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The Human Ideal of Anarchy:

The Sympathy for Anarchy in Joseph Conrad's Editorial Alterations

Joseph Conrad's alterations and additions to *The Secret Agent* from its serialized publication in "Ridgway's" magazine reveal in the full novel Conrad's sympathy for the humanity of anarchy. Furthermore, the magazine does not contain the "Author's Note", which was written later, where Conrad speaks of his total immersion in, and consequent understanding of the anarchist ideal. As Comrade Ossipon says, "How am I to express myself? One must use current words" (71). Conrad was aware of this tenacity, and was forced to speak in current words acceptable to the audience of "Ridgway's". Because Conrad must avoid a too vehement support or association with the anarchist cause in the public and political context of the magazine, he omits essential character exposition, and a telling preface, until he is able to add them later under the safety of a novel.

Firstly, and briefly, it should be explained why the magazine was not an appropriate venue for Conrad to avow even a small allegiance with the radical anarchist movement. One can easily see that "Ridgway's" was politically themed to at least some extent. Its subtitle is: "A Militant Weekly for God and Country" (1.1.1). Its two aims, therefore, are moral and patriotic, representing the primary targets that anarchy seeks to disrupt and destroy. The magazine proceeds to list its contents, placing "good fiction" sixth, with "the significant happenings of the entire country" listed first (1.1.1). Even if the order of this list is inconsequential, the mere

inclusion of these two subjects together means that a reader of the magazine should be informed in both. The reader of Conrad's fiction in "Ridgway's" is politically interested, and reads the serialized fiction alongside political articles and editorials. Consequently, Conrad could not successfully, popularly, or even safely publish a fiction that promoted the amoral and anti-patriotic themes of anarchy within the context of this magazine. Contrarily, the form of novel in which *The Secret Agent* was later to appear allows more liberal thought by providing a more lenient and artistically minded audience.

We must now move to the text, to find where these additions indicate Conrad's anarchist sympathy. At several points in the novel Conrad likens the conflict between anarchist and government to a game, but the strength of these allusions is weak in the magazine. In the novel the Professor says to Comrade Ossipon:

[Chief Inspector Heat] meant nothing to me. The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality—counter moves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game—so do you propagandists. But I don't play (69)

In "Ridgway's" the Professor only says, "He meant nothing to me. He plays his little game—so do you propagandists. But I don't play." (1.4.64). In the magazine the Professor's statement lacks all the force it does in the novel, where it is clear that the law and the anarchist are both equally weak. It is not a battle of good and evil, but a competition between two forces that are essentially identical. In the magazine Conrad chooses not to make this radical leveling of good and bad, but leaves the "game" vague. Later, in the chance meeting between Chief Inspector Heat and the Professor, this dialogue occurs, which is totally missing in the magazine:

“You don’t know who you’re speaking to,” said Chief Inspector Heat, firmly. “If I were to lay my hands on you now I would be no better than yourself.”

“Ah! The game!” [Said the Professor]

“You may be sure our side will win in the end.” (94).

Once again, the opposing force of police and anarchist are equated to opponents in a game. The exclamation and isolation of the Professor’s statement, “Ah! The game!”, magnify it as a characterization of the battle. Both sides are even willing to accept the analogy of a game. At the end of the magazine publication the Professor states, “War. Let it be war then.” (1.11.47). Interestingly, this passage is missing from the latter novel. In the shift from magazine to novel, the conflict has become less of a war, which calls to mind the victory of good over evil, and replaces it with a pedantic game. As evidenced in these two passages, Conrad does not mean the anarchist to be simply evil, but depicts the anarchist and the law almost as morally equitable, or at least morally confused. Both claim superiority, but Conrad refuses to grant it to either of them objectively.

After making the police and anarchist equal combatants, Conrad raises something superior and pure above them: the perfect anarchist. In both publications he refers to the Professor as the “perfect anarchist”, but only in the novel does he venture to attach positive moral images to this epithet (304;1.11.47). Earlier the Professor was quoted in saying, “I don’t play” (94; 1.4.64). Conrad demeans the other weak anarchists as he demeans the police by involving them in a silly game, but uses the Professor as an image of perfection, isolated from the foolishness of the play, to judge the true ideal of anarchy. Except for the last sentence, this passage appears only in the later novel:

In the [Professor], individualist by temperament, once the science of colleges had replaced thoroughly the faith of conventicles, this moral attitude translated itself into a frenzied Puritanism of ambition. He nursed it as something secularly holy. To see it thwarted opened his eyes to the true nature of the world, whose morality was artificial, corrupt, and blasphemous. The Professor's indignation found in itself a final cause that absolved him from the sin of turning to destruction as the agent of his ambition.... He was a moral agent—that was settled in his mind. (80-1; 1.5.23)

Firstly, it this addition of character description indicates an attempt by Conrad to give a sympathetic background for the otherwise loony Professor. In the magazine, the flat descriptionless character of the Professor does little or nothing to facilitate an understanding of his emotive depth. Furthermore, Conrad attributes only to the Professor this purity of moral motive which absolves him from the sin of destruction. He elevates the Professor above Heat's "unphilosophical temperament" and the anarchists' idle jabber (Conrad 91). He cleanses the Professor of the accusation that his anarchy is merely hate or insanity, and shows that his conscience is so strongly motivated and rectified; he cannot be wholly delusional. The Professor is not fuelled emotionally, at least primarily, but by a "final cause" that makes his indignation justified. One may argue that the Professor's morality is merely a subjective opinion of himself, being only settled "in his mind", and not heavily weighing on his objective character or Conrad's opinion of him. To rebut this argument, it may first be noted that in the novel Conrad proceeds to liken the Professor to "all men whose ambition aims at a direct grasp upon humanity—to artists, politicians, thinkers, reformers, or saints." (82). This conscious addition to

the magazine assimilates the perfect anarchist with the moral and even holy leaders of humanity. There is a paradoxical humanity to his violence; just as he is “secularly holy”, his seemingly anti-human anarchism is strangely human (81). The Professor’s morality is not his wild illusion. His moral conscience, which does exist, is validated not only in contrast to the weak anarchists and policemen, but more importantly by the pure ideology of his motives.

In the expanded novel Conrad eliminates a good versus evil distinction and raises in its place the perfect anarchy of the professor. In the novel though, and not in the magazine, Conrad goes so far as to unite the Professor’s anarchy with that of natural humanity. Conrad states, “the most ardent of revolutionaries are perhaps doing no more but seeking for peace in common with the rest of mankind—the peace of soothed vanity, of satisfied appetites, or perhaps of appeased conscience” (81). Here the Professor is no longer motivated by any disturbed ambition or indignation, but by a regular human emotion. He is simply seeking to satisfy his ordinary thirst for perfection that he sees so terribly vacant in the world’s morality. His anarchy is not one of evil, but driven by and towards a common human goal: a certain satisfying peace.

In the transition between magazine and novel Conrad seems to have expressed much more fully his sympathy with anarchy. In the “Author’s Note” he states, “The world generally is not interested in the motives of any overt act but in its consequences” (viii). Unlike the world, Conrad is interested in the ideal motives which drive a revolutionary anarchist, and it is the greatness of this fanaticism that delights him. In fact, “there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist” (xiv). His immersion into the character of anarchy indicates well his friendliness with it, and his respect for its cogs. This is not to say

that Conrad is an anarchist, rather, he is league with the height and humanity of its ideal. This sympathy is expressed in his characterization of the anarchist as human in motivation and ideal.

Works Cited

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