaps sad someone promising is shown to be only that, but while harsh, it cannot be problematic or unjust. But given the demands of our conception of ourselves, a conception Marlow extends to Jim in seeing him as 'one of us', "I see well enough now that I hoped for the impossible."²⁸ There can be no explanation, no excuse at all. And these two tendencies are underwritten by an Aristotelian and what can be extracted from a Kantian approach respectively. On an Aristotelian view, there *must* be some explanation, merciful or otherwise. Moral failure is not in principle different from anything else. On a Kantian view there *cannot* be one, at least not in the ordinary sense of the term, for here moral failure is the expression of an undetermined self. On one view, we simply are our character, and so must be irrevocably identified with however that character expresses itself. On the other we are tied to our actions in a different way. Moral failure lies at the intersection and so pries apart the two components of the responsible self: that it is free and that it is moral. That it should freely fail to be moral is then necessarily inexplicable. And so to the question 'is this act ours?' the answer must be both yes and no. It is not ours in that this act is not what we want, we cannot connect ourselves to it via any purpose or desire that is ours. But it is ours as in the most fundamental sense it is we who have acted this way. To fail in this way is to walk an evanescent border between accepting full responsibility and believing it is not us, that we are not really colored by such action. If we stress either of these in the wrong way, we cannot have the other, and if we do not have both in the right way neither the right kind of shame nor the right kind of dignity is available.

IV.

However, to accept this is to accept something none of those conceptions we ordinarily entrust ourselves to can prepare us for. There may be occasions of great moment where we fail though there is no excuse or reason for our failure. That we live and act in the face of unsteady, sometimes malevolent circumstances is acknowledged readily enough in Conrad's world. But to find we are subject to fortune in this further and inexplicable sense is to introduce a different, more troubling note. The world, and our moral conceptions of it, become unclear, unsteady in a new way. Conrad makes this point with exceptional force when he has Marlow reflect:

It seemed to me that I was being made to comprehend the inconceivable--and I know of nothing to compare with the

discomfort of such a sensation. I was made to look at the convention that lurks in all truth and so on the essential sincerity of falsehood. He appealed to all sides at once--to the side turned perpetually to the light of day, and to that side of us which, like the other hemisphere of the moon, exists stealthily in perpetual darkness, with only a fearful ashy light falling at times on the edge. . . .The occasion was obscure, insignificant-what you will: a lost youngster, one in a million-but then he was one of us; an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an antheap, and yet the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself. . . .²⁹

And this brings us to what I take the final expression of Conrad's moral posture to be. We must show the right kind of willingness to acknowledge where our conceptions simply give out, where we go forward best only if we are prepared to acknowledge 'the reputable that has its claims and the disreputable that has its exigencies.' The final "meta-virtue" is a kind of moral wisdom or attunement, anxious to do justice to each of the ill-fitting parts of moral life. It is a sensibility at home in the subtleties of shadow, ill suited to an unmodulated light ('the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from (Stein's) face. . . .The light had destroyed the assurance which had inspired him in the distant shadows.'³⁰), a wisdom not so much of knowing some truth as the ability to act and live well in the midst of uncertainties or half truths. ('They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything!'³¹) Marlow speaks explicitly of Stein's moral understanding as 'a charming and deceptive light, throwing the impalpable poesy of its dimness over pitfalls-over graves.'³² We go forward with integrity, we live impressively when we know when and how to act unflinchingly under one conception of self worth or another, when we know where each may be subject to a kind of 'shadowy incompleteness', a truth of 'mere convention.' Yet *this* fact ought not to undermine our commitments or character so much as be woven into the kind of character or commitment we have in the right way. The unsteadiness of the world, of ourselves, of our conceptions of both, forms the background against which real accomplishment occurs. Thus Stein's cryptic "the way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up."³³ We go forward guided now by some conception of transcendent authority, now by our sense of its incompleteness. The tension is a deeply felt one for Conrad, but we simply cannot get the moral world we want any other way.

Indeed, a sub-text of *Lord Jim* is that to insist on an unqualified account of moral life or to fail to employ the right conception at the right time in the right way is to court disaster. Brierly's suicide is the expression of a sense of what is possible, and so a sense of himself, utterly unyielding before the subtleties of experience ('The worst of it,' he abuses Marlow, 'is that all of you. . . don't think enough of what you are supposed to be'; Jones remarks to Marlow that 'neither you nor I, sir, had ever thought so much of ourselves.'³⁴) Jim fails to judge Gentleman Jim Brown from the right *kind* of perspective; he extends a somewhat Kantian charity towards him (Kantian in that it is as if Brown may be separated from his character: though he has so far acted only

horribly, one may reasonably hope he may yet act well. 'Men act badly sometimes,' Jim says of Brown explaining his decision 'without being much worse than others.'). The man of moral wisdom such as Stein or Marlow would instantly see that Brown simply is a brute, a fiend, and should be crushed. One must know which conception of responsibility and the self to bring to bear on which circumstances. And when Brown's 'malicious egoism' runs its course and brings disaster, there is unmistakable ambivalence in Marlow's description of Jim as one who 'goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct.'³⁵

In the end, our confidence must lie not so much in the truth of some conception, but in our moral suppleness, in our ability to avail ourselves of certain 'ways of seeing' when and how we need to 'in the right way at the right time.' In *Lord Jim*, concern with an unsteady world gives way to a more inward concern with the unsteadiness of those conceptions by which we attempt to render it less so. Yet, and I take this to be one of the central strengths of *Lord Jim*, this concern is convincingly woven into the texture of particular lives. It is neither something various characters simply discuss, nor is its importance of the sort that is attested to by being measured out in exaggerated or overwrought gestures. The responses to Jim's story that Conrad explores are compelling because they are the responses of mature adults. Naturally, they vary enormously--the impatient and deeply flawed egoism of Brierly, the cavalier dismissiveness of Chester, the highly qualified sympathy of the French Captain, the absorbed yet almost mystical perspective of Stein, the obsessively ruminative curiosity of Marlow--but in each case, a facet of Jim's story takes on an undeniable vitality because it is placed against a plausible character's ongoing struggle to articulate his own sense of self worth. The exploration of ideas goes hand in hand with the exploration of those personalities for whom such ideas matter. And so our sense of the moral world, those within it and that which troubles them all unfold together. The conceptual murkiness at the center of Jim's story is in the end made palpable not by abstract ruminations so much as by close psychological attention to just what it means for particular individuals to grapple with it. Conrad's genius lies in his extraordinary success in capturing every subtlety and nuance of such responses. Here clarity means doing careful justice to all that is uncertain and obscure. And nowhere I think is this ambition better realized than in his account of Jim's own recollection of that central moment:

then he rolled over, and saw vaguely the ship he had deserted uprising above him, with the red side-light glowing large in the rain like a fire on the brow of a hill seen through a mist. 'She seemed higher than a wall; she loomed like a cliff over the boat. . . .I wished I could die,' he cried. 'There was no going back. It was as if I had jumped into a well--into an everlasting hole. . . .'³⁶

The metaphor is perfectly realized: the symbol of steadfastness and duty looms large and unattainable, both a beacon and reproach through the mist. The image, of growing darkness before a slowly receding light, is a remarkably unsentimental picture of personal anguish. But it also serves as an unusually apt symbol for qualified hesitations, and uncertainties that await us in so far as we reflect upon its source.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*. All references to Holt Rhinehart and Winston edition (New York), 293.
- ² *Ibid.*, 36 (italics mine).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ⁷ See Jean Austin, "Pleasure and Happiness" in *Mill*, ed. J.B. Schneewind (New York: Doubleday, 1968).
- ⁸ *Nichomachean Ethics*, VII, iii.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, VII, iii, 1147a10.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VII, iii, 1147b10.
- ¹¹ Euripides, *Medea*. Source: Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of Will Possible?", in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 99.
- ¹² *Lord Jim*, 7.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 75.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-5.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ¹⁹ *Nichomachean Ethics*, VII, iii, 1147a35 ff.
- ²⁰ *Lord Jim*, 71.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 43.
- ²³ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1976), 51-2.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-7.

²⁵ *Lord Jim*, 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³² *Ibid.*, 185.

³³ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52, 55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.