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Butterfly and Bulkhead: Chance, Control, Conrad

‘What a chance missed! My God! What a chance missed’
Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900)

Jim’s lament has intriguing implications for issues of chance and control in literature, perhaps also for literary history, and certainly for the act of reading itself. Its immediate implications are obviously for the ‘moral identity’ of Jim himself, as Conrad’s narrator Marlow is quick to point out (Conrad 1968: 66). As he remarks, Jim contrives thoroughly to ‘give himself away’ through the nature of his regrets about abandoning the *Patna* and its passengers, pilgrims left to drift helplessly on the high seas (68). For the Court of Enquiry that follows, and for Marlow, this is a disgraceful dereliction of duty; a betrayal of the ‘few simple notions’ – such as ‘honest faith . . . courage’ – that sustain a body of men in their toil at sea (38, 39). For Jim, on the other hand, such relatively prosaic notions apparently hold less interest. Instead, he regrets abandoning the *Patna* not as an act of betrayal so much as of missed opportunity: as an exceptional but wasted chance for picturesque, heroic action; for brave and splendid performance in the world’s eyes. Opportunities the *Patna* offered are seductive enough to induce an extended, beatific reverie, even in mid-conversation with Marlow, about what might have been. Marlow notes that Jim ‘had no leisure to regret what he had lost, he was so wholly and naturally concerned with what he had failed to obtain’, and that he appears to be ‘projected headlong into the fanciful realm of recklessly heroic aspirations’. He chooses to bring him back to earth by bluntly remarking “‘If you had stuck to the ship’” (68). Jim’s crestfallen return to reality seems to Marlow ‘as though he had stumbled down from a star’ (68).

Jim’s reveries – his disposition as the ‘imaginative beggar’ Marlow describes in Chapter 7 – have of course been evident in the novel from the beginning, carefully

detailed as a decisive factor in Jim's boyhood choice of a career at sea, and a sustained influence on its development (68). It is 'after a course of light holiday literature [that] his vocation for the sea had declared itself'. Later, aboard a training ship, 'he would forget himself, and beforehand live in his mind' the kind of adventures this light reading outlines – ones in which, naturally, he always imagines himself 'as unflinching as a hero in a book' (11). Unfortunately, even at this early stage of his career, Jim fails to take heroic or even proper action when a moment of actual crisis occurs, disabled partly by the intensity of his inner, imaginative reflections immediately prior to it. Between the ideal and the reality, in other words, there falls a shadow; one which extends across most of Jim's life, deepening and darkening at several points as it goes on.

It is a shadow, or gap, also strongly emphasised in the novel's symbolic texture and lexis from the very beginning – or in a way even sooner, in the tensions between exalted status and common name in that title, 'Lord Jim'. Many of the novel's most picturesque episodes follow the same pattern: in the scene, for example, of the rare and beautiful butterfly flitting over the dead man's face in Chapter 20. It is only at the very end that the novel offers to resolve these tensions. In the 'proud and unflinching glance' which immediately precedes Jim's self-chosen death, he may at last consummate a 'pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct' (313). Yet Jim unhesitatingly 'goes away from a living woman' in order to celebrate this ethereal 'wedding', suggesting that any final realisation of heroic ideals and 'boyish visions' is also a rejection of love and ordinary human relationship, as well as, obviously, of life itself (313).

Jim, at any rate, 'passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic' (313). And perhaps he could just be left under that cloud. Marlow does suggest that Jim might be seen as 'an individual in the

forefront of his kind . . . as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself' (75). He further insists, repeatedly, that Jim is 'one of us', though – slightly obscurely himself – without ever quite clarifying the referent of that first-person pronoun (38 etc). But whatever society or species Marlow insists on assigning him to – 'mankind', the Western world, or just the mercantile marine – Jim might easily enough be dismissed merely as an intriguingly aberrant member of it. His extravagant romanticism disables him in ways interesting enough to sustain the after-dinner monologue which makes up most of the novel's substance, and whose duration Conrad himself estimates, rather conservatively, at around three hours. But does it necessarily have significances wide enough to affect 'mankind's conception of itself'?

If the significances of his story are held to have wider resonances – especially in terms of literary or critical understanding – they might most easily be seen as focused around the 'light holiday literature' which installs itself so early and so damagingly as a core of Jim's imagination. The interests of *Lord Jim* clearly do include a role in extending but also criticising imperial adventure and romance – the kind of fiction, produced by Rider Haggard, John Buchan, or lesser writers – which celebrated and disseminated ideals on which the expansion and maintenance of the British Empire were supposedly based. Yet many episodes in the novel suggest that Conrad's critical uneasiness is directed not only on a contemporary form of imaginative writing, but ultimately on imagination itself, on the ideals it helps engender, and on the disabling consequences of each for immediate action and responsibility. When Jim realises the scale of the crisis on board the *Patna*, he is distracted not by any particular recollection of the 'light holiday literature' that first led him to the sea, but by the more general disposition Marlow identifies in calling him 'an imaginative beggar' (68). As Marlow also remarks, Jim's limp response to

the crisis results from a 'confounded imagination' which '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' (71). Vivid action, disabblingly, occurs for Jim more readily and effectively in the mind than in the world.

By contrast, those characters in the novel who succeed in behaving with apparently genuine heroism do so through a *lack* of imagination so comprehensive as sometimes to be almost funny. The Malay steersmen who remain resolutely at their post on board the *Patna* do so simply because no-one has given them an order not to, a dutifulness apparently unaffected by the desertion of all officers from whom that or any other order might have been expected. The French Lieutenant who remains on board the *Patna* for thirty hours while it is towed to port – enduring the imminent likelihood of it sinking – likewise offers little hint of disquiet apart from deep regret at having missed his usual glass of wine. Discussions with this 'steady, reliable' Frenchman contribute to Marlow's conclusion that it is possible to 'go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts' and that 'this very dullness' may help to make life 'so supportable and so welcome' (111).. On the evidence of this Frenchman, and the Malays, it is certainly pragmatic numbness that appears to offer the best preparation for a life of purposeful action, and not imagination, likely merely to distract from the immediate moment and its demands.

Further conclusions about life, behaviour and imagination might no doubt be drawn from Jim's experience, if it were to be read principally – as Marlow often seeks to – in terms of the 'moral posture' it suggests (37). A specifically literary/critical analysis might do better to concentrate on literary implications, and specifically on the significance of *Lord Jim* and its protagonist for the act of reading. Here, again, Jim might not necessarily be seen as an ideal exemplar, or an 'individual in the forefront of his kind'. He might be dismissed easily enough, at any rate by

students or critics of literature, as *not* one of us, not *our* kind of reader at all, and on several grounds. He – or perhaps his father, a parson – seems guilty of a poor choice of Early Reading, exposing him at an impressionable age to such impossibly adventure-ridden ‘light holiday literature’. ‘Exalted egotism’, too, obviously makes him a peculiarly vulnerable reader of this literature, allowing him to project himself uncritically into the imaginative realms it offers, and to frame himself so flatteringly alongside the splendid heroes he finds there. Many writers and thinkers, after all – Jean-Paul Sartre, extensively, in *La Nausée* (1938) – have carefully cautioned against such temptations to live life as though telling a story.

Yet *Lord Jim* itself, and even Jim’s own literary experience, however limited and idiosyncratic, offer analogies for almost any engagement with imaginative narrative, and even for the impulse to undertake such engagement in the first place. The kind of gaps or shadows Jim finds between his ideals and the realities he encounters are after all paradigmatic of what makes imaginative narrative so necessary and engaging, and of the disappointment it seeks to overcome. As critics such as Frank Kermode suggest, every narrative is an extension of what Wallace Stevens calls ‘the mind in the act of finding/what will suffice’ in its encounters with a recalcitrant world. (Stevens 1955: 240). Fictions ‘meet a need’, Kermode explains in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966). ‘They seem to do what Bacon said poetry could: “give some show of satisfaction to the mind, wherein nature doth seem to deny it”’ (Kermode 1966: 63). In a world of chance, contingency, shapeless passages of days, and, ultimately, mortality, fictions offer a seductive sense of pattern, significance, connection and control, a way, as Kermode says, of ‘projecting the desires of the mind onto reality’ (42).

Readers find the resulting ‘satisfaction’ on fiction’s every page. Unlike life, unless for the deeply religious, narrative offers an implicit certainty of pre-ordained

control by directive, authorial intelligence, and so of purpose – anticipated if not always immediately discernible – shaping even the most chaotic of immediate events. Clearest evidence of the ‘satisfaction’ which results may be offered by the most popular of narrative forms: thriller and suspense genres, which promise that even the most violent or disturbing events have discoverable causes and acceptable resolutions. Yet such promises and fulfilments function in all narrative, as part of what Kermode calls their ‘humanly needed order’: ways that novels ‘have beginnings, ends, and potentiality, even if the world has not’ (123, 138). Wherever ‘human order’ is most missing from reality – in irrecoverably vanished happiness, or in lost childhood, or just in the unfulfilled wish that things would occasionally make good sense – narrative can provide this order imaginatively, creating measures of coherence or fulfilment to balance or outweigh actual loss and regret. Importantly, too, such fulfilment in a way takes a physical and tactile form, perhaps helping to explain the longevity of the printed book, even in an age of potentially more convenient methods of electronic delivery of narrative. Past times and experiences are lost in life, and future ones are unpredictable, of uncertain duration, and beyond secure control. Yet any readers holding a printed novel open in their hands know that the past remains securely contained under their left thumbs, the latter under their right. Reading, of all human activities, probably offers the best means of taking in hand the chancy, slippery dimension of time, albeit only in imagination.

Jim’s dreamy withdrawal from immediate conversation with Marlow, in other words, and his imagined construction of an alternative history of the *Patna*, not only help identify the troubling character traits Marlow seizes on, but incidentally offer a kind of paradigm for the allure of narrative and reading. Rather like Jim at this moment, there is a disposition among all readers to regret what has been lost, and to seek in art, ‘wholly and naturally’, what they have otherwise ‘failed to obtain’ from

actual experience. Jim's disposition tends towards the simple wish-fulfilment of personal romance: towards a story in which good chances are taken and never missed, and heroes alone control events, and not vice versa. Many readers, obviously, engage with far more complex fulfilments of desire, including in multi-layered and subtly-structured fictions such as *Lord Jim* itself. But all narrative, regardless of complexity, reflects a desire to substitute for chance and contingency – for the arbitrary winds and tides of the word – domains reordered by the controlling pulse of the mind. Such desires and impulses obviously concerned Conrad unusually directly, reflected in his inclusion in his novels – in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and in *Chance* (1913), as well as *Lord Jim* – of a circle of 'readers', or at any rate listeners, whose reactions and wishes sometimes shape or deflect Marlow's narrative.

Conclusions about narrative outlined above are neither new nor surprising in themselves, though they may emphasise the wide and fundamental significances, for literary study, of the issues of chance and control chosen as themes of this issue of *Forum*. There may still be scope, too, for a new or more thoroughly historicised approach to these issues. Even after forty years, *The Sense of an Ending* is still one of the fullest assessments of the appeal of narrative and its orders – of its intersections of desire, experience and imagination. Yet even Frank Kermode has little to say about the historical particularities of such intersections. And in way, quite properly so: Kermode is writing about narrative in general, in all its forms, and about the perennial nature of its appeal, and not only about the novel, which obviously has a much shorter and more particular history. That history, though, in the British context anyway, owed its very origins to particular stresses, pressures and opportunities specific to the eighteenth century. In later ages, the form and nature of fiction obviously continue to respond to the nature of the times: the world's particular uneasiness or mischance, in any age, exigent of particular forms of narrative reshaping or control.

Illuminating instances of this particularity appear in Conrad's own fiction, *Lord Jim* included, in which complex structures and sustained anachronies clearly depart from conventions of fiction established in the nineteenth century. For reasons probably arising principally from personal experience and the demands of a life at sea, Conrad experienced earlier than many of his contemporaries the pressures of modernity on everyday life late in the century, particularly as they affected the temporal and spatial ordering of the world. Conrad, of course, scarcely supports Captain Brierly's actions in *Lord Jim*, in marking his ship's spatial co-ordinates on a map, tying his gold chronometer watch to the rail, and throwing himself overboard into the unruly depths of the sea. Nor does he altogether approve Stevie's insane inscription of incessant circles in *The Secret Agent* (1907), mocking the Greenwich meridians' rigorous encirclings of space and location across the world. Yet in each case, involuted tensions between order and anarchy, control and chaos, are both fundamental to the form and vision of the novels, and also highly contemporary. The Prime Meridian Conference endowed Greenwich with new powers in 1884, just at the time Conrad was taking his maritime examinations as first officer and then as master mariner. It is no coincidence that Conrad is the first of the modernist novelists to depart decisively from conventional chronology in his fiction, nor that crises in his novels are entangled in clockwork with such weird regularity: in *Nostromo* (1904) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), as well as in *Lord Jim* and in the plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory in *The Secret Agent*.

Equally illuminating instances of the reshaping of the forms of fiction appear regularly in later modernist writing. These further confirm that cravings for control, though central to all narrative imagination, are significantly variable according to period, and to the degree to which chance and contingency seem to rule contemporary life. In the years following the First World War – an age experiencing dwindling

confidence in most forms of order, social or religious – modernist writers were forced to employ with new explicitness the kind of controls and opportunities, discussed above, offered by art and imagination themselves itself. If storytelling and its audiences intrigued Conrad, art and writing preoccupied later modernists still more widely. For authors such as Woolf, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis, imagination obviously created fictions, but it also became their subject, with artists, writers – ultimately language itself – occupying newly central roles in their novels. In the nineteenth century, novels often ended satisfactorily, or at least decisively, in representing episodes of lived experience, most often marriage or death. By the 1920s, modernist novels could no longer conclude only with an achievement or a fulfilled ambition, such as reaching a lighthouse, but instead had to withdraw into domains of ‘vision’, of controlling but imaginary order, distanced and aloof from an actual world.

Such developments show how incessantly and ingeniously the imagination strives to impose its orders and controls on experience: also how this ingenuity is challenged but perhaps enhanced by the difficulties of the contemporary events it confronts. Examining stresses and resolutions involved offers conclusions scarcely ‘momentous enough to affect mankind’s conception of itself’. But it does suggest how fundamental needs for narrative may be; how thoroughly ‘mankind’ – if not, like Jim, ideally seeking to live life as if it were a story – does need from stories constantly renewed means of enduring the chances and challenges of life. Imagination may merely distract from these challenges, of course, but it also often offers the only chance of controlling or coming to terms with them at all. Faced with a bulkhead bulging toward breaking point with pent-up seawater, Jim is evidently not much helped by the vividness of his imagination. Yet one of the characters in *Lord Jim* most sympathetic to the butterfly world of the mind is also one of the novel’s most successful pragmatists: Stein, respected merchant and lepidopterist. The man above

whose face that rare and beautiful butterfly flutters lies dead because Stein has just had to shoot him, in order to save his own life. And Stein catches the butterfly, too, for his collection, swiftly and neatly, in his capacious hat.

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