

Unlucky Jim: Conrad, Chance, Ethics

David Dwan
University of Oxford

Conrad's fiction often focuses on luck, particularly on moral luck— those happenings that exceed our control but affect our standing in the world nonetheless. Such luck has a key bearing on the moral intelligibility of plot and character in *Lord Jim*. This is a novel that supports two sides of a paradox: morality should and should not be influenced by the vagaries of luck. There is no obvious resolution to this double vision in Conrad and it leads him to question the coherence of morality as a general system. He also doubts— however paradoxically— its basic fairness. If luck is all-pervasive, then justice itself is unjust.

Keywords: moral luck / counterfactuality / responsibility / shame / *Lord Jim*

As the simple titles of tales such as “The Smile of Fortune” or *Chance* make clear, Conrad was intrigued by the machinations of what might be broadly termed luck— those events that exceed our control, but shape how we appear to others and to ourselves. The hap within happiness, moreover, is one of his constant themes. Conrad often entertained metaphysical theories that limit the dominion we have over our lives, sometimes courting the possibility of an entirely determined universe.¹ This is life conceived as one vast knitting machine— “it knits us in and knits us out”— and the mechanism itself is the result of some “tragic accident” (*Letters* 1:425). Some form of freedom may be compatible with this determinism— a question that is probably undecidable in Conrad— but our actions are never invulnerable to luck. Moreover, this luck mediates our performance as moral agents— luring us into contexts that we have not chosen, producing outcomes that we do not intend, exposing fissures in ourselves that are themselves the legacy of luck. Yet all of this happenstance seems to affect how we are judged, making it difficult to distinguish the good from the lucky and the bad from the hapless. Conrad was obsessed by this moral issue, though the extent and significance of this obsession have yet to be addressed by critics.²

Though I concentrate here on *Lord Jim*, much of his oeuvre could be viewed as a compulsive re-writing of “the chapter of accidents which counts for so much in the book of success”— particularly moral success (*Secret Sharer* 105). He is even more fascinated by the luck governing failure.³ In his various accounts of moral mishap Conrad advertises the meta-ethical force of fiction— it is a forum in which morality is forced to think about its own grounds and to confront its own limits.

The question of moral luck— and the degree to which individual agency, responsibility, and judgment are subject to the vagaries of chance— became a key topic of philosophical debate after Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel published two celebrated papers on the issue in 1976. But the main moves of these debates were already traced in *Lord Jim*— arguably, Conrad’s most concentrated study of luck. Here Conrad breathes life into the cliché that “chances are what men make of them,” showing— through multiple and dissonant points of view— how luck is open to interpretation, while our interpretations are often constitutive of our luck (*Lord Jim* 232-33). Indeed, the novel reveals how a self-consciousness about luck may harm us as moral agents— a self-referential question often neglected in recent philosophical debates about moral luck.⁴ Ultimately, Conrad forces his readers to entertain a paradox that would also haunt Nagel and Williams: the conviction that moral life should be immune to luck and the recognition that it never is. The paradox seems to be irreducible, for Conrad, and it raises disturbing questions about the coherence of a moral point of view, whether it be applied to literature or to life.⁵ Before turning to *Lord Jim* I want to establish some of the conceptual infrastructure for my discussion by considering how the dice may have fallen for Conrad himself.⁶

Lucky Joe?

On one front, at least, Conrad was lucky. He was not, perhaps, very fortunate with money.⁷ After a run of what might be charitably cast as bad luck in 1878— he had lost all his capital on a dubious smuggling scheme and had gambled away further funds that were borrowed in its stead— Conrad is reported to have shot himself in the chest (Najder 51-53). The bullet missed his heart and every vital organ. All of

Conrad's art depends on this piece of good fortune, but how should his subsequent career and its many glittering achievements affect our understanding of his suicidal episode?

The contention that our decisions might be legitimized or damned by events that occur afterward is certainly a leitmotif of Conrad's art. It was also a key feature of moral luck for Bernard Williams. Gauguin's decision to abandon his family to pursue his art, Williams argued, could only be vindicated by the subsequent success of that project— a type of success that is largely a matter of luck.⁸ It is far from clear, of course, that justification properly operates in this retrospective fashion,⁹ nor is it obvious that Gauguin's artistic success is an example of *moral* luck.¹⁰ Yet it is easy to see how the complexion of our decisions is— intuitively at least— modified by what happens later. Conrad's success as a writer, after all, might make his suicide attempt appear particularly rash, short-sighted or irrational. If it was a prelude to years of penury, starvation, and ruined dreams of authorship, then his reasons for reaching for that pistol might seem more valid. As we shall see, suicide will remain a radical solution to the problem of luck in Conrad's fiction.¹¹

Before and after his attempted suicide Conrad was privy to several sermons about luck. Deeply aware of the ways in which it might deplete responsibility, Conrad's long-suffering uncle warned him about attributing too much— indeed anything— to it: "You must not [...] believe in either good or bad luck" (Najder 64). Uncle Tadeusz was clearly exasperated by Conrad's misadventures or at least his rationalizations of them ("Your misfortunes of the past year fill me with despair" [Najder 74]). He urged his nephew to cultivate virtues— a stern work ethic and sense of perseverance, for instance— that might seem impervious to luck. His subsequent advice was a little less categorical: "Certainly, your success depends to some extent on chance or luck, but your judgement plays an important part as well" (Najder 74). Yet his nephew would remain fascinated by the ways in which judgment itself might be governed by luck— not least when human beings lack the time and relevant training to judge properly. It is certainly hard to say that Conrad took his uncle's advice. "There are runs of bad luck," he continued to insist, "which no foresight and no incantation can turn away" (*Letters* 3:267). Many of his characters will feel the same way.

Artistic success, for Conrad, was primarily “a matter of luck” and it was a fitting irony that he would secure popular success through the novel *Chance* (*Letters* 4:157). Until that point, he had harbored mixed feelings about his own fortune (“I had ten times the luck I deserved”; “I haven’t got any luck,” etc. [*Letters* 3:85; 4:311]). Even the writing process was luck-governed: “For me it is a matter of chance, stupid chance,” he confided to H. G. Wells. The writer, it seemed, was simply the plaything of a nervous system over which he had little control (“when the nervous force is exhausted the phrases don’t come:— and no tension of will can help” [*Letters* 3:85]). Yet, it was the ethical implications of luck that appeared to preoccupy Conrad the most and it could render him deeply skeptical of traditional conceptions of responsibility and merit. As he put it in an author’s note to *Youth* and *Gaspar Ruiz*: “it can hardly be denied that it is not their own deserts that men are most proud of, but rather of their prodigious luck, of their marvelous fortune: of that in their lives for which thanks and sacrifices must be offered on the altars of the inscrutable gods” (*Youth* 6).

By distinguishing between “fortune” and “deserts”— even as he shows how they are so often conflated in the world’s eyes— Conrad confirms the intuition that luck is distinct from moral responsibility. The desire to keep these two things distinct have informed philosophical attempts to isolate a person’s will from anything that it might actually effect since consequences lie within luck’s empire. As Kant put it: “A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes [...] but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself” (50). Even if fortune or nature made it impossible for this will to execute anything, Kant insisted that the good will would still shine out like “a jewel,” resplendent in its own goodness. The actual fruits of that will have no bearing on its worth. Conrad often appears to be deeply sympathetic to this position. As he declared in the author’s note to *Chance*: “it is only for their intentions that men can be held responsible. The ultimate effects of whatever they do are far beyond their control” (333). And yet Conrad was acutely sensitive to the fact that in everyday moral life, people are judged on results— results that may exceed or clash with their intentions.

The terror of moral life stemmed from precisely this fact. As he put it in a letter to Marguerite Poradowska in 1891: “Each act of life is final, and inevitably produces its consequences despite all the

weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the sorrow of feeble souls who suffer the terror that seizes them when confronted by the results of their own actions” (*Letters* 1:95). This focus on what we end up doing—whatever we might think we intend—makes morality susceptible to luck and allows our mistakes to be seen as malign. As Marlow puts it in *Chance*, “in our world of chances the luckless *must* be put in the wrong somehow” (146). Yet how right is this sense of wrongdoing? This is a key question in *Chance*, but it is even more insistently posed in *Lord Jim*—a story of a man who “is very fine— and very unfortunate” (178). The “and” here may keep Jim’s fineness discrete and unsullied, but even Jim’s greatest admirers will hold “his misfortune against him” (232).

The Metaphysics of Chance

“Our captivity within the incomprehensible logic of accident,” Conrad once declared, “is the only fact of the universe” (*Letters* 1:303). *Lord Jim* bears witness to this intimidating fact on several levels. The *fabula* of the tale is a tissue of accidents, but so too is its *sjuzet*. The story’s various shifts in space, time, and point of view betray the series of lucky events that have made the tale a tellable one— from Marlow’s random encounter with a French lieutenant in a café in Sydney to his improbable success in tracking down the villain of the tale on his deathbed in Bangkok.¹² As Conrad conceded, these various leaps could make the novel seem disorganized, making it feel like “a patchwork,” “a hash of episodes” or a series of “side shows” (*Letters* 2:226). Yet this narrative happenstance yields its own kind of consistency in a novel preoccupied with chance. Almost everyone in *Lord Jim* shares this preoccupation. Conrad’s sailors talk “everlastingly of turns of luck” (45) as does Jim himself. Marlow too is luck-obsessed. The sea in the novel is the great theatre of luck— as it so often is in Conrad. Those who make their living on it are engaged in a “fool game, in which the sea wins every toss” (72).

Luck raises a number of metaphysical questions in *Lord Jim*. It may point to an absence of causation in the universe or to a simple ignorance of it; under both or either of these conditions, life can assume “a vast and dismal aspect of disorder” (288). The language of luck also points to the unpredictability of outcomes— a testament once again to the limits of human knowledge or to some real indeterminism in

the world. Jim deeply resents the way the world takes him unawares. “It is always the unexpected that happens,” Marlow ironically concludes (113). The action of *Lord Jim* certainly hinges on a particularly chancy set of chances— events that might take place in the world, but would not occur in other possible worlds with almost identical properties. If the spine of the story is supplied by a real crew’s abandonment of their craft and its passengers off the Somali coast in 1880, Conrad’s retelling of the tale talks up the role of chance.¹³ Instead of encountering a storm, for instance, Conrad’s boat hits a submerged object (“She went over whatever it was as easy as a snake crawling over a stick” [58]). The incident emphasizes the role of the improbable in our lives, while simultaneously exposing our ignorance of causes. The identity of that mysterious object is never revealed.

Our belief in efficient causality may survive the collision of the *Patna*— indeed, basic comprehension of the event may seem to require it— but luck in the novel often points to the absence of final causes.¹⁴ Conrad’s characters, it would seem, are still acclimatizing to life after Darwin.¹⁵ Admittedly, Darwin always tried to play down the role of chance in his system (the word itself was a “wholly incorrect expression” testifying to a simple ignorance of physical causes [Darwin, 125]), but natural selection would be construed as the “survival of the luckiest” (Butler 98). The description was offered as a form of disparagement, but it was a much more apposite shorthand than the “survival of the fittest” (Spencer 1:444). Darwin, it appeared, had stripped the world of teleological structure or objective purposiveness, making any sense of existent order a simple matter of chance.

Some of Conrad’s characters prefer to ascribe a malign design to the world than no purpose at all. Jim detects a “fierce purpose” in a storm, for instance, and in a characteristic rush of self-importance, he believes that it is “directed at him” (40). Gentleman Brown even attempts to punish the world for his bad luck, aspiring to become “the Scourge of God” (336). His murderous rampage at the end of the book is “not a vulgar and treacherous massacre; it was a lesson, a retribution” (363). This may reflect a kind of moral insanity, but many of Conrad’s characters struggle to adjust to a world that has no personality, design, or inherent justice. As Marlow maintains: “It is not Justice, the servant of men, but accident, hazard, Fortune— the ally of patient Time— that holds an even and scrupulous balance” (293).

“Fortune,” in this resonant aphorism, is distinct from “Justice” but also masquerades as her noble sister (adopting her scruples, scales and presumably her blindness). Marlow’s main point is that justice is not an objective property of the universe, but is internal to human practices. Yet if justice is the “servant of men,” human beings are also servants of the universe, subject to its accidents and events. When these events supervene upon moral agents, shaping what it is they end up doing, whatever they might intend, then the dividing-line between fortune and justice is obscured. Jim often seems to blur the distinction—most obviously, perhaps, in his superb boast: “I am equal to all my luck” (281). The phrase may simply advertise the fact that he can face up to his luck (indeed, Jim asserts that there’s “nothing he could not face” [52]). But the declaration can also imply that he deserves his luck— that his luck or rewards are proportional to his merits. Marlow recognizes that such confidence cuts both ways: if the hero was equal to his good fortune, he “must have been equal to his misfortune” (260). Readers might feel that the language of desert has little meaning here— that luck contaminates any genuine notion of merit at the outset— and yet this is not how Jim’s luck plays itself out in the novel.

Varieties of Luck

If the basic concept of luck involves an ability to imagine possible worlds alongside the actual one, then Jim has a gift for this counterfactual thinking. It is at the heart of his “romantic”— indeed, “excessively romantic”— disposition (372). Jim’s romanticism dances merrily with his self-love, leading him to envision, with the help of “light literature,” situations in which he plays a starring role (“He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line [...] He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men— always an example of devotion to duty and as unflinching as a hero in a book” [39-40]). The title of the novel smiles at this grandiosity, giving the banal “Jim” the sheen of a “Lord.” Jim’s counterfactual existence has constituted “the best parts of life, its secret truth, its hidden reality” (52), but it also feeds his resentment. When bad things happen, he is acutely aware that things could have easily happened otherwise.

But Jim starts off rather lucky. Endowed with “a steady head and excellent physique” (39) he has what some philosophers would call good “constitutive luck”—a basic set of attributes that would seem to make a happy and virtuous life quite probable.¹⁶ He is, we are told, “the right sort” (98). He has enjoyed a comfortable upbringing in a genteel parsonage, he has been nurtured and loved (remaining very much his father’s darling), and has been initiated into an admittedly easy school of virtue. His education may have had its flaws, but all the rudiments seem to be in place for success in the moral world. Indeed, Jim’s constitutive luck make his various misdeeds very hard to accept: “if this sort can go wrong like that” (68), then what hope is there for the rest of us? But Jim does go wrong. Much of this wrongdoing, he believes, is attributable to luck; however, the extent to which this serves as either a mitigation or a moral waiver remains to be seen.

Jim’s assessment of his moral career anticipates much of what Thomas Nagel had to say about “circumstantial luck.” As Nagel put it: “It may be true of someone that in a dangerous situation he would behave in a cowardly or heroic fashion, but if the situation never arises, he will never have the chance to distinguish or disgrace himself in this way, and his moral record will be different” (33-4). Jim is painfully alert to this fact. He is aware that for much of his career he has been the beneficiary of good fortune. He has risen to the position of chief mate “without ever having been tested by those events of the sea that show in the light of day the inner worth of a man, the edge of his temper, and the figure of his stuff” (43). But Jim feels unlucky in his luck and craves a moral theater that would allow him to display his worth to the world. At the same time, he remains deeply aware of the luck that conditions other people’s heroism—so much so that he repeatedly doubts its substance. When a colleague saves someone from drowning in a storm, Jim feels the “gale had ministered to a heroism as spurious as its own pretence of terror” (42). In the eyes of some, “luck is better than courage”—or so a character declares in *Suspense*—but Jim is inclined to think of them as the same thing, at least when other people are involved (5).

Jim gets his test, of course, and he fails miserably. The moral ramifications of his awful leap from the *Patna*—where he abandons his ship and its passengers to their doom—will haunt him all his life. If, as Aristotle maintained, the good person is never over-exercised by their luck—they will “neither be

excessively happy at good fortune nor excessively distressed at bad fortune”— then Jim is not good (69). Having bemoaned his bad luck for never being tested, he now berates the fact that he has been tested (“Was there ever any one so shamefully tried!” [121]). The cowardice the world has conjured out of him is, he suggests, a case of bad circumstantial luck. Again, Jim lives counterfactually, seduced by the person he would be if circumstances had been a little different. Jim may over-egg his luck to “save from the fire his idea of what his moral identity should be” (101), but as Marlow concedes, he is on many levels unfortunate.

Such misfortune may reflect the “villainy of circumstances” (133), but it also hangs on unforeseen results. Initially, Jim’s “resultant luck” appears to have been rather good. The *Patna*, after all, never sinks and its passengers never drown. The fact that we continue to care about Jim or are moved by his plight may depend on such fortune. His leap might be viewed as cowardice or some serious dereliction, but he is not the monstrous enabler of some eight hundred deaths. Here plot would seem to affect the assessment of character in literature as in life.¹⁷ But Jim’s luck is double-edged. The survival of the *Patna* greatly weakens the excuse that the sailors may have had for their abandonment of their craft: that their lives were in imminent danger and all were set to perish (as Marlow sympathetically puts it, “The foreseen fact coming so swiftly had justified their haste” [145]). The sailors, therefore, are desperate for the world to vindicate their actions by allowing the boat to go down (“Sink!— curse you! Sink!” [118]). But the world does not oblige. This may feel like a bad case of epistemic luck where the world reneges upon a highly probable outcome and thus the most rational form of guess.¹⁸ It is certainly a case of poor resultant luck—at least in the cynical scheme of saving moral appearances.

Of course, the most dramatic example of resultant luck occurs at the end of the novel. This is the terrible result that follows Jim’s decision to allow Brown and his crew free passage out of Patusan in full possession of their arms. The massacre that issues from this again reveals how events can conspire to delegitimize our choices, at least in the world’s eyes, turning an apparently generous action or decision into a moment of homicidal negligence. Adam Smith was rightly concerned by the terrible alchemy of results: “That the world judges by the event, and not by the design, has been in all ages the complaint, and is the

great discouragement of virtue” (123). Yet, a total overlooking of the consequences of a poorly considered action might seem equally wrongheaded. Jim’s intentions may have been magnanimous and largely honorable, but judged in the light of what they lead to, his decision appears self-indulgent, reckless, and foolish— a disastrous bet on the wellbeing of the community he claims to protect.

There is, it would seem, real culpability here, but there is also considerable luck. Could Jim have ever predicted the extent of Brown’s malice or the wider series of betrayals that made massacre possible? These are, perhaps, naïve questions to ask about a fictitious character— an excessively earnest investment in the hidden life of metaphors— but our desire to get to the bottom of Jim’s luck repeatedly invites this counterfactual speculation about a counterfactual world.¹⁹ If the sense that things might have happened otherwise underpins our sense of luck, it also informs the ideas of freedom we might bring to Jim. And with freedom, of course, comes responsibility or so we tend to assume. Hence we arrive at what Kipling identified as the central issue of *Lord Jim*: “the question of whether a man is responsible for his actions.” As far as Kipling was concerned, Conrad had shown that responsibility “almost ceases to exist” under certain conditions (Perłowski 63)— a position that Kipling agreed with, but counselled against propounding in an English court of law. But is Jim’s responsibility routed by his bad luck? It is an issue that torments his internal interpreters— Marlow, Brierly, and the French lieutenant— and puts real readers to the test.²⁰

Luck and the Blame Game

One of the striking things about Jim— at least initially— is his apparent lack of remorse. This may reflect the fact that he attributes his errors to luck and he may have concluded that this leaves little room for responsibility. But even inadvertent or unlucky wrongdoers tend to show regret, and Marlow is troubled by its apparent absence in Jim: “I asked myself, seeing him there apparently so much at ease— is he silly? is he callous? He seemed ready to start whistling a tune” (68). Jim’s emotions may be more complex than surfaces allow— Marlow sometimes feels he takes things too much to heart— yet the only regret he immediately relates during the *Patna* affair is a sense of an opportunity lost: he has spoiled his

chance to prove his heroism. Before, during, and after his terrible leap Jim remains a narcissist.²¹ He consequently has great difficulties squaring his deeds with the romantic image he entertains of himself (“when he shuts his eyes he sees himself as a very fine fellow— so fine as he can never be” [208]). It is hard to know whether Jim’s preoccupation with luck drives his narcissism or whether his narcissism drives his sense of luck, but it leaves him with the impression that his deeds are accidental to the person he really is (“some conviction of innate blamelessness [...] checked the truth writhing within him at every turn” [99]). If he lays claim to the moral innocence of a child, the cost of this is a childish misconstruction of the world and his own responsibilities within it.

Jim may be an extreme case, but he expresses a difficulty we all share in aligning our sense of our own moral personality with its actual manifestations in the world.²² As Jim’s recollections of that night suggest, our conception of ourselves as agents— as the prime cause of our own actions— is so often disturbed by the basic mechanics of the world. The way luck conditions or completes our actions may make us wonder whether our deeds are ever really our own. We now stand the risk of dissolving as agents and becoming mere playthings of the world. Jim certainly undergoes some collapse on the *Patna*: he experiences “a strange illusion of passiveness, as though he had not acted but had suffered himself to be handled by the infernal powers who had selected him for the victim of their practical joke” (123). Significantly, Marlow presents Jim’s passivity as “an illusion”— a form of bad faith in which he actively disavows his own powers. Moreover, Marlow’s judgment implies that non-action is never inactive in a moral sense: it is only “*as though* he had not acted,” when in fact he had. Not doing anything in the face of injustice, Marlow suggests, is itself a move in a moral game and we stand or fall by it.

However, Jim does not feel like an owner of his own actions— an alienation heightened by the shift between third-person and first-person accounts of that terrible night on the *Patna*. Even as Jim narrates the events of that night his movements are not quite his own (he rises slowly as he talks “as if a steady hand from above had been pulling him out of the chair by his hair” [125]). He denies basic awareness of his own jump (“I knew nothing about it till I looked up” [126]) and can’t quite make sense of how it happened: “‘Didn’t I get somehow into that boat? Into that boat— I ...’ The muscles round his lips

contracted into an unconscious grimace” (132). Jim’s involuntary grimace repeats the lack of rational control that he possessed over his own actions on the *Patna* (indeed, Marlow casts the whole ordeal on the boat as a burlesque of “funny grimaces” [121]). Jim stumbles on the word “I,” finding it impossible to locate his deed within the circle of himself (as Sartre recognized, the seeming clumsiness of Conrad’s dialogue was part of its philosophical power [22]). When Jim jumps from the *Patna* it seems that he is not quite himself. The metaphysical comedy of this is brilliantly captured by the sailors’ misidentification of him as “George” (“Jump, George! Jump! Oh, jump!” [125]). The name is peculiarly apposite: George is now a corpse and Jim feels dead to himself. As he bleakly concedes, “‘Everything was gone and— all was over ...’ he fetched a deep sigh ... ‘with me’” (128). His leap precedes and conditions a kind of moral death.

Thoroughly alienated from his moral personality— or the personality he would possess had not luck intervened— Jim even ceases to feel human: “If I had opened my lips then I would have simply howled like an animal” (136). His beastly condition on the lifeboat returns us to one of the novel’s most famous moments: his eloquent misapprehension that he has been called a “wretched cur” during the official inquiry about the ship’s abandonment (92). The ground for Jim’s mistake and its resolution is the actual presence of a “yellow dog” in the courtroom. His discovery of the animal is a cruelly comic kind of *anagnorisis*:

He appeared at first uncomprehending, then confounded, and at last amazed and scared as though a dog had been a monster and he had never seen a dog before. ‘Nobody dreamt of insulting you,’ I said.

He contemplated the wretched animal, that moved no more than an effigy: it sat with ears pricked and its sharp muzzle pointed into the doorway, and suddenly snapped at a fly like a piece of mechanism. (95)

Jim's protests have merely emphasized the kinship between himself and the dog—a canine “effigy” of his moral state. He may discover his own cowardice in the “yellow dog” or his humiliating passivity. The animal, moreover, functions “like a piece of mechanism,” behaving more as a thing than as an agent—a little like Jim on the *Patna*. As Nagel pointed out, it often feels as if “something in the idea of agency is incompatible with actions being events, or people being things” (37). Jim cannot align his moral personality with the event of his jump, or the thing that landed in a waiting lifeboat. It is why he sometimes prefers to describe his jump without a pronoun—“‘Jumped,’ he corrected me incisively. ‘Jumped— mind.’” (141). Evidently, there has been very little mind in that jump, or so Jim would have us believe.

Nonetheless, Jim is called to account for his actions in a court of law. Marlow proclaims that the ethical and existential issues at stake in Jim's case lie “beyond the competency of a court” (111) and he speaks dismissively of the inquiry as the “yellow-dog thing” (63)— an expression that stresses the thingliness of the dog as much as it points to the absurdity of the court case. If there is something anomalous about a dog in a courthouse,²³ there is, perhaps, something inappropriate about Jim's presence too. Neither are fitting objects of justice, for justice implies responsibility and this usually presupposes both understanding and control. Jim possesses neither of these attributes— at least at some of the decisive moments of his life. The problem may be constitutional, a sad example of “the perversions of nerves” (71), but it is another instance of bad moral luck.

Jim, of course, may milk his luck in ways that reveal the “subtle unsoundness of the man” (108). His suggestion that his yapping companions— “Yap! Yap! Bow-ow-ow-ow-ow! Yap! yap!” (131)— are the real yellow dogs in this story seems like a dodge. His scapegoating of other crew-members— “It was their doing as plainly as if they had reached up with a boat-hook and pulled me over” (135)— is a grubby self-exculpation, and certainly features a very over-burdened “as if.” Jim clearly downplays his own moral agency, but it is significant that he does not avoid all sense of culpability for his actions. His protests, after all, are intriguingly torn: “Isn't it awful that a man should be driven to do a thing like that— and be responsible?” (132). Jim's use of third-person narration is another form of self-distancing from his deed—

he also claims that he was “driven” to his leap rather than being the driver of it— and yet he still concedes that he is accountable. Such responsibility may be “awful,” but it obtains nonetheless.

And so, Jim undergoes the humiliation of a public hearing. Jim’s attendance at court is arguably an expression of shame rather than guilt— if we understand shame as a capitulation to a set of social standards or honor-code (the importance of which is stressed throughout *Lord Jim*) and guilt as a more inward, private, or autonomous acknowledgment of culpability.²⁴ The distinction is a crude one and takes little account of the ways in which Jim may have *entirely* internalized the “eye of others” (154) in his perception of himself (I’ll say more on this point later).²⁵ But it at least might begin to explain how Jim can hang onto a feeling of inner innocence, while publicly owning up to a perceived injustice. Indeed, Marlow will wonder if Jim has not overdone the shame— making “so much of his disgrace when it is the guilt alone that matters” (178). Whether it’s due to shame, guilt, or some combination of the two, Jim’s still feels that he has done wrong in a way that cannot be explained away by his luck.

“All the same, one is responsible,” he ruefully admits. It is hard to know how fully Jim believes this about himself (the way he watches Marlow “like a hawk” for his reaction his admission of responsibility reflects, perhaps, how provisional his own assent to it is [181]; the remark stands or falls on the kind of response it receives from others). Nor is it obvious how we should respond. Presumably, a lot hinges on whether or not Jim can be said to be in control of his actions and whether or not we believe responsibility requires this dominion (some contend, after all, that our “responsibilities outrun control” [Walker 247]). The extent of Jim’s control is certainly talked up in the novel: “He had regulated so many things in Patusan! Things that would have appeared as much beyond his control as the motions of the moon and the stars” (214). And yet the image of Jim heading into the unknown with an “unloaded revolver on his lap” (234) is the more fitting emblem of the extent and limits of his power. The question of control becomes particularly inflamed when we return to Jim’s fatal decision to give Brown free passage. As we have seen, Jim may be at fault for a poor decision— a fault, moreover, that would seem to stem from narcissism as much as from a sense of honor, though honor for Jim has always been an “idealised selfishness” (178). Moreover, the magnanimous precept he applies to Brown— “Men act sometimes without being much

worse than others” (356)— is a charitable interpretation of his own moral history.²⁶ Jim’s observation may largely be true, but unluckily in this case it proves to be disastrously misapplied. It sanctions a reckless charity in which the lives of others are sacrificed on the altar of his own self-love. And yet the homicidal result of his egotism is also terrible moral luck.

So how should we judge the unfortunate Jim? His own view on this question is at best ambiguous. On one level, it appears that he accepts all guilt for what has happened by offering himself up as a symbolic object of punishment. This, at least, is how some see his final actions: “‘He hath taken it upon his own head,’ a voice said aloud.” Somehow it feels right that the source of this voice is unknown and its authority impossible to vouchsafe, though Jim casts it as the proper interpretation of his own act (“‘Yes. Upon my head.’” [371]). Yet, one might wonder whether Jim’s presence in Doramin’s court is a last attempt to persuade others— and himself— of his own “innate blamelessness” (99). The chief doesn’t spend much time on these questions or on the broader issue of whether luck precludes responsibility. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he takes a very quick stand on the last question by shooting Jim through the chest. Luck, it seems, is no mitigation and Jim will die “unforgiven” (371).

The Contagion of Example

Jim’s fate is liable to prove humbling to a reader. We are repeatedly told that “he is one of us” (70, 98, 111, 122, 217, 297, 301, 329, 372)— a term that stands for the brotherhood of the sea, while also operating as an ethnic category, securing Jim (and the ideal reader) from “one of *them*” (329),²⁷ but it is also an invitation to think of Jim in a general key and to include ourselves in his fate. He can be read as an exemplary moral agent and his failings are “enough to affect mankind’s conception of itself” (111). If Jim “is not good enough,” then this might indicate that “nobody is good enough” (292). Several of the novel’s characters find themselves implicated in his fate and model its implications for the reader. Marlow is aware of the egotistical root of his own interest in Jim. The vindication he seeks for his friend— some “profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse” (76)— is also an attempt to retain his sense of the world and his confidence in its moral intelligibility. But

if Jim's case erodes Marlow's confidence, it has an even more disastrous impact on Captain Brierly. It is difficult to know what triggers Brierly's fatal leap into the sea, but he is clearly appalled by the moral ramifications of Jim's own leap. Faced with the same situation of a sinking ship, would Brierly do any better? His suicide may stem from the recognition that he would not.

Brierly models the ways in which reading might sensitize us to our own luck by luring us into possible worlds, encouraging us to compare ourselves with fictional figures and to test our mettle in counterfactual situations. He also advertises the dangers of doing so—presumably, it can be brought to fatal lengths—as does Jim himself. If Jim's course of "light literature" has nurtured his narcissism, his various misadventures are a deep disappointment to Brierly's own self-love for they underline the instability of our claim to virtue. After all, Brierly is "*the* fortunate man of the earth" (82) and has an impeccable moral record: "He had never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident, never a mishap, never a check in his steady rise, and he seemed to be one of these lucky fellows who know nothing of indecision, much less of self-mistrust" (81). Brierly's self-satisfaction may stem from the fact that much of his luck is "constitutive" and feels essential to who he is, but Jim's case disturbs his moral serenity by showing how even the constitutionally lucky may be undone by the villainy of circumstances or by the discovery of some "infernal alloy" (72) in their moral metal.

If the key to virtue, as Marlow maintains, is to retain a radical self-sufficiency—an immunity to "the contagion of example," to the destabilizing influence of theories and even to the evidence of facts—then Brierly appears to have attained this invulnerability. As we are told: "The sting of life could do no more to his complacent soul than the scratch of a pin to the smooth face of a rock" (82). Ultimately, however, Brierly is undone by the contagion of Jim. His suicide may be a last attempt to win immunity from luck and it is an option that is also courted by Jim throughout the novel (death after all, "exorcises from the house of life the haunting shadow of fate" [178]). His refusal to flee at the end of the novel and to turn himself in may represent a suicidal form of rectitude. So Brierly and Jim are fatal mirrors of each other. Both believe themselves equal to their luck, both believe themselves immune to it, both, ultimately, are deluded. "I feel as if nothing could ever touch me" (180), Jim declares, and reiterates this sense of

inviolability at the end of the novel. “‘Nothing can touch me,’ he said in a flicker of superb egoism” (369)— until, of course, he is touched by a bullet in the chest. Unluckily, not all shots miss the heart.

Surely Martha Nussbaum is right: “interference from the world leaves no self-sufficient kernel of the person safely intact” (381). The search for independence has made Jim stand aloof from others: “these men did not matter; he rubbed shoulders with them, but they could not touch him; he shared the air they breathed, but he was different” (55). Yet Jim repeatedly finds himself in the same boat with his fellows— most literally so before and after his leap from the *Patna*. Even on a tiny lifeboat Jim will try to stand apart. He may cling to a sense of inner difference— another feature that makes him “one of us”— but the public significance of his own leap cannot be avoided. As Marlow acknowledges, “it is impossible to lay the ghost of a fact” (194). And the fact is that Jim jumped. Facts, of course, are not self-interpreting, and the meaning that Jim attributes to the event of his leap is ultimately dependent on the meaning that others give it. Total independence is unavailable when it comes to interpretation and self-interpretation. The most blunt acknowledgment of this condition is given in *Under Western Eyes*: “A man’s real life is that accorded to him in the thoughts of other men by respect or natural love” (11). Our self-identity is partly derived from the recognition of others— which is what also makes it dependent on luck. The need for another’s recognition, and consequently our vulnerability to luck, is acknowledged by Jim’s desire for a hearing and by the epigraph from Novalis that prefaces the novel: “It is certain my Conviction gains infinitely the moment another soul will believe in it” (35). Yet it is not clear what we believe about Jim or what Jim ultimately believes about himself.²⁸ This is because he is one of us— a figure who nurses contradictory feelings about luck and morality itself.

Conrad often worried about the coherence of the moral point of view. As he declared in *A Personal Record*: “The ethical view of the universe involves us [...] in so many cruel and absurd contradictions” (86). The task of fiction, he suggested, was to explore these aporias. “The only legitimate basis of creative work lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic, so burdensome, so fascinating, so dangerous— so full of hope” (*Letters* 2:348-9). As I have shown, one of the most dizzying contradictions, for Conrad, is in our moral attitude to luck: we believe

that people are only responsible for what they control, yet they are repeatedly held accountable for actions and events that exceed their dominion. This is the contradiction that produces the “unanswerable why of Jim’s fate” (258). Of course, we can attempt to defuse the contradiction by producing a more differentiated sense of control (no easy matter) or by relinquishing the notion altogether. Responsibility, in other words, may not require the control-principle. However, this is liable to make morality itself seem like “a beastly unfair thing” (142).

The coherence of this last sentiment may be queried, but many of Conrad’s characters wonder about the justice of justice itself. His secret sharer, for instance, admits to having killed someone, but he refuses to explain himself “to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen.” His guilt cannot be settled by them: “What can they know whether I am guilty or not— or of *what* I am guilty, either? That’s my affair” (111). Jim is also dismissive of the theater of justice to which he is subject, yet he also seems to acknowledge that the question of his guilt is a valid one and cannot simply be settled by himself. He is, it seems, no moral skeptic— “After all, one is responsible” (181). Nonetheless, Jim’s unlucky life may make us wonder how responsive to the world and to our experience of it the concept of responsibility really is.²⁹ We may depart from the novel with our faith in this concept weakened, but we may also find— like Brierly— that our responsibility has been horribly enlarged. The force of Jim’s question— “but what would you have done?” (110)— is certainly difficult to dodge and can induce a kind of counterfactual guilt in those who are willing to address it. According to Conrad, readers bring to literature one basic imperative: “Take me out of myself!” (*Notes*, 16). But Conrad’s novels also take us back to ourselves with dark and intractable questions.

Notes

¹ On these metaphysical questions, see Schnauder.

² The question of moral luck is suggestively raised, but never systematically pursued in Simmons, Schnauder, and O’Hara.

³ As Moser recognized, Conrad is obsessed by “moral failure” (29), but the way luck bears upon the interpretation of failure remains unexplored.

⁴ For an overview of more recent debates on luck, see Hanna, Church, and Hartman.

-
- ⁵ On the irreducibility of this paradox, see Nagel. Williams sought to evade the paradox by over-ruling the assumption that morality should remain immune to luck. The role of moral paradox in Conrad's fiction has often been noted—see Gekoski, Lands, Collits—but not in relation to luck.
- ⁶ Luck remains a leitmotif in Conrad's later fiction, but I share Gekoski's view that the ethical tensions of Conrad's writing gradually weaken in the later work.
- ⁷ On the ways in which capitalism conditions luck in Conrad see Caserio (*The Novel* 42-54).
- ⁸ As Williams puts it, "the only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself" ("Moral Luck" 23).
- ⁹ To determine whether a decision is justified or not all we may need to recover is the information that agents have at their disposal at the time; what happens afterward, we might conclude, is irrelevant.
- ¹⁰ See Nagel 28 on this question.
- ¹¹ See also Cox on suicide.
- ¹² On this point, see Armstrong 120-22.
- ¹³ For other deviations from fact, see Watt 266 and Sherry.
- ¹⁴ On the means by which narrative technique may undermine a reader's faith in even efficient causality see Sheehan 77-8.
- ¹⁵ For more on the influence of Darwin, see Hunter.
- ¹⁶ For a description of this luck, see Nagel 28. For the argument that constitutional luck is incoherent, since "identity" precedes luck, see Rescher.
- ¹⁷ The resistance to plot in modern literature noted by Caserio may reflect a broader resistance to the ways in which plot is often allowed to determine moral identity.
- ¹⁸ On the differences between moral and epistemic luck, see Statman and Pritchard. For the view that arguments for moral luck are often simply disguised cases of epistemic luck, see Latus.
- ¹⁹ Throughout this essay I take Cavell's approach that a condition of intelligibility for literary characters is that we treat them *as if* they are real (246-9). See also Anderson, Felski, and Moi.
- ²⁰ As Acheraïou argues, *Lord Jim* is "an odyssey of reading" in which several internal readers inform and complicate the external reader's task (132).
- ²¹ On the way narcissism distorts Jim's judgment see Brudney.
- ²² The role of alienation in Conrad has been observed by Watt (*Essays* 1-19) and several others (Van Ghent, Gekoski, Hampson).
- ²³ Some societies, however, have not deemed it absurd to prosecute animals. See Slabbert.
- ²⁴ Hampson speaks of a larger rift between "identity-for-self" and "identity-for-the-other" in Jim (123).
- ²⁵ On the reasons why the distinction may fail to do justice to shame see Williams (*Shame* 81-85).
- ²⁶ This does not preclude the possibility that Jim's magnanimity is also a disastrous form of "white solidarity" (Moore 23).
- ²⁷ On the ways in which Conrad enlists and troubles colonial distinctions between "us" and "them," see White.
- ²⁸ Here I depart from Greaney's judgment that *Lord Jim* "reneges upon its own scepticism" (91). On the more general role of skepticism in Conrad, both moral and epistemic, see Wollaeger.
- ²⁹ For a philosophical account of how luck negates responsibility, see Levy.

Works Cited

- Acheraïou, Amar. *Joseph Conrad and the Reader: Questioning Modern Theories of Narrative and Readership*. Palgrave, 2009.
- Anderson, Amanda, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi. *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*. U of Chicago P, 2019.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Edited and translated by Roger Crisp. Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Armstrong, Paul. B. *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford*. Cornell UP, 1987.
- Brudney, Daniel. "Lord Jim and Moral Judgment: Literature and Moral Philosophy." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 3, 1998, pp. 265-81.
- Butler, Samuel. *Luck, or Cunning as the Main Means of Organic Modification*. Jonathan Cape, 1887.
- Caserio, Robert L. *Plot, Story and the Novel from Dickens to Poe to the Modern Period*. Princeton UP, 1979.
- . *The Novel in England 1900-1950*. Twayne, 1999.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge UP, 1976.
- Church Ian M and Robert J Hartman, editors. *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Luck*. Routledge, 2019.
- Collits, Terry. *Postcolonial Conrad: Paradoxes of Empire*. Routledge, 2005.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Chance*. Edited by Martin Ray. Oxford UP, 1988; rev. 2002.
- . *The Letters of Joseph Conrad*, edited by Frederick F. Karl, Laurence Davies, Gene M. Moore, Owen Knowles, J. H. Stape, 9 vols. Cambridge UP, 1983-2007.
- . *Lord Jim*. Edited by Cedric Watts. Broadview, 2001.
- . *Notes on Life and Letters*. Edited by J. H. Stape. Cambridge UP, 2004.
- . *A Personal Record*. Edited by Zdzislaw Najder and J. H. Stape. Cambridge UP, 2008.
- . "The Secret Sharer." *Twixt Land and Sea*, edited by J. A. Berthoud, Laura L. Davis, and S. W. Reid. Cambridge UP, 2008.
- . *Suspense*. Edited by Gene M. Moore. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- . *Under Western Eyes*. Edited by Jeremy Hawthorn. Oxford UP, 2003.
- . *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Cox, Brian. "Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 1972, pp. 285-99.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. Edited by William Bynum. Penguin, 2009.
- Gekoski, Elek. *Conrad: The Moral World of the Novelist*. Elek, 1978.
- Greaney, Michael. *Conrad, Language and Narrative*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Hampson, Robert. *Joseph Conrad: Betrayal and Identity*. Macmillan, 1992.
- Hanna, Nathan. "Moral Luck Defended." *Noûs*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2014, pp. 683-98.
- Hartman, Robert J. *In Defense of Moral Luck: Why Luck Often Affects Praiseworthiness and Blameworthiness*. Routledge, 2017.
- Hunter, Allan. *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism*. Routledge, 1983.
- Kant, Immanuel. "The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals." *Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary J. Gregor. Introduction by Allen Wood. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Land, Stephen. *Conrad and the Paradox of Plot*. Macmillan, 1984.
- Latus, Andrew. "Moral and Epistemic Luck." *Journal of Philosophical Research*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2000, pp. 149-72.
- Levy, Neil. *Hard Luck: How Luck Undermines Free Will and Moral Responsibility*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Moore, Gene. "Slavery and Racism in Joseph Conrad's Eastern World." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2007, pp. 20-38.
- Moser, Thomas. *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline*. Archon, 1966.
- Nagel, Thomas. "Moral Luck" in *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge UP, 1979, pp. 24-38.
- Najder, Zdzislaw. *Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle*. Rutgers UP, 1984.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, updated edition. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- O'Hara, Kieron. *Joseph Conrad Today*. Societas, 2007.
- Pelowski, Jan. "On Conrad and Kipling." *Under Familial Eyes*, edited by Zdzislaw Najder, translated by Halina Carroll-Najder. Cambridge UP, 1983, pp. 150-70.
- Pritchard, Duncan. "Moral and Epistemic Luck." *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-25.
- Rescher, Nicholas. "Moral Luck." *Moral Luck*, edited by Daniel Statman. SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 141-66.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Literary and Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Annette Michelson. Philosophical Library, 1957.
- Schnauder, Ludwig. *Free Will and Determinism in Joseph Conrad's Major Novels*. Rodopi, 2009.
- Sheehan, Paul. *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*. Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Eastern World*. Cambridge UP, 1966.

- Simmons, Allan. *Joseph Conrad*. Palgrave, 2006.
- Slabbert, Melodie. "Prosecuting Animals in Medieval Europe: Possible Explanations." *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History*, no. 10, 2004, pp. 159-79.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Edited by Knud Haakonssen. Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Spencer, Herbert. *The Principles of Biology*. 2 vols. Williams and Norgate, 1864.
- Statman, Daniel. "Moral and Epistemic Luck." *Ratio*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1991, pp. 146-56.
- Van Ghent, Dorothy. "Lord Jim." *The English Novel: Form and Function*. Rinehart and Co., 1953, pp. 229-44.
- Walker, Margaret Urban. "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency." *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 22, no. 1-2, 1991, pp. 14-27.
- Watt, Ian. *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*. Chatto and Windus, 1980.
- . *Essays on Conrad*. Edited by Frank Kermode. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- White, Andrea. *Joseph Conrad and the Adventure Tradition*. Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Williams, Bernard. "Moral Luck." *Moral Luck*. Cambridge UP, 1981, pp. 20-39.
- . *Shame and Necessity*. U of California P, 1993.
- Wollaeger, Mark A. *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*. Stanford UP, 1990.