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> Man...is born as the beasts are born, a greedy egotism, a clutching desire, a thing of lusts and fears. He can regard nothing except in relation to himself.
>
> H. G. Wells, *The Undying Fire*

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One of the major themes in Joseph Conrad's novels seems to me to be selfishness or egoism. He depicts selfish people repeatedly——people who are living in a world of self-preoccupation and more or less personal values. Even *Nostromo*, which is very often called a great political novel, is no exception. The novel certainly deals with politics and colonialism or imperialism, but the author's main interest was, I believe, not so much in political upheaval or inhuman power of silver or capital as in the psychology or, more exactly, the motives of the people involved——people who, in the final analysis, turned out to be actuated by selfish motives whether living for allegedly spiritual values or simply material interests. Thus, *Nostromo* may be regarded as the study of various forms of egoism, a story which reflects Conrad's sceptical conception of human existence.

After *Lord Jim* (1900), which, incidentally, is a story of a young man who could not release himself from 'a sort of sublimated, idealized selfishness,'[1] and *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad turned to the life of a great city, which, according to Ford Madox Ford, Conrad thought novels should usually concern themselves with instead of the sea which to his great chagrin he found himself forced forever to write about.[2] He

1) *Lord Jim*, p. 177.
2. Introduction to *The Sisters*, p. 14 (U.Mursia & Co. 1968).

completed the novel about the city life of London in September, 1906 and gave it the title of *The Secret Agent*. The 'simple tale,' as the author called it, seems on the surface quite different from the majority of his works, notably with the setting of city life, its characters——revolutionaries, police officials and so on——and above all, with its 'ironic treatment.' Despite those differences, however, *The Secret Agent* is fundamentally of a piece with his other novels such as, for instance, *Nostromo* in that it is 'a manifestation of human nature in its discontent and imbecility'[3] which reflects the author's pessimistic view of human existence.

This novel was suggested by the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory which was made in January, 1894. But what actually induced Conrad to take up his pen was not the 'anarchist outrage' itself, but two informations concerning the incident given by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists[4]: 'one that the perpetrator was a half-witted youth, the other that his sister committed suicide some time afterwards.'[5] What Conrad intended to do, then, in writing the novel was primarily to give a plausible explanation as to why the half-witted youth was involved in the Greenwich Park explosion and why his sister committed suicide afterwards. That is perhaps why he said in a letter to Ambrose J. Barker, dated 1 September, 1923, that the novel was, in intention, the history of Winnie Verloc.

Whatever his intention might have been, he had to treat 'anarchists' in some way or other in the course of telling the story and the necessity inevitably made him reveal his attitude towards them. And what was his attitude? In the Author's Preface Conrad recalled and put down what he had said to his friend in the above-mentioned conversation about anarchist activities:

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3) Letter to John Galsworthy, dated 12 September, 1906.

4) Author's Preface to *The Secret Agent* (Dent's Collected Edition), ix.

5) Those were the words Conrad wrote in the copy of the novel which he gave to his friend Richard Curle. See Borys Conrad, *My Father: Joseph Conrad*, p. 47.

> I remember, however, remarking on the criminal futility of the whole thing, doctrine, action, mentality; and on the contemptible aspect of the half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so tragically eager for self-destruction. That was what made for me its philosophical pretences so unpardonable.

Now it is clear that the treatment of the anarchists in the novel is based on such a very critical attitude as is accurately described by these words. In fact, the treatment is so harsh and ruthless that one might almost think the author was satirizing the revolutionary world in spite of his repeated denial in his letters.[6] If it is true, however, that he is attacking the revolutionaries, it is also true that he is critical of other characters in the book as well, though perhaps to a lesser degree. And if the revolutionaries are more harshly treated, it is only because they are all the more unpardonable for their professed ideal or mission which they are far from living up to, but which, nevertheless, seems to them to justify their being so selfish as to 'exploit the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind.'[7]

Conrad does not subscribe to any character in the novel just as he does not to anyone in *Nostromo*. He says in his letter to Ambrose J. Barker (which I once referred to):

> My object, apart from the aim of telling a story, was to hold up the worthlessness of certain individuals and the baseness of some others.

If this remark gives the impression that he is discriminating between the characters, it is certainly misleading, for his irony is applied to the whole characters including Winnie, Stevie, their mother, police

6) Letters to R. B. Cunninghame Graham (7 October, 1907), John Galsworthy (8 June, 1921), Ambrose J. Barker (1 September, 1923), etc.

7) Cf. "I suppose you know that the world is selfish, I mean the majority of the people in it, often unconsciously I must admit, and especially people with a mission, with a fixed idea, with some fantastic object in view, or even with only some fantastic illusion." *The Arrow of Gold*, II, 1.

officers, the Embassy officials, statesmen, the Lady and even such minor characters as the charwoman and the cabman, not to mention the revolutionaries. Indeed, his mistrust is extended to the human affairs in general:

> The way of even the most justifiable revolutions is prepared by personal impulses disguised into creeds ... in their own way 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.[8]

The author seems to imply that we are all acting more or less by personal impulses and for personal interests even when we profess to be otherwise. What a certain chief was found out to be guilty of is, Conrad seems to assert, by no means his peculiar sin or weakness, but one shared by all the characters and, for that matter, by mankind in general.

> His memory evoked a certain old fat and wealthy native chief in the distant colony whom it was a tradition for the successive Colonial Governors to trust and make much of as a firm friend and supporter of the order and legality established by white men: whereas, when examined sceptically, he was found to be principally ***his own good friend, and nobody else's.*** Not precisely a traitor, but still a man of many dangerous reservations in his fidelity, caused by a due regard for his own advantage, comfort, and safety.[9]

There can be no doubt that this accusation applies to almost every one of the characters in the novel and that they are all made out to be more or less their own good friend. Those who are most severely criticized and denounced are of course the revolutionaries. They are 'a lazy lot,'[10] who 'talk, print, plot, and do nothing.'[11] They are

8) ***The Secret Agent***, p. 81 (my italics).
9) ibid., p. 118 (my italics)
10) ibid., p. 52.
11) ibid., p. 73.

'men who live on the vices, the follies, or the baser fears of mankind.'[12] They are, in fact, parasites on poor, credulous people: Karl Yundt, who is 'nursed by a blear-eyed old woman, a woman he had years ago enticed away from a friend, and afterwards had tried more than once to shake off into the gutter'[13]; Michaelis, who under the protection of a wealthy old lady is engaged in writing an autobiography urged on by 'the zeal of his guileless vanity first awakened by the offer of five hundred pounds from a publisher'[14]; Ossipon, who 'was sure to want for nothing as long as there were silly girls with savings-bank books in the world.'[15] And it is Ossipon who later cheats Winnie of her money and drives her to suicide.

They are not, however, the only calpable ones. If they are traitors to their professed cause. the police officers themselves are described as traitors to their job: Chief Inspector Heat, who knows the Professor is connected with the Greenwich explosion, and yet for his own safety does not want to 'meddle with his desperate ferocity'[16] and tries to arrest Michaelis instead, because he thinks it will bring 'a personal triumph'[17] to him besides being much easier and less dangerous; the Assistant Commissioner, who disapproves of the arrest of Michaelis just because he fears that the lady patroness of the ticket-of-leave apostle, who happens to be his wife's patroness as well, 'will never forgive me,'[18] for 'the instinct of self-preservation was strong within him.'[19] Even Winnie is selfish: she 'is obsessed with Stevie's welfare to the exclusion of everything else and married Verloc only because he was willing to take over Stevie along with the furniture.'[20]

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12) ibid., p. 13.
13) ibid., p. 52.
14) ibid., p. 120.
15) ibid., p. 53.
16) ibid., p. 122.
17) ibid., p. 122.
18) ibid., p. 112.
19) ibid., p. 113.
20) Jocelyn Baines, *Joseph Conrad*, p. 333.

It is significant that only Stevie, a half-witted youth, is free from such self-preoccupation or 'personal impulses' and capable of feeling genuine sympathy and tenderness to the pain and misery of both people and animals. It is interesting to note in this connection that Mrs. Neale, the charwoman, trades on the credulity and compassion of Stevie in order to get what little money he has, which she spends on 'ardent spirits in a mean and musty public-house.'[21]

It is no wonder, then, that there should exist no real communication or understanding between those people who are thus confined in their respective cell of 'self.' In fact, human isolation, which is another recurrent theme of Conrad's, is also emphasized in this book, especially with regard to the relation between the Verlocs. Quite symbolically they are more than once described as feeling lonely in each other's presence in their bedroom. Mr. Verloc, who 'loved his wife as a wife should be loved——that is, maritally, with the regard one has for one's chief possession,'[22] now 'menaced in what is dearest to him——his repose and his security——,'[23] wants to, but finds it difficult to confide his secret and anguish of heart to his wife, who in her turn married him for convenience' sake and is too much preoccupied with her brother's welfare to notice the suffering of her husband.

> he beheld his wife re-enter the room and get into bed in a calm, businesslike manner which made him feel hopelessly lonely in the world.[24]

Again in Chapter Ⅷ:

> Under her husband's expressionless stare, and remembering her mother's empty room across the landing, she felt an acute pang of loneliness.[25]

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21) op. cit., p. 185.
22) ibid., p. 179.
23) ibid., p. 52.
24) ibid., p. 57.
25) ibid., p. 178.

> Mr. Verloc went on divesting himself of his clothing with the unnoticing inward concentration of a man undressing in the solitude of a vast and hopeless desert.[26]

It is perhaps not without reason that these two chapters (Ⅲ and Ⅷ), which represent the isolated relations of the married couple, end both of them with Winnie asking, 'Shall I put out the light?' and Verloc's somewhat irritated and despaired reply: 'Put it out.'

Probably the most scathing description of the lack of understanding between Mr. and Mrs. Verloc can be found in Chapter Ⅺ, where Verloc is described as unpardonably obtuse to the nature or extent of his wife's grief at her brother's death, which was to her 'a shock of which, in the physical order, the most violent earthquake of history could only be a faint and languid rendering.'[27] Therefore, the irony is most pungent when he remonstrates with her: 'Do be reasonable, Winnie. What would it have been if you had lost me?'[28]

Thus irony is consistent throughout the book, for, Conrad explains in the Author's Preface, 'ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity.' In other words, the consistent irony is 'the literary robe of indignant scorn' which clothes 'a grisly skeleton,'[29] or 'a merely horrible and sordid tale.'[30] Whether it comes from artistic purpose or otherwise, the comic tone he applies to the whole book, which, incidentally, is very much like that of Well's *Love and Mr. Lewisham*,[31] would not certainly be incongruous with his attitude towards the affairs of this world and the following facetious or almost synical tone could hardly be ascribed to 'the purely artistic purpose'[32] alone:——

26) ibid., p. 179.
27) ibid., p. 255.
28) ibid., p. 234.
29) Author's Preface, xv.
30) Letter to J. B. Pinker of 11 November, 1919.
31) *The Secret Agent* is dedicated to 'H. G. Wells The chronicler of Mr. Lewisham's love.'
32) Author's Preface, xiii.

> This joyousness and dispersion of thought before a task of some importance seems to prove that ***this world of ours is not such a very serious affair after all.***[33]

> The phenomena of this world of vain effort and illusory appearances.[43]

> And the lofty pretensions of a mankind oppressed by the miserable indignities of the weather appeared as a colossal and hopeless vanity deserving of scorn, wonder, and compassion.[35]

Now, I am not suggesting that Conrad's outlook on life was wholly negative. He was sceptical, yes, but I suspect there was something in him which would not allow him to take a totally negative attitude towards life. That 'something' may have been 'the romantic feeling of reality' which he said he had as 'an inborn faculty.'[36] Be it what it may, it is possible that he had some element of optimism or tendency towards life-affirmation within him which kept his works, especially his later ones, from being hopelessly bitter and pessimistic. It may be that Conrad was temperamentally optimistic but that his unhappy experiences in life, particularly in his childhood, and his penetrating intelligence mistrustfully observing human affairs would not allow him to look on the bright side of life. It should be noted in this connection that Heyst in *Victory* suffers from the painful recognition of such a discrepancy between his intelligence and his feelings.[37] Unless we assume such a conflict existing in Conrad, it would be difficult to explain the change in his later novels which recent critics disapprove as showing his weakness and decline in workmanship.

At any rate, Conrad's main concern in his works seems to be with the self-preoccupation of man or release from that bondage.

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33) op. cit., p. 150 (my italics).
34) ibid., p. 154.
35) ibid., p. 100.
36) Author's Note to *Within the Tides*, v.
37) 'Nothing is more painful than the shock of sharp contradictions that lacerate our intelligence and our feelings.'——*Victory*, pp.66–7.