Order and Anarchy: The Political Novels

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Source: *The Kenyon Review*, Autumn, 1953, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Autumn, 1953), pp. 505-521

Published by: Kenyon College

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/4333442

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THE KENYON REVIEW

Vol. XV AUTUMN, 1953 No. 4

JOSEPH CONRAD

I. ORDER AND ANARCHY: THE POLITICAL NOVELS

Irving Howe

BY TEMPER and discipline Joseph Conrad was hostile to the life of politics. He could not identify with a cause or idea, in the manner of Dostoevsky; he did not live by the glow of an exalted historical moment, as did Stendhal; he would have shuddered at Disraeli's fondness for the mechanics of intrigue; and it is difficult to imagine him trapped, as was Turgenev, in a barrage of polemic. The grime of routine maneuvre disgusted him, and the politics of a more intense, ideological kind he found peculiarly open to the sin of righteousness. A man of carefully tended austerity, Conrad disliked the whole "modern" atmosphere, with its wild fluctuations of belief, its feverish introspection, its impatience before traditional duties. Yet, by some paradox of his creative life, he repeatedly abandoned his established subjects and turned, with a visible shudder of distaste, to the world of London anarchists, Russian emigrés, Latin revolutionaries.

1. This essay is the opening section of a longer critical study which includes discussions of *The Secret Agent* and *Nostromo*.

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THE TWO WRITERS who mattered most in Conrad's life were Dostoevsky and James—not merely as literary influences but as symbols of two paths of dedication, polar responses to the possibilities available to the modern artist. Dostoevsky, whom he called "a grimacing and haunted creature," Conrad hated with a dull fury which goes far beyond the range of literary taste. Dostoevsky meant a nagging memory, a sardonic challenge, an unsubdued pressure of rejected energies. Dostoevsky was his Smerdyakov.

One of Conrad's friends, Richard Curle, has written that Dostoevsky to Conrad represented "the ultimate forces of confusion and insanity. . . . He did not despise him as one despises a nonentity, he hated him as one might hate Lucifer and the forces of darkness." Conrad wrote of *The Brothers Karamazov* that it was "an impossible lump of valuable matter. It's terrifically bad and impressive and exasperating. Moreover, I don't know what Dostoevsky stands for or reveals, but I do know that he is too Russian for me. It sounds to me like some fierce mouthings from prehistoric ages." These "prehistoric ages," I would suggest, are a projection of Conrad's own past, the years of his youth which he may well have wished to consign to the blackness of the prehistoric. The meaning of Dostoevsky, far from being "too Russian," was immediately and profoundly accessible to Conrad, as *Under Western Eyes* so dramatically shows. The truth is, Conrad did not wish to understand Dostoevsky.

He did not wish to because in the novels of that "grimacing and haunted creature" were recreated not the events but what was far more terrifying, the atmospheres and emotional patterns of the youth he had escaped. Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniouwski, had been a leader of the extremist wing of Polish nationalism, which believed in direct, violent action. Despite Conrad's embarrassed claim that his father was merely "a patriot," Korzeniouwski was a revolutionist on the model of Garibaldi, struggling to create a free and unified homeland. The flavor of revolutionary nationalism is unique and certainly different from that

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of revolutionary socialism; it is romantic rather than analytical, it exalts the *mystique* of the nation rather than the war of the classes, it creates an ambience of blurred fraternity rather than of social antagonism. And because it was a movement doomed to defeat, Polish nationalism took on a mood of desperate and quixotic melancholia.

After the collapse of the Polish rebellion in 1863, Korzeniouwski was exiled to a distant province in Russia, together with his wife and five-year-old son Joseph. The scar of this experience, as it throbbed in Conrad's later memories, was to recall both glory and humiliation. When the children of revolutionaries revolt, it is against revolution: Conrad as a young man escaped from the world both of his father and of those who had persecuted his father. But few things short of an actual return to Poland or Russia could have recalled this world as vividly as Dostoevsky's novels. For in those novels were mirrored both sides of his memory: the hated oligarchy of Czarism and the rebels against this oligarchy who, for all that Dostoevsky wrenched them into ugliness and caricature, might still stir in Conrad the dimmed fires of his political past.

Part of what I have been saying is a modified version of Gustav Morf's thesis that Conrad lived his life in the shadow of his Polish heritage and that many of his novels are efforts, by symbolic indirection, to justify or expiate his "desertion" from the national cause. Like most original minds, Morf went too far; he strained for connections between Conrad's life and work that are unnecessary to his thesis. But he was right in suggesting that when Conrad left Poland he cut himself off from the support of his native setting and thereafter remained a stranger, a wanderer at sea and an alien on land. Few writers—few men—have ever had their lives so sharply fractured: oppressed Poland, the maritime service, literary England. It was a bewildering journey and each step must have exacted a psychic price.

At the time Conrad came to England, the writer was still

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regarded as a gentleman: and a gentleman was what Conrad passionately wished to be. Once he began to publish, the best literary men of his day—James, Galsworthy, Garnett—accepted him as colleague and peer, and this acceptance kept him afloat through some difficult years. James is the crucial figure here, though not quite as the literary mentor he is sometimes said to have been. For, while Conrad admired the novels, he seems to have thought of James, above all, as an exemplar of the Western literary man, the writer dedicated to craft yet secure in the social world, the writer as moral spokesman in a free society. And perhaps—the ways of identification being what they are—Conrad fastened upon James as his model of the literary man because James, for all that he seemed so consummate a gentleman, was still, like himself, a foreigner.

This need to be at least as English as the English has been shrewdly noticed by Ford Madox Ford and J. H. Retinger, a Pole in Conrad's circle. Ford writes that Conrad's "ambition was to be taken for—to be!—an English country gentleman of the time of Lord Palmerston," and Retinger that "there was always a certain touch of snobbishness in [Conrad's] assumed English outlook." Snobbishness is hardly the word, far more was at stake—Conrad's profound yearning for security, recognition and tranquility. Conrad was one of the first of those modern writers who react against the "nonsense" of bohemia by adopting a way of life that is notable for its grey bourgeois prudence.

Conrad's conservatism, which is at least as much a psychological reflex as a formulated opinion, reached its full bloom in England. It is not an aggressive conservatism, Conrad being, for one thing, anti-imperialist in an age of imperialism; his rather querulous political mood came closest to that of the "Little Englanders," those who wished to freeze history at the point where England had been a prosperous mercantile nation but not yet a world power, and where the English gentleman and his country house had seemed indestructible monuments to an eternal order

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of virtue. This is a politics of defense: a desire to remain untouched by the fearful effects of industrialism, to be let alone by history, to retain privileges and values that are slipping away.

To connect this conservatism with Conrad's famous "philosophy" may help clear aside the murk which usually accompanies that philosophy. For the philosophy of his novels is of a piece with his political conservatism: genuinely felt, fervently clung to, but not finally organic to the work. They represent Conrad's public face—by which I do not mean that they are insincere or insignificant but that they exert their force mainly on the surface, through the cautions of the will. At every critical moment in his books, or in rare moments of relaxation, long repressed and discordant materials break through this surface. Or in hyperbole: the Jamesian Conrad directs, the Dostoevskian Conrad erupts.

The stoical attitude is compatible with almost any politics: twist it one way and it becomes a sanction for quietism, another way and it becomes the mask of revolution. But the prolonged emphasis in Conrad's novels upon order and responsibility, restraint and decorum, fortitude and endurance, is strongly congenial to an unspectacular conservatism, the politics of a class losing self-confidence yet still determined to keep its power. Such a class has a good many ideological resources, but none more soothing and few more useful than an appeal to pluck and the tried virtues. So that if one can imagine Conrad in any political setting at all, it is perhaps as a second-rank dignitary of the later Roman republic, sternly holding to the values of simplicity and restraint as they suffer attack from tyrants and mobs.

Conrad's motto certifying fidelity as the basic human obligation and his remark that because the universe cannot be regarded as ethical one must suppose the aim of creation to be purely spectacular, fit in well enough with his insecure stoicism. Yet the claim sometimes made for Conrad, that these attitudes lead to a redeeming vision of human solidarity, must be sharply discounted. That Conrad reaches for such a vision and believes in its necessity,

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is obvious; but it is almost never found, and in his political novels, those terrible surveys of desolation, it never is found. For Dostoevsky human life is always drenched with terror, yet men turn to each other for comfort and support; in Conrad the terror is also there, but each man must face it alone and the only solidarity is a solidarity of isolated victims.

We cannot stop at this point of formal statement, much as Conrad might wish us to; for beneath the controlled stiffness of Conrad's stoicism, as beneath his conservatism, there flows a bleak and terrible disbelief, a radical skepticism that corrodes the underside of everything he values. Christianity, he wrote to Garnett, he had "disliked" since the age of fourteen; politics, and particularly the rationalist liberalism of his day, he found at least as distasteful; and he was too serious and morally self-conscious a man to console himself with the cult of aestheticism. His stoical mask served him well, but not continuously. For his every tribute to fortitude there is also in his work an image of desolation, of the terror that is left when belief crumbles. Conrad cannot share Dostoevsky's faith in universal salvation nor can he accept Stendhal's minimal solidarity with "the happy few"; he finds comfort neither in the future nor the present, not the heavenly seat of judgment nor a mundane circle of devotees. There remains, to be sure, his famous "job sense," the satisfactions he found in the discipline of the maritime service and to which he repeatedly returned in his novels, if not in his life. But the "job sense," whatever its modest returns, is a security *faute de mieux*:— because there is nothing better by which to live, you fall back on your way of earning a living. It is a useful crutch, but little more. In the end Conrad is alone, unmoored, perhaps sunk. Long before Hemingway began to look for a clean well-lighted place, Conrad knew the meaning of *nada*.

The stoical attitude has been described as a mixture of sternness, simplicity and an absolutely untheatrical feeling for life. The first two Conrad had, the last not quite. And it is here that

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his romanticism crops up—in a fondness for the theatrical, which in his case usually means the exotic. The romantic impulse in his fiction, and particularly in the sea stories, works as a *controlled* release from the stoical burden. Security of a kind is found at sea, its very terrors being predictable and at their worst demanding nothing more than resistance and resignation, while the land is crowded with dangers, class intrigues, perplexing social mechanisms. In the contrast between what Marlow says and what he tells lies the distance Conrad can allow between the stoical norm and the romantic deviation. Which is to say: between the desire to cling to moral formulae and the recognition that modern life cannot be lived by them, between the demands of social conscience and the freed fantasies of the idyllic or the dangerous, between the commandments of one's fathers and the quandaries of exile.

In only one important way is Conrad anti-romantic: he violently resists the demonic and the sensual. By straining his will, he suppresses the chaos within him; but it breaks past his guard as a free-floating anxiety, a sense that the universe is—not actively malicious, which might even be consoling, but—permanently treacherous and ominous. Conrad is finally unable to sustain either commitment or skepticism: what remains is the honorable debris of failure.

I am aware that this reading, to gain full credence, requires psychological support, but this is not the occasion, nor am I the person, to supply it. Suffice it to remark that in Conrad the sense of repression is persistently acute: in his agonies of composition, his style of baroque wariness, his inability to imagine living women, and above all, his persistent need to maintain a safe distance, through narrator or manner, from his own work.

If these remarks have any value, they should help explain why Conrad's philosophical soulfulness is often so irritating, why his addiction to adjectives of ultimacy in, say, *The Heart of Darkness* strikes one as a straining for some unavailable significance.

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For isn't *The Heart of Darkness* itself a kind of parable about Conrad the writer, a marvellously colored and dramatized quest for something "unspeakable," which proves to be merely unspecified?

Conrad's conservatism, his hatred of the anarchists, his suppressed residue of nationalism, must now seem more equivocal than at first sight. The anarchism he attacks is a political movement, and if we are to read his novels with a minimum of objectivity we cannot forget that; but it is also something else, a projection of the unrevealed self, of the desolation the modern ego fears to find beneath its domesticated surface. Conrad is entirely serious in his warnings against social disorder, which he mistakes for a state of anarchy, but his seriousness is shaped and then mis-shaped by an exorbitant need for personal order. His fascination with the informer as a psychological type is partly the token of guilt over his removal from the Polish cause that Morf takes it to be, but more fundamentally it is a recognition by an uprooted European that the world of political realities is far less settled than the world of political appearances. Perhaps, too, there is another sort of identification: The informer who serves the established world by prying into the world beneath it, may he not be seen as a projection of the writer who pries, not without guilt, into the depths of motive? The informer informs on his comrades, the writer on himself.

Nationalism, though minor in Conrad's mature thought, is the seed-bed of his politics. And even of his tone. The posturing that sometimes disfigures his work has a strong resemblance to the romantic melancholia of a nationalism that could not hope for success. By its nature, nationalism has no invariable social content: its role has been to create an independent nation in which the suppressed problems of capitalism can belatedly come to free play. In Poland, squeezed between Prussians and Czars, nationalism tended to be aristocratic (the aristocracy of petty nobles) and reactionary (the reaction of a country not quite ven-

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tilated by the Enlightenment). Conrad's conservatism thus has some roots in the militant nationalism of his fathers.

So too does his uneasy interest in the anarchists. Nineteenth Century anarchism and nationalism share many features, more than either does with Marxian socialism. Both are impelled by despair and romantic in mood, both solicit individual heroism rather than mass activity, both resort to violence against personalities taken to be symbols of oppression, and both appeal to a unitary consciousness in the people which socialists say does not or should not exist. The scent of anarchism as it rises from Conrad's novels is a recollection, though not entirely a faithful one, of the scent of Polish nationalism. His fascination with the smoky plots of the anarchists is a sign that the experience of childhood survives; his antipathy, a sign that he would prefer to destroy this memory.

Even conservatism and anarchism, which now seem to be emerging as the polar forces of Conrad's politics, are not quite so distant as might be supposed. Conservatism is the anarchism of the fortunate, anarchism the conservatism of the deprived. Against the omnivorous state, conservatism and anarchism equally urge resistance by the individual. Both conservative and anarchist —here they diverge, along parallel lines, from the socialist—find industrial society odious and indulge, if only by way of willed nostalgia, in a rural bias. Both try to improvise a moral shelter in the crevices of this society, the conservative in his cultivated circle, the anarchist in utopian communities shivering on the rim of great cities. And both see the ideal society as one in which men stand at a measurable distance from each other, free to enter direct relationships without the mediation of the state. What the anarchist anticipates, the conservative has won for himself; what the conservative feels to be the limited good of an achieved reality, the anarchist would distribute, after rites of purification, among humanity at large.

This kinship of apparent opposites may explain why Conrad

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kept returning to the dark corners of anarchist conspiracy. It is not, of course, the only reason: Conrad meant to sound a warning against the enemies of social peace and to disparage the codes and motives of the radicals. But his acute knowledge of their life—acute when not blocked by malice—would have been impossible without the fervor of his Polish past and the ambiguousness of his conservative present. Had his thoughts been harmoniously settled he would have been a "Tory anarchist"; as it was, and happily for his work, he was a Tory with repressed affinities for anarchism.

II

In both *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* Dostoevsky is everywhere to be seen, though more as a force to resist than an influence to absorb. Dostoevsky had wrestled with ideas, the problems of *The Possessed* were defiantly his; Conrad cultivated an acquired distaste for ideology. For him there was no danger of being caught up in the Dostoevskian effort to define salvation, there was only the danger of being enticed into that airless world, that madhouse of intellectuals and prophets, where the effort takes place. To Conrad the Dostoevskian milieu seemed barbaric, lawless, Eastern, an enemy of the "sanity and method" he clung to; and yet, perhaps because he sensed that in this milieu was to be found the most highly charged experience of his time, he could not turn his back upon it.

The plot of *Under Western Eyes* is inconceivable without Dostoevsky—the betrayal of the student revolutionary and political assassin Haldin, by another student, Razumov, and the ensuing service of Razumov as a Russian government agent among the radical emigrés; the analysis of Razumov's suffering when he turns in Haldin and of his isolation when, as a spy pretending to be Haldin's comrade, he must associate with the radicals he detests ("All sincerity was an imprudence. Yet one could not renounce truth altogether."); the maliciously satiric portrait of

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the emigrés, particularly of their leader Peter Ivanovich. But what is quite alien to Dostoevsky is the tone of cool detachment—of willed detachment—in which most of *Under Western Eyes* is composed. Dostoevsky looks at the political world as a reactionary, Conrad as a conservative. The advantage is largely with Dostoevsky: precisely because he does not accept the status quo, because he cannot delude himself with daydreams about "sanity and order," the reactionary enjoys a keener scent for political realities than the conservative. Conrad shares Dostoevsky's contempt for radicals, but he also indulges a condescension toward them that would be impossible to Dostoevsky. These differences go beyond opinion: Conrad distrusts abstract ideas as such, he grows uneasy before the furies of controversy, while Dostoevsky embraces them with the insatiable excitement of an addict. Conrad writes about politics to reject, Dostoevsky to transform.

The political strength of *Under Western Eyes*—as also its literary merit—is largely felt in the first 100 pages, that sweeping overture of terror which, from the moment Haldin bursts into Razumov's room, rises steadily in pitch and volume. Politics enters the narrative in several forms: as environment and character, fetter and goad, "the monumental abode of misery" which is absolutist Russia and the frantic rebellion of isolated intellectuals. In this section of the novel as in few other parts of his work, Conrad permits himself a complete absorption in his subject, feeling no need, whether from panic or caution, to fall away from what he has created, to smother it with irony or box it in with skepticism.

Where freedom is absent, politics is fate. This encompassing fact of modern life Conrad dramatizes with incomparable intensity in the "overture" of *Under Western Eyes*. By allowing Haldin some autonomy, Conrad shows a restraint unusual in his treatment of revolutionists. A terrorist prepared for death, entirely disinterested in motive yet naively unaware of the complications that attend his idealism, Haldin emerges with a fine polit-

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ical exactitude. His declaration, "The modern civilization is false, but a new revelation shall come out of Russia," is typical of the pre-Marxist Russian radicals, populists by conviction and terrorists by despair. Terrorism in Europe having often been the work of intellectuals without support or steadying from a mass movement, it is entirely right for Conrad to see Haldin as a student who lacks political roots or experience. For in a country like Russia, how can enthusiasm be expressed but in the language of desperation? Nor does it matter that Haldin never emerges as a fully-developed character, for his only role in the novel, and that he performs efficiently, is to implicate Razumov, to make "normal life" forever impossible for that unhappy victim. To Razumov, Haldin is the face of Nemesis, the Nemesis which haunts Russia; and having looked at it long and squarely, he does not care whether it bears the features of guilt or justice, he wants only to be rid of it.

The characterization of Razumov is a triumph secured by Conrad's decision to shape each action affecting him from a political design. Razumov is the ideal functionary, the man for whom the world has little use because he is so entirely useful. Without a past, tied to nothing in the present, he is an anonymous stranger who yet claims Russia for his home. No one thinks of him as a person with sorrows and desires of his own: to Haldin he means shelter, to the peasant Ziemianitch he is fated brutality, to Prince K——— embarrassment, and to Councillor Mikulin a likely recruit for the secret service. Each of these responses is molded by the pressures of Russian politics and society; the very Razumov who wishes only for the obscure solace of a career is shattered by the politics of oppressor and oppressed. He is the man in the middle, and he pays the price. Neither disturbingly good nor conspicuously bad, he betrays Haldin with full knowledge that he is doing wrong yet with some reason to resent Haldin's fatuous assumption that he would prove hospitable to a revolutionary terrorist. It is a tremendous stroke of irony: that Razumov's

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mediocre silence should lead Haldin to suppose him a secret rebel, that his appalling anonymity should set off his destruction by the political world.

Having betrayed Haldin, Razumov utters his great and redeeming sentence: "I have walked over his chest." To his credit he does not say, as with some justice he might, "State and revolution have forced me to walk over his chest." He yearns to confess, to beg forgiveness, but no one will hear him, no one cares: to the world it does not matter. So great is his loneliness, he could not find peace even if the world were to forget him. Nothing can save him now, he is sure prey for Mikulin, the bureaucrat who displays his power by neglecting to finish his sentences. As they are brought together in muted climax, Razumov tells Mikulin that he wishes to withdraw from the whole affair, simply to "retire:"

> An unhurried voice said—
> "Kirylo Sidorovitch."
> Razumov at the door turned his head.
> "To retire," he repeated.
> "Where to?" asked Councillor Mikulin.

This question cannot be answered, not by Razumov and not by us. The whole first part of the novel, shaped and deepened by its brilliant ending, is a dramatic statement of Conrad's realization that in the modern world politics is total: it will create all or destroy all, it provides no exemptions, permits no mercy, offers no haven.

What follows in *Under Western Eyes*, for all its frequent richness, has neither the political nor dramatic authority of the first part. The trouble is usually laid to the fumbling narrator, an old Englishman thrust into accidental relations with the refugees, who is accused of breaking the integument of the fiction. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose his tedious prominence a mere technical slip. The narrator is not simply an awkward intrusion: he signifies a wish on Conrad's part to dissociate himself from

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his own imagination. The pontifical teacher gratifies Conrad's need to be aligned with the orderly West, to be insulated from all that Russia implies—a Russia that has been transformed into a passion for confronting those problems of society which the sanguine 19th Century would as soon have avoided and which Conrad tried to avoid because he was so entirely unsanguine. But this Russia cannot be avoided: it is a bloated image of our world. That the novel was written at all shows that Conrad knew this; that the English narrator so often blocks our view of things shows how deeply he needed to resist his knowledge. The mere presence of this academic *raisonneur*, inflating his timidity into a virtue of liberalism, is enough to suggest a disharmony between the ideology and the action of the book. The narrator expresses Conrad's opinions, the narrative incarnates Conrad's vision.

In a moment of intensity the Englishman declares what must have been Conrad's own bias:

> A violent revolution falls into the hands of narrow-minded fanatics and of tyrannical hypocrites at first. Afterwards comes the turn of all the pretentious intellectual failures of the time. . . . The scrupulous and the just, the noble, humane and devoted natures; the unselfish and the intelligent may begin a movement—but it passes away from them. They are not the leaders of a revolution. They are its victims. . . . Hopes grotesquely betrayed, ideals caricatured—that is the definition of revolutionary success.

Though praised in our time as prophecy, this famous passage will not resist critical examination. It reduces history to a cycle of enforced repetition and frees us, conveniently, from the need to study either specific revolutions or their complex consequences. "All revolutions," wrote George Orwell, "are failures, but they are not all the same failure." Some, I might add, have even been successful, the French Revolution, despite the Terror and Napoleon, having opened Europe to political freedom. Conrad's formula suggests the complacence of a man who fails to see that at times political revolt is the only honorable choice and the

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scepticism of a man who urges the gesture of moral heroism yet insists that it is ultimately meaningless.

Were Conrad merely indulging a stray reflection it would be pointless to worry this matter; but the passage is his political signature, it controls the narrator's point of view. And it leads, for one thing, to a serious failure in judgment; an equation of rulers and ruled, both of whom Conrad finds to be stained by "the cynicism of oppression and revolt." To assimilate the behavior of a Haldin to the behavior of a Czarist functionary is to indulge the middle-class smugness which afflicts Conrad whenever he decides to place his drama under western eyes.

It is a smugness which frequently blots the later pages of the novel. By failing to restrain his antipathy toward the emigrés and by casting most of them as knaves or fools, Conrad undermines the dramatic integrity of his book. Like all political novels, it needs a dialectic of opinion that will at least *seem* free from the author's motivating prejudices, a force of resistance that will clash with the author's dominant energies and convictions. But these it often lacks. In his treatment of radicals Conrad often commands great shrewdness, certainly more shrewdness than can be expected from the English narrator on whom he relies. (A Greek proverb has it: *a man can't hide behind his finger.*) More rarely, there flickers through his disgust a light of sympathy and understanding. With Sophia Antonovna, that familiar female radical whose impressive selflessness has been purchased by a destruction of the self, Conrad is superb. ("Life, not to be vile," she says, "must be a revolt—a pitiless revolt—all the time." And even more striking: "You have either to rot or to burn.") Though hardly treated with gentleness, Sophia Antonovna is "there," created, tangible. So too, if not as unambiguously, is the peacock leader of the emigrés, Peter Ivanovich. Malice enters Conrad's view of him, but at least on the political side he is done full justice. Given to strutting and self-condolence, a flunky before those he needs and petty tyrant before those he uses, Peter Ivanovich is yet

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capable of so remarkable and so Russian a thought (Russian in that it can move toward either a populist or Bolshevik sequel) as this:

> For us at this moment there yawns a chasm between the past and the future. It can never be bridged by foreign liberalism. All attempts at it are either folly or cheating. Bridged it never can be. It has to be filled up!

The writer able to imagine this speech is not so alien to the politics of the East as he would have us believe. Yet his radicals do not exert the force they might and should exert: he does not let them. Mocked and scorned, alternately infantile and sinister, fanatical but even worse, foolishly fanatical, the revolutionists are too much what the English narrator—and by proxy Conrad himself—wants them to be, too much a reassuring index of Western expectation. Conrad has failed to accept the challenge of his own book: to confront the revolutionists in their strength and not merely in their weakness, to pit Razumov against men of serious if wrong-headed commitment rather than merely against "apes of a sinister jungle," as in his preface he so fatally calls them.

Because of this failure, a whole side of the novel remains static: Razumov's line of action develops but the subsidiary motions that should be whirling about and against him do not. In the end one wonders why Razumov should wish to confess before these counterfeit revolutionaries, for if indeed they are as contemptible as he supposes he can hardly believe them the proper agents of either Haldin's heritage or revenge. In what sense can he be said to owe them a debt? and how can he, or anyone else, suppose them worthy to hear his *mea culpa*? This, I would suggest, is a critical instance of the way bias run wild can damage a political novel. By refusing to extend his radicals the necessary credit, if only to call it in, Conrad fails to establish the dramatic ground for his denouement.

At the end Conrad strives for a non-political resolution of

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his political theme. The final stress of the book is a blank hostility to politics, on one level, a westerner's rejection of the extremism he supposes unique to Russia ("senseless desperation provoked by senseless tyranny"—though neither tyranny nor desperation was really senseless), and on a much profounder level, a passionate outcry against the hardening and narrowing of character that is enforced by political life. The diseases of dogma, the corruptions of power, the impoverishment of fanaticism—these, for Conrad, are the very marrow of politics. Against the falseness of public life he stakes his hope in the private virtues represented by Natalie Haldin.

> I believe [she says] that the future will be merciful to all. Revolutionist and reactionary, victim and executioner, betrayer and betrayed, they shall all be pitied when the light breaks on our black sky at last. Pitied and forgotten; for without that there can be no union and no love.

These words are moving, but more so in isolation than in context; for the vision of an ultimate moral harmony—and no political novel would be tolerable without it—can gain our full assent only after the existing disharmonies have been completely explored. As Conrad himself admitted, Natalie Haldin, his figure of reconciliation, "does not move," perhaps because, like the radicals she is meant to set off, she seems the creature of Conrad's political will rather than of his free imagination. It is a difficulty which characterizes almost all of his writings devoted to the political theme, particularly *The Secret Agent.* Only in *Nostromo* is there an almost perfect fusion of politics and imagination, ideology and emotion—*Nostromo,* which is Conrad's masterpiece.

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