Literature, Moral Reflection and Ambiguity

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Abstract
While a number of philosophers have argued recently that it is through our emotional response to certain literary works that we might achieve particular moral understanding, what has not been discussed in detail in this connection are works which generate conflicting responses in the reader; which is to say literary works in which there is significant element of ambiguity. Consider Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*. I argue that in making sense of our potentially conflicting responses to this novel, and specifically to its central character Jim, we may gain a richer sense of the ways in which literature may contribute to moral understanding – in this case by contributing to an understanding of our own character, its blind spots and its limitations.

In responding to a reader's query about his aesthetic principles, in this specific case in connection to his novel *Victory*, Joseph Conrad writes as follows,

> … a work of art is very seldom limited to one exclusive meaning and not necessarily tending to a definite conclusion. … as to precision of images and analysis my artistic conscience is at rest. I have given all the truth that is in me… But as to 'final effect' my conscience has nothing to do with that. It is the critic's affair to bring to its contemplation his own honesty, his sensibility and intelligence. The matter for his conscience is just his judgement.[1]

What concerns me in this paper is not a detailed examination of Conrad's aesthetic principles, but rather two distinct though connected ideas we can draw out of Conrad's reply here to one of his readers: First, and most obviously, that a work of art, including literature, may not be limited to one meaning, that it may not tend to a definite conclusion, or, in other words, that it may be in the nature of a

[1] From a letter to Barrett H. Clark, 4th May 1918, in A. Ingram (ed.), *Joseph Conrad: Selected Literary Criticism and* The Shadow-Line (London: Methuen, 1986), 89.

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given work of art that its meaning or meanings may remain ambiguous at the same time as they convey truths; Second, about the responsibility of the (critical) reader trying to make sense of such a work. When I say that these two ideas are connected what I mean by that, as I hope to show, is that the matter for our conscience in trying to make sense of such a work concerns what we make of our conflicting responses to it. More specifically my interest is with the moral sense we might make of such a work and with the kind of moral understanding we might gain from it. Here I will argue that our conflicting responses to such a work, far from obscuring its moral meaning for us, actually suggest it; that such understanding as we might gain from the work may be revealed through its ambiguity.

1. Literature and Moral Reflection

I will take it that the role of literature in contributing to our moral understanding is not simply to provide good examples. Almost anyone would accept that in helping a person to understand some (perhaps difficult) moral problem or concept it may be useful to give them certain examples of a literary kind. But to claim that the role of literature is exhausted by its role in providing a pool of such examples suggests that once the relevant moral problem or concept is understood the literary example itself is superfluous and can be dispensed with. Of course against this it has been argued by a number of philosophers[2] that *the ways in which* literature (though not necessarily just literature) illuminates important human values are essential to any adequate understanding of those values. Here then there is a distinct divide, at least in the case of philosophers broadly in the analytic tradition, between two conceptions of moral thought and reflection, a divide that is illustrated by a now well known exchange between Cora Diamond and Onora O'Neill. Since my own argument draws, in ways which will become clear, on Diamond's response to O'Neill it is useful to outline their respective visions of moral thought and reflection *per se*.

The above-mentioned exchange was motivated by a review of Stephen Clark's book *The Moral Status of Animals* by O'Neill.[3]

[2] Most influentially perhaps, Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1985); Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991). I will refer specifically to Diamond in this paper.

[3] Onora O'Neill, 'Review: *The Moral Status of Animals*, by Stephen Clark', *The Journal of Philosophy* **77** (1980), 445.

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What O'Neill finds wanting in Clark's book are arguments in favour of his claims about the moral status of animals. Where what is needed are arguments in defence of the moral status of animals O'Neill finds only appeals to the heart, appeals that: first, are unlikely to convince anyone whose heart does not already so incline them; and second, are, insofar as they are appeals to the heart, not a legitimate exercise of moral thought or reflection at all but rather simply assertion. Against this, Diamond argues that there lie between mere assertion and argument other varieties of moral thought that O'Neill appears blind to. Specifically Diamond argues that moral thought quite properly involves the exercise of certain capacities of emotional response as well. Further, while acknowledging that our responses to literature (or to the world), may be initially wholly unreflective – as for example when we respond in 'delighted amazement and wonder at fairy tales' – Diamond goes on to argue that through the development of these capacities we may come to a

> …deepened understanding and enriching of our own thought and experience; we can come to have a sense of what is alive, and what is shallow, sentimental, cheap; as we make comparisons, we come to know what are our interest in this, our feeling that that is important.[4]

All this Diamond describes as 'a kind of learning to think; it plays an essential role in the development of the emotions and in the development of moral sensibility' (303). While Diamond is not denying the importance of the kind of critical attention invited by philosophical argument, to this she wants to add that 'critical attention to the character and quality of thought in a work may be asked of a reader in many other ways as well' (303). So, just as a work may be unconvincing because internally inconsistent, a work may be unconvincing, may fail as we might say to ring true, simply because the thought in it is shallow or sentimental. Indeed, to put the boot as it were on the other foot, while a work, say, of moral philosophy, may meet the highest standards of philosophical argument, the character and quality of the thought in that work might-in light of other kinds of critical attention that Diamond is highlighting-be found wanting in various ways, might itself appear shallow for example.

One reason I have focussed on Diamond here is that in her response to O'Neill, and in other places, she develops a conception of moral thought in terms of which it is possible to see the importance also,

[4] Cora Diamond, 'Anything but Argument?', in Diamond (1991), 303. All references to Diamond are from this work.

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as I will argue, of ambiguity in literature. I am not suggesting of course that ambiguity is a feature of all literature, and in fact the examples that Diamond gives in her response to O'Neill are ones in which ambiguity appears notably absent. Consider Diamond's discussion of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*; an example, she thinks, that indicates the way in which our capacities for emotional response are essentially involved in moral thought leading to being convinced of morally significant truths. First, as Diamond notes, these poems are 'clearly meant to lead their audience to new moral responses' (297), indeed as Diamond goes on to say Wordsworth indicates in his Preface 'his intention to enlarge the reader's moral and emotional sensibilities' (297). Second, as Diamond goes on to argue, to be convinced of the kind of view of human nature that gets expression through such poems as Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', when for example 'the response of the villagers to the beggar is explained: we have all of us one human heart… cannot [she claims] be separated from an understanding of oneself, from acknowledgment of certain capacities of response as appropriate both to their object and to one's own nature' (298). Diamond finds the example of the 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' particularly interesting because 'the moral aim is very clear, and because there is actually an argument in it' (297). Her point is though that while Wordsworth is certainly trying to convince us of something it is not the argument we might abstract from his work that does the convincing. Given the point that Diamond wants to make against O'Neill this is indeed a good example for her to focus on. However not all writers of literature have such clear moral aims. It may be for example that a writer has not determined precisely what we should make of or draw from the people and events they portray. It may be that something, a character perhaps, remains unresolved in a work of literary fiction. My concern in this paper is what we might learn from our response to some such works, works in which there is a strong element of ambiguity.

2. Literature and the Varieties of Ambiguity

First though, a point about ambiguity in literature generally: It is widely understood that ambiguity may feature in a work of literature in a number of ways.[5] Some of these ways that are worth noting but

[5] See here, for example, W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930) – a classic work of literary theory on this topic.

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with which I will not be directly concerned include: ambiguity in a work that is resolved within the work into a single meaning; two alternate meanings in a work that contribute to convey the same thing, consider here the example of even a simple pun involving the double meaning of a word; alternate meanings in a work that seem to conflict but turn out to indicate a single more complex meaning. Ambiguity in these kinds of cases might be viewed simply as a kind of artistic technique used to convey what may be a more or less clear idea or conception. My concern in this paper however is with a deeper, more troubling, kind of ambiguity that may occur when a writer, remembering Conrad's words, has put all the truth they can into a work yet where particular characters and events portrayed remain unresolved *for the writer*. In this kind of case while a writer may be genuinely concerned to make sense of some aspect of human life the most they may be able to do is trust in that mode of responsiveness to the world that is manifest in their work. Further, in such a situation, and again thinking of the quote from Conrad, the reader really faces a similar challenge, for it is then up to us to exercise our own judgement in making sense for ourselves of our potentially conflicting responses to those characters and events.

My point above, let me stress, is not simply that a particular narrative may be *incomplete* and that that is the reason the reader is required to bring their own sensibility, including their moral sensibility, to the work to properly understand it. This point is familiar enough from the work of Noël Carroll who argues that

> …the successful narrative becomes the occasion for exercising knowledge, concepts and emotions that we already have, in one sense, learned. Filling in the narrative is a matter of mobilizing or accessing the cognitive, emotive and moral repertoire that, for the most part, we already have at our disposal.[6]

Like Carroll I accept that the kind of engagement with literature he is here highlighting 'can deepen our moral understanding by… encouraging us to apply our moral knowledge and emotions to specific cases' (Carroll (1998), 142). However the kind of case I am interested in involves more than filling in the narrative in the manner that Carroll suggests; I am interested in the kind of case where, as we might put it, our conflicting emotional responses to the narrative really suggest different ways in which we might fill it in. I am

[6] Noël Carroll, 'Art, Narrative and Moral Understanding', in J. Levinson (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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concerned, as I say, with cases where a work's ambiguity remains *unresolved*. In this sense my argument goes beyond the general point that literature engages our capacities of emotional response leading to moral understanding. Specifically, my interest is with cases where we have *conflicting* responses to a work and with the particular moral understanding that may lead to.

3. *Lord Jim*

One work, I argue, in which the kind of ambiguity I am interested in is manifest is Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*.[7] This novels tells the story of Jim, a young English officer in the Merchant Service, a man who dreams of being a hero – who even expects it – and is only waiting for his opportunity, yet who when the time comes fails shamefully to live up to his vision of himself. The fateful incident occurs when he is first mate on the merchant ship the *Patna* delivering 800 Muslim pilgrims to their Holy Land. The journey has been uneventful, the sea calm, 'smooth and cool to the eye like a sheet of ice' (15), when the *Patna* strikes something just below the surface. The collision is barely noticeable but the outer hull is breached and water rushes in filling up to the forward bulkhead. With the *Patna* hardly seaworthy and with nothing but the heavily corroded bulkhead (bits of it came off in Jim's hand) between the inrushing sea and the sleeping pilgrims, Jim imagines that catastrophe is inevitable, that the ship will sink at any moment. Yet Jim is unable to act; so vivid is his imagination, so clearly can he see the impending disaster, that he stands, horrified, rooted to a spot on deck while the other white crewmembers, captain included, disgrace themselves by trying to release one of the lifeboats so saving themselves while leaving their charges to a terrible death. Jim is disgusted by their cowardice and refuses to help them. But the next moment he has himself jumped over the side and into their boat. As it turns out however the *Patna* does not sink, being saved and towed to safety by another ship, and Jim is called to answer for his act of cowardice before a court of inquiry which punishes him by cancelling his certificate and thus his occupation.

Jim's story is told in three ways as the book progresses: first in the third person by an omniscient narrator up to the point where Jim faces the court inquiry; then as related by Marlow in a long (very long) talk to a group of people after dinner in which Marlow tells

[7] Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*. All references are to the Penguin edition: A. Simmons (ed.), (London: Penguin, 2007).

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of his experience and impressions of Jim from first meeting him at the inquiry; and finally in the form of a letter by Marlow to one of those present at that dinner and relating events of Jim's life after Marlow saw him for the last time. Looked at another way *Lord Jim* divides into two distinct parts; the first dealing with events on the *Patna* and the second dealing with Jim's time in the remote settlement of Patusan where he retreats from the world to become very quickly its virtual absolute ruler. Central to the narrative though, what holds the story together, is Marlow's sympathy for and interest in Jim. While Jim's crime, as Marlow sees it, is so serious as to be 'a breach of faith with the community of mankind' (121), Marlow nevertheless emphasises several times that Jim is 'one of us'. Jim is not in this sense of a kind with the other white crewmembers who think nothing of fleeing from the *Patna* or, later, of fleeing from or evading the court of inquiry. Jim unlike these men is horrified by his actions, as he says: 'It was as if I had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole' (87). Moreover he alone of the crew is prepared to face the inquiry, as he says 'to fight this thing down' (119).

At the same time however Jim's character remains ambiguous to Marlow and to us as readers. The difficulty in fixing Jim's character moreover stems in part from certain conflicting responses we might have to Jim. On the one hand like Marlow we may respond with sympathy for Jim; in a moment of terrible weakness he loses not only his livelihood but the respect of the world, indeed he has lost his whole future as he had envisaged it. At the same time however, and in conflict with our sympathy for Jim, we, like Marlow, may recoil from the rank cowardice of his actions on the *Patna* so that we wonder if there is not in Jim's character some unusual and fatal flaw. What pervades Marlow's and perhaps our reflections on Jim in the end then is a certain doubt about Jim, about who he is, about his character. Further, the way in which Jim responds to his failure of nerve does nothing to remove these doubts but rather adds to them. So there is the suspicion for instance that what troubles Jim most is not what he has done but what he has lost: a supposed right to think of himself in a certain way. As Marlow says, '… the idea obtrudes itself that he made so much of his disgrace while it is the guilt alone that matters. He was not – if I may say so – clear to me. He was not clear' (135). Then there is the question of why, after the *Patna* affair, Jim should suddenly leave several jobs when his identity becomes clear. Is it that, as Jim says, he will no longer be trusted by his employer, or is he simply running away, running away perhaps most fundamentally from himself? Marlow cannot say: 'Obviously Jim was not of the winking sort; but what I could never

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make up my mind about was whether his line of conduct amounted to shirking his ghost or to facing him out' (150).

Even in Patusan, where Jim has been sent as a local agent for a trader friend of Marlow, and which seems to be an ideal opportunity for Jim to redeem himself, Marlow's – and our – doubts remain. Things seem to start off well: After ridding the people of the village of a band of outlaws and standing up to the local Raja Jim is loved and admired by all, his word being law for the people. Jim even wins the heart of a girl, Jewel, the cruelly mistreated stepdaughter of the agent he is there to replace. But questions remain. Consider what Jim says to Marlow when he visits Patusan:

> 'The very thought of the world outside is enough to give me a fright; because don't you see… I have not forgotten why I came here…. Upon my soul and conscience … if such a thing [meaning the *Patna* affair] can be forgotten, then I think that I have a right to dismiss it from my mind… Ask any man here' …his voice changed. 'Is it not strange,' he went on in a gentle almost yearning tone, 'that all these people, all these people who would do anything for me, can never be made to understand? Never! … What more can I want? If you ask them who is brave – who is true – who is just – who is it they would trust with their lives? – they would say, Tuan Jim. And yet they can never know the real, real truth' (232–3).

Here again Jim's character remains ambiguous; has Jim really come to terms with or mastered his past weakness, is he really any more self-aware, or does his life on Patusan merely sustain his grand illusions about himself? Even Jim's last acts admit of conflicting interpretations. Here the story takes the form of the letter from Marlow I mentioned earlier in which Marlow pieces together from conversations with those involved – the outlaw Captain Brown, Jewel and Jim's servant Tamb' Itam – Jim's last days in Patusan. Jim is away from the village when the outlaw Captain Brown and his crew arrive in Patusan seeking provisions and possible plunder. After an initial exchange of fire with the villagers Brown establishes a base for himself on a knoll by the river. When Jim returns he goes out to meet Brown. For his part Brown realises that he is hopelessly outnumbered against an organised people in the charge of another white man whom they venerate and will follow almost without question. But as it turns out Brown has one advantage. Interpreting events as he learns of them from Brown, later when Brown is on his death bed, Marlow writes that 'Brown…had a satanic gift of finding out the best and weakest spot in his victims' (295). With Jim he soon finds his way as Brown says 'to get

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in and shake his twopenny soul around and inside out and upside down – by God!' (294). So Marlow says when Brown,

> asked Jim, with a sort of brusque despairing frankness, whether he himself – straight now – didn't understand that when 'it came to saving one's life in the dark, one didn't care who else went – three, thirty, three hundred people' – it was if a demon had been whispering advice in his ear (295–6).

And so Jim convinces the villagers to provide Brown and his men with safe passage down river and out to sea, and is betrayed by Brown who takes his revenge 'for a life of ill-luck' by taking a backwater to the coast so as to surprise and kill the armed villagers charged with monitoring his departure. Among the casualties is Jim's friend Dain Waris, son of the main chieftain Doramin who had trusted in Jim's advice. Outraged the villagers turn on Jim and it is clear that he will have to fight them. But Jim will not fight, even as Jewel begs him to. Instead he goes out to meet Doramin, who shoots him dead.

Does Jim in going out to meet Doramin display the kind of qualities that failed him when the opportunity arose on the *Patna*? Or is his refusal here to fight one last expression of that same failure to act? Marlow cannot say, finding Jim inscrutable to the last. To be sure Jim goes out to face his own death, but as Marlow sees it, 'at the call of his exalted egoism. He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied – quite, now, I wonder? We ought to know. He is one of us' (318). But we don't know; we wonder too, and that is central to the point, as I see it, of an appreciation of Conrad's novel.

4. 'He is one of us'

A suggestion repeated many times throughout *Lord Jim*, is, as indicated in the last quote, that Jim is 'one of us'. Marlow sees Jim in this way from first sight: 'I liked his appearance; I knew his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us' (35). And later: 'He was a youngster of the sort you like to see about you; of the sort you like to imagine yourself to have been' (99). But the sense of fellowship goes deeper than that. Describing his last moments on the *Patna* Jim attempts to account for his actions before Marlow who is moved as follows.

> I can't explain to you who haven't seen him… the mixed nature of my feelings… He appealed to all sides at once – to the side turned

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> 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… He swayed me… 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 ant-heap, 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 (73).

What pervades *Lord Jim*, and what makes Jim most significantly 'one of us,' is doubt. Of course we have doubts about Jim's character. But beyond this there is another doubt we might have, one that it is our natural tendency to resist but which the novel moves us to recognise: a doubt about our own character, *a doubt about ourselves*. Visiting Patusan Marlow attempts to reassure Jewel that Jim will not leave, that 'the world did not want him, … had forgotten him, … would not even know him' (243). When Jewel asks repeatedly 'why', this is Marlow's reply as related to his dinner companions.

> 'Because he is not good enough,' I said brutally… Without raising her voice, she threw into it an infinity of scathing contempt, bitterness, and despair.
>
> 'This is the very thing he said… You lie!' …
>
> 'Hear me out!' I entreated … 'Nobody, nobody is good enough' (243).

As Marlow says shortly after to his dinner companions, Jim

> 'told me he was satisfied … nearly. This is going further than most of us dare. I – who have the right to think myself good enough – dare not. Neither does any of you here, I suppose? …'
>
> Marlow paused as if expecting an answer. Nobody spoke.
>
> 'Quite right,' he began again. 'Let no soul know, since the truth can be wrung out of us only by some cruel, little, awful catastrophe. But he is one of us, and he could say he was satisfied … nearly' (248).

To say that Jim is 'one of us' here is not to suggest that we understand him. On the contrary we don't really understand Jim at all, and that is my point. In this respect many philosophical – as well as literary – interpretations of *Lord Jim* do not really take the ambiguity central to this novel seriously enough, seeking in effect to resolve it in one way or another. Focussing on two of the more notable philosophical interpretations for example: Daniel Brudney argues that Jim's

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behaviour is explained by a kind of narcissistic self-obsession which makes him dependent on how others see him and suggestible in their presence, so that '[h]e jumps from the *Patna* at the urging of the men already in the lifeboat', and further that he 'sees his suicide as the right action only or at least primarily due to his narcissistic blinders'.[8] Richard Eldridge argues that Jim is initially fatally flawed by 'pride, self-love and [moral] exceptionalism',[9] but is morally transformed on Patusan. So Eldridge suggests Jim's final act in going out to meet Doramin and face the 'surviving political and moral authority' expresses his 'respect for persons' so that here Jim 'may well be acting from [a Kantian] understanding of duty' (Eldridge (1989), 95–7).[10] Yet, as both Brudney and Eldridge concede, the meaning of Jim's final act remains ambiguous. So, Conrad leaves it open that Jim's final act may be 'a last flicker of superb egoism' (315). But now if Jim's final act remains so stubbornly ambiguous, one may question whether trying in a more general way to resolve for ourselves the ambiguity about Jim's character is the right, or at least the most illuminating, way to respond to this novel.[11] At least to my mind *Lord Jim* is hardly amenable to such

[8] Daniel Brudney, '*Lord Jim* and Moral Judgment: Literature and Moral Philosophy', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **56** (1998), 265–81, 268–9. I find this explanation for Jim jumping quite implausible. At the time, the other four white crewmembers had in fact given up on Jim, even called him a coward, for refusing to help them release the lifeboat. So, when the three men in the lifeboat call back to the ship, it is for *George* – the third engineer (who unbeknownst to them has died of a heart attack on deck) – to jump, not *Jim*. If Jim had been motivated by a concern for how he would appear to these men he may have helped them, but he certainly would not have jumped on that account into their lifeboat. While Jim has contempt for the other white crewmembers they likewise have contempt for him, as becomes apparent when they discover in the darkness that it is Jim that has jumped not George. The most obvious explanation for Jim jumping here, and it says nothing very special about him, is fear for his own life.

[9] Richard Eldridge, 'The Achievement of Autonomy: Marlow's Talk in *Lord Jim*', in his *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature and Self-Understanding* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 90.

[10] In a similar vein, Joanne Wood suggests that '[i]n accepting the consequences without acknowledging any guilt, Jim remains a Kantian hero to the end' (J. Wood, '*Lord Jim* and the Consequences of Kantian Autonomy', *Philosophy and Literature* **11** (1987), 57–74, 69).

[11] The tendency to try and resolve the ambiguities over Jim's final act is not restricted of course to philosophical commentaries. A host of influential literary readings over the years have also attempted to explain Jim's actions here in terms of defining character traits. So Albert Guerard suggests that

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attempts at resolution. Moreover, while we may want, perhaps led on by Marlow's repeated questioning, to understand the kind of man Jim is, to understand his character, what makes him act in the way that he does, there is an invitation in *Lord Jim* to question our motives for this. Consider again Marlow's attitude to Jim and his desire, as he says, to find 'a shadow of an excuse' for him. Looking for one, he questions the hospitalized and delirious chief engineer who has avoided the inquiry:

> Did I believe in a miracle? And why did I desire it so ardently? Was it for my own sake that I wished to find some shadow of excuse for that young fellow… whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness – made it a thing of mystery and terror – like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth – in its day – had resembled his youth? I fear that such was the secret motive of my prying. I was, and no mistake, looking for a miracle. (41)

Marlow's words here suggest that our motives in trying to render Jim's character clear and unambiguous might lead us astray; that they may be concerned less with finding out the truth than with reassuring ourselves, insulating ourselves from the 'hint of a destructive fate ready for us all' that Jim represents. Considering Marlow's question to his dinner companions for example it may be that we need to think that we *are* good enough, that we would not jump should we face such a 'cruel, little, awful catastrophe'. But to think that we need to fix Jim's character once and for all in our minds. Only then

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'Marlow realizes that [Jim] has not escaped the egoism and pride which menace him from the start' (A. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 144); similarly Tony Tanner suggests that Jim is 'egoistic to the end' (T. Tanner, *Conrad: Lord Jim* (London, Edward and Arnold, 1963), 55); while Ian Watt suggests more positively that Jim passes the test he failed on the *Patna* in not running away from his fate in Patusan and that he 'dies for honour' (I. Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 356). Somewhat more in line with my own reading, Jacques Berthoud suggests that '[i]t seems to me a measure of Conrad's humanity that he does not close his novel on a note of unqualified heroic absolutism… Whatever his death may mean for Jim, for Marlow it does not resolve, but crowns, the ambiguity of a tormented career' (J. Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad: The major phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 92–3).

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can we say, for example, that Jim's failure is explained by a kind of narcissism, and in so doing convince ourselves that we are (or would be, or can be) prepared where Jim was not. But while we may want to put distance between us (our character) and Jim, the effect of the kind of ambiguity and thus doubt that Conrad leaves surrounding Jim prevents that. Yet much of the commentary on this novel can be seen as an attempt to establish just this kind of distance.

5. Learning to think – about ourselves

The point we might draw from the ambiguity in *Lord Jim* is an uncomfortable one. I have already noted Diamond's suggestion that the capacity to make certain distinctions we might achieve through our experience of literature, such as the distinction between 'what is alive, and what is shallow sentimental, cheap' amounts to 'a kind of learning to think'. What I would add to that now is that learning to think here depends also on an awareness of the ways in which this process might be distorted by our own particular weaknesses, evasions, our moral frailties. In judging and acting we need to be aware of, so as not to discount, 'that side of us which… exists stealthily in perpetual darkness'. If Jim's character and motives remain dark to us, so, we might come to realise, may be our own. I agree with Diamond and others that imaginative literature plays an important part in developing and strengthening our moral sensibility, but beyond this our response to literature, and in particular a novel like *Lord Jim*, can bring home to us the gaps that inevitably exist for us in that moral sensibility. *Lord Jim* reminds us that we can never be entirely sure of ourselves 'since the truth can be wrung out of us only by some cruel, little, awful catastrophe'. It is then part of what it is to have a developed, we might also say mature, moral sensibility that we do not discount the possibility that faced with such a catastrophe we might fail the test; a real sense of that possibility is itself I suggest a part of learning to think.

To expand on the above point, what *Lord Jim* may suggest, in line with certain recent arguments in moral philosophy and moral psychology, is that moral character is much more fragile than we commonly like to believe.[12] There is of course well known empirical

[12] A detailed discussion of the relevant literature here is beyond the scope of this paper, but for further discussion of *Lord Jim* in relation to the fragility of character see P. Goldie, *On Personality* (London: Routledge, 2004), chapter three and four, and J. Doris, *Lack of Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapter eight. Of

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evidence that suggests, first, that we have a strong tendency to ascribe stable and consistent personality traits to people, and second, that our predictions about how people will act based on such ascriptions often prove to be mistaken. So, whether or not a person acts in accordance with virtue (or simply does the right thing) has been shown to depend heavily – despite intuitions to the contrary – on factors to do with certain features of the situation that person is in. In one famous experiment, whether a person stops to help a distressed colleague was found to depend not on their supposed personality traits but on whether or not they were in a hurry.[13] When we turn to consider Jim's situation on the *Patna* then we may be struck by how extraordinary and stressful it must have been for him. As Peter Goldie says in a related discussion of *Lord Jim*, 'what an extreme test Jim had to face! Who, we might wonder, would have been strong or courageous enough to withstand it?' (Goldie (2004), 94).

Given my reading of *Lord Jim* Goldie's question is the right kind of question to ask. But, and as Goldie also seems to suggest, the problem with Jim is not just that he was not as courageous as he thought, but that he fails to recognise how his own motives may remain dark to him. In this way Jim *continues* to discount the possibility of moral failure. So he says to Marlow that in Patusan 'if I go straight nothing can touch me… frankly don't you think I am pretty safe? It all depends on me… and I have lots of confidence in myself' (248). But what all Jim's confidence rests on is his hope as he says for a 'clean slate', a hope really for something impossible; Jim's hope is almost that the events on the *Patna* should not have happened, certainly that they should not have marked him, determined

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particular bearing for my discussion of *Lord Jim* is Goldie's suggestion that 'we should be circumspect about our own motives and character traits' (Goldie (2004), 98).

[13] This particular experiment involved a group of seminarians at Princeton some of whom were asked to prepare a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan others of whom were asked to prepare a talk on the job prospects for seminarians. The set up of the experiment involved telling some of each group that they had plenty of time to get to the venue for the talk, others that they had just enough and others that would need to rush. On the way to the venue it was further arranged that the seminarians should pass an apparently distressed colleague. As reported in Goldie 'Of those with plenty of time 63 per cent helped, of those with enough time 45 per cent helped, and of those in a hurry only 10 per cent helped.' (Goldie (2004), 62–3) For a more extended discussion of the empirical research in this area see Doris (2002).

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him to some extent. But of course they have marked him and the revengeful but intuitive captain Brown soon finds the spot; in the end a few carefully chosen words from Brown are enough to undo Jim, to unravel all he has achieved (or seemingly achieved) in Patusan. I suggested above that *Lord Jim* reminds us how we can never be entirely sure of ourselves, so in one sense we are no safer than Jim. Yet to *seriously* believe this – to take this knowledge as it were to heart – can perhaps make a difference to how we fair in life. At least, if Jim had had any real sense that he was *not* safe, he might have been more prepared for Captain Brown.

The fact that we cannot be sure that we are safe from some unexpected moral catastrophe does not show of course that we cannot judge Jim, even condemn his cowardice. But this fact should lead us to consider the attitude we take up towards Jim and that is manifest in the manner in which we judge him; here the fact that Jim's failure could be our failure is significant. One way we might register our similar vulnerability is through our pity for Jim, the kind of pity that is registered when one is inclined to say 'there but for the grace of God go I'. However, it is not so easy to seriously entertain the possibility that we might ourselves behave in a way comparable to Jim on his worst day, with gross cowardice or with something (who can tell) just as bad.[14] To put the point differently, serious moral reflection and judgment, as I have argued elsewhere, is hard in the sense that it requires the will to be hard on oneself.[15] What I am suggesting is that it is through our responses to a work like *Lord Jim*, through our conflicting responses to such a work, that we can gain a sense of what serious moral reflection really requires of us, of the kind of unflinching scrutiny it requires, scrutiny not most fundamentally of others but of *ourselves*. A failure to subject ourselves to this kind of scrutiny is itself a kind of evasion of serious moral reflection and judgement.

Given the above argument, we can see how moral readings of *Lord Jim* may obscure our understanding and appreciation of this novel. To explain, consider a kind of argument *against* the idea that it is in the nature of (some) literature – as opposed to philosophy say – to convey important truths. As Peter Lamarque says, '[t]o read philosophy is to read for truth. In contrast, to read and value a work *from a*

[14] It is worth noting that the specific contribution that a novel like *Lord Jim* might make to our understanding here is a clearer sense of *what it is* we need to entertain about ourselves, and that is not something that we might achieve simply by reading the empirical studies I referred to earlier.

[15] See here Craig Taylor, 'Art and Moralism', *Philosophy* **84** (2009), 341–353.

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literary point of view seems quite different … literary works that are too obviously didactic, that too obviously are trying to impart a message, are seldom valued highly'.[16] On Lamarque's final point I am inclined to say: just so. But the problem here may be with overt didacticism or the *quality* of the thought rather than with the suggestion that literature *as literature* might convince us of important truths. It is the quality of thought that literature demands both from writers *and* readers that has concerned me in this paper; and, as Diamond notes, as distinct from the attention demanded by philosophical argument, 'critical attention to the character and quality of thought in a work may be asked of a reader in many other ways as well'. One difference between philosophy and literature here is brought out in our differing attitudes toward ambiguity in literature as opposed to philosophy (at least in its analytic variety). Not only is there no demand *as a writer of literature* that Conrad resolve the ambiguity surrounding Jim, moral readings that do so – that do what Conrad has declined to do – may themselves seem (and make Conrad seem) overly didactic because they are insufficiently attuned to the 'character and quality of thought' that literature demands of us as readers. Thus they may fail to capture not only much that is of (aesthetic) interest or value in a given work, but also what we might (morally) learn from it.

To expand on the above point, far from being a flaw, the ambiguity surrounding Jim is a mark of the quality of Conrad's thought, his instinct to offer us in *Lord Jim* only 'all the truth that is in me', which is to say *nothing more than this*. Indeed one might think, as Suresh Raval suggests in his reading of *Lord Jim*, that 'for Marlow the success of his narrative is closely interwoven with his failure to clearly grasp Jim', and that '[r]eal failure would consist in the possibility that, given the inscrutable nature of Jim's experience, no attempt is made to record and articulate it for us'.[17] Jim's inscrutability is important on my reading of *Lord Jim* since it encourages us to reflect on the possibility that Jim represents for us – as Raval also says 'Marlow sees that if the unexpected erupted in Jim's life, it could occur in anyone's life' (Raval (1981), 389) – to reflect on the ways in which our own character and motives may remain dark to us. To that extent the core of *Lord Jim* is Marlow and his response to Jim; when Marlow says that it was as if 'the obscure truth [about Jim's

[16] P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 253–4.

[17] S. Raval, 'Narrative and Authority in *Lord Jim*: Conrad's Art of Failure', *EHL: English Literary History* **48** (1981), 387–410, 389.

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failure] were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself' what he means I think is that it is enough to effect *his* conception of himself. That is why, I suggest, Jim's story got a hold of Marlow, as it may get a hold of us.

Of course a recognition that one might fail as Jim failed will not be equally engaging or illuminating for everyone. For what is crucial here is the kind of self-conception we are prompted here to reflect upon. So far I have focussed on Marlow's experiences of and reflections on Jim, on his perspective on Jim. But another perspective on Jim is provided by a certain French lieutenant that Marlow happens to meet years after the Patna affair. This lieutenant we learn was on board the ship, the *Avondale*, that finally rescued the *Patna*, and, further, that he spent thirty hours on board the *Patna* with two quartermasters while it was towed safely to port. Faced with the same crisis this man simply does what needs to be done, 'one's possible' (109) as he says. As he also says: 'Brave – you conceive – in the Service – one has got to be – the trade demands it' (113). For this lieutenant, saving the *Patna* was simply what the situation and the trade called for, he cannot at first even remember the name of the *Patna*. The lieutenant has not heard of Jim's actions on the *Patna* and as Marlow recounts them the lieutenant appears sympathetic, as he says to Marlow: 'The fear, the fear – look you – it is always there' (112). But when Marlow says that he is glad to see the lieutenant 'taking a lenient view', (114) he is left disappointed by the lieutenant's reply:

> I contended that one may get on knowing very well that one's courage does not come of itself… But the honour – the honour, *monsieur!* … The honour … that is real – that is! And what life may be worth when … when the honour is gone… I can offer no opinion. I can offer no opinion because *monsieur* – I know nothing of it (114).

The French lieutenant's view of the matter is both simpler and harsher: what matters is the honour and Jim has lost his. The lieutenant is not concerned to look into Jim's soul, to discover the 'obscure truth' about him. Marlow reflects that where Jim is concerned it is 'as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself', but there appears to be no such threat to the lieutenant's conception of mankind or himself; he is happy, for instance, to claim: 'Man is born a coward' (113). Yet this, we must remember, is from a man who spent thirty hours on a ship that could sink at any moment! The French lieutenant, one might say, is a man who harbours no illusions about the fragility of character and what that might mean for a particular life. The exchange between

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Marlow and the French lieutenant suggests another response to the events that Conrad has portrayed. Moreover, it seems from the text – from Marlow's admiration for the lieutenant and more specifically for the lieutenant's opinion of the affair with Jim – that Conrad himself has respect for this practical man of action; he was as Marlow says 'one of those steady reliable men who are the raw material of great reputations, one of those uncounted lives that are buried without drums and trumpets under the foundations of monumental successes' (110–11). What the example of the French lieutenant shows then I think is that the kind of self-understanding we might gain from *Lord Jim* depends on our own character as manifest in the way in which we respond to it: Jim's story may, as it does for Marlow, get hold of us, but as with the French lieutenant it may not. That Jim's story does get a hold of us then says something about us. The French lieutenant is happy to accept that courage does not come of itself, but that, including all that it entails, is not something everyone will be happy to accept; as with Marlow the very fact of Jim may affect our conception of ourselves.

Still, one may take Marlow's ultimate dissatisfaction with the French lieutenant's account of Jim as a mark of the lieutenant's failure of moral reflection. On this point my interpretation of the French lieutenant contrasts sharply with that offered by Eldridge in the work I have referred to. In contrast to what I have suggested Eldridge argues that the lieutenant's character too is marked by 'a narcissistic exceptionalism,' as well as 'pride and [a] sense of moral purity' (Eldridge (1989), 81). I find this reading implausible, for the lieutenant more or less states he is in no way exceptional, as he says, 'there is a point – for the best of us – there is somewhere a point when you let go everything… Given a certain combination of circumstances, fear is sure to come' (113). These are hardly the words of a man who claims special moral purity.[18] Eldridge notes the lieutenant's admission that 'he shares fear with everyone', but thinks nevertheless that the lieutenant 'claims, unlike the many to "know nothing" of dishonourable action' (Eldridge (1989), 81). But

[18] Discussions of *Lord Jim*, both philosophical and sometimes literary, have tended to ignore the significance of the French lieutenant's perspective on Jim, which is not to say my positive appraisal of the lieutenant is completely idiosyncratic. So, Raval suggests, in a similar vein, that the lieutenant's remarks that I have just quoted illustrates that he 'represents the authority of practical reason and experience, an authority that derives its power not from an unqualified assertion of self, but from a recognition of the self's liabilities.' (Raval (1981), 392)

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while the lieutenant says that he does not know what life is worth 'when the honour is gone' he does not claim to know nothing of dishonourable *action*, and in fact the lieutenant actually alludes to a certain dishonourable act of his own, 'even a simple headache or a fit of indigestion… is enough to … Take me, for instance – I have made my proofs. *Eh bien!* I who am speaking to you once…' (113). But draining his glass he moves on without elucidating further.

6. Conclusion

From the kind of ambiguity I have discussed with reference to *Lord Jim* we can see again, but perhaps in a different dimension, how literature as a mode of moral reflection can play a role beyond that of philosophical argument in deepening our moral understanding; here in part by bringing to bear on our moral reflections and judgements of people and events a more critical self-awareness. The kind of self-awareness I am suggesting we might gain from *Lord Jim* depends on the recognition that Jim 'is one of us'. But if we ask now what it is to recognise *that*, the answer is, I have argued, that we see the substance of it by attending to our potentially conflicting responses to Jim. On the one hand we, like Marlow, may look for a 'shadow of an excuse' (41) for Jim's behaviour; and on the other hand, in our moral condemnation of Jim as simply a young man with a particular and fatal flaw, we may seek to dismiss Jim, again like Marlow at times, to be done with him. For attending to those responses we may be led to ask: Are our attempts here to fix Jim's character the desire for the truth or an attempt to evade it, to avoid seeing who Jim really is?: that he is – stands for – us. So it may be that confronted with our own evasions we come to see what it means most fundamentally to say that Jim is one of us. If in argument we can be caught out in a contradiction, in our experience of a novel like *Lord Jim*, we can be caught out, and caught out much more fundamentally, in a response.

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