
Joseph Conrad's Moral Imagination

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Joseph Conrad: His Moral Vision, by George A. Panichas. Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005. 165 pp. \$35 cloth.

This study of Joseph Conrad is welcome both for its perceptive readings of Conrad's great novels and for its demonstration of the quality and depth of insights possible when the humanistic tradition in criticism is not merely continued but renewed by a critic with the literary sensitivity and moral seriousness of George Panichas. He vindicates what he calls "the old humanist tools of criticism" in employing his critical skills for the sake of "clarity and enlargement of understanding." Believing, with earlier exemplars of the humanistic tradition like Matthew Arnold, Irving Babbitt and Lionel Trilling, that "literary interpretation is at its maximum free of dogma," Panichas does not make use of Conrad to promote his own philosophy or political agenda. Panichas hopes that his analysis of Conrad's fiction will "reclaim and reactivate the moral essences of art, exclusive of a philosophy of morality," a necessary qualification, given his insistence that Conrad's "imaginative art cannot simply or finally be reduced to morality." The project of *Joseph Conrad: His Moral Vision* thus depends on both a recognition of the power of "the moral imagination" as revealed in great works of art and a concomitant recognition that the authority of the literary critic derives from the ability to provide "forms of encouragement that light the reader's way through the

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text" (xvi)—not from any theory, no matter how all-encompassing its claims. These twin recognitions provide perhaps the only convincing answer to the questions about literary criticism raised by Plato in his brief but searching early dialogue, the *Ion*.

In *Ion*, perhaps the earliest study of literary criticism in Western culture, Socrates politely exposes the hollowness of the rhapsode Ion's claim to encyclopedic knowledge on the grounds that his understanding of Homer assures him knowledge of everything Homer writes about. Socrates asks Ion if this means he can explain passages about medicine better than a doctor, about prophecy better than a priest, about fishing better than a fisherman, or about charioteering better than a chariot driver. Ion must admit that, in all the cases Socrates cites, the specialist who knows a particular art would be more knowledgeable than himself, the literary critic who supposedly knows everything that Homer knows. Socrates even slyly suggests that Homer himself must have been less than a universal genius, since no city asked him to lead its people or command its armies. Even the greatest works of literature have, it seems, no special knowledge to provide, despite the great enthusiasm they arouse when a rhetor like Ion recites them to an audience.

The most influential contemporary theorists insist that they have nothing in common with Plato, who, as the fount of essentialism, logocentrism and ontotheology, embodies all the most dangerous and pervasive sins of Western culture. Yet their view of literary criticism has much in common with the views Socrates suggests—but does not definitively affirm—in the *Ion*. Most schools of literary criticism today rest their authority not on the depth or breadth of the critic's knowledge of literature but on the claims of a discipline, theory or political outlook whose standing is derived from sources other than its ability to encourage sensitive readings of literary works. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* includes in its list of "Modern and Contemporary Schools and Movements" critical approaches whose names indicate their basis in an overarching (though perhaps discredited) theory, such as "Marxism," "Psychoanalysis," "New Historicism," and others whose name indicates an embattled cultural or political stance, such as "Feminist Theory and Criticism," "Gay and Lesbian Criticism and Queer Theory," and "Postcolonial Theory and Criticism." George Panichas, on the other hand, advocates no agenda

of his own, but instead, with the modesty of a true humanistic scholar, dedicates himself to explicating Conrad's vision through seeking "to explain the meaning of text and texture, and in turn to quicken the artist's language and meaning, by variously re-creating the artist's vision to its ultimate point of application." There are chapters on seven of Conrad's novels in this short book; the interpretations of *The Secret Agent*, *Under Western Eyes* and *Nostramo* epitomize Panichas's approach.

Professor Panichas refuses to score political points in his close readings of Conrad's novels even when doing so would not be untrue to Conrad's text. Noting accurately that the anarchists of *The Secret Agent* "personify moral corruption and negation," he leaves it to the reader to draw any parallels between the would-be terrorists of the novel and the actual terrorists of today. Panichas instead emphasizes the novel's depiction of the moral blindness shared by partisans of political views across the spectrum, observing that "both the revolutionists and the legal and political authorities respect no central value or discipline." The relations between Sir Ethelred and the Assistant Commissioner of Police, like those between Secret Agent Adolf Verloc and his wife Winnie depend on a refusal to understand, a willed ignorance. In turn, Panichas points to the ways in which the novel demonstrates with unmistakable clarity "the effects of moral blindness." Adolf Verloc's murder dramatizes the hollowness of the "grand illusions" about his own loyalty "to his employers, to the cause of social stability, and to his affection" with which he has flattered himself for years. But if *The Secret Agent* reveals the folly that lies behind both the anarchists' claims to moral superiority to the ordinary, law-abiding citizen and an authoritarian government's contempt for the freedom of speech available in bourgeois England, the novel's greatness is diminished when it is used to promote a political program or even to teach a specific moral lesson. Panichas is surely right when he asserts that "in *The Secret Agent* Conrad is neither preacher nor propagandist," and Panichas himself likewise resists the temptation to exchange the task of the humanistic literary critic for either the former or the latter.

Under Western Eyes deals with political revolutionaries, but Panichas suggests that Conrad's intention is not to study political ideas for their own sake but "to use ideas that the novel poses as a journey of moral discovery." Panichas does not claim that

The humanistic critic explicates the literary text without scoring political points.

*Moral
problems
cannot be
solved by
mere politics.*

Conrad ignores the political dimension, only that Conrad refuses to offer any merely political solution to the moral problems raised by his narrative. He quotes Conrad's prophetic criticism in the preface to the novel of both the rule of the Russian Czar and the revolutionaries whose success replaced a tyranny with one incalculably worse:

The ferocity and imbecility of an autocratic rule rejecting all legality and in fact basing itself upon complete moral anarchism provokes the no less imbecile and atrocious answer of a purely Utopian revolutionism encompassing destruction by the first means to hand, in the strange conviction that a fundamental change of hearts must follow the downfall of any given human institution.

The novel, however, is not so much about "Conrad's view of autocracy and revolution" as an "examination of the theme of betrayal." The revolutionaries, who find refuge in Geneva, but who make use of its liberties only to scheme for an upheaval in which all liberty will be lost, clearly lack political wisdom and prudence. The main character of the novel, Razumov, is nevertheless driven to confess to them that he betrayed one of their heroes, Victor Haldin, when Haldin unexpectedly asked him for help in escaping the police after an assassination. Conrad demonstrates—as Panichas, drawing upon Irving Babbitt's concept of the "law of measure," makes clear—that the political and moral folly of the revolutionaries does not free Razumov from the demands of his own conscience:

Under Western Eyes portrays the process of moral discovery in the face of confusion, scoundrelism, anarchism. Razumov himself is finally able to distinguish the law of measure as it governs, or should govern, both human existence and individual character and fate. His confessions give us the measure of his character; they reveal a growing inner perception in sight of moral discovery.

Just as Panichas rejects any attempt to limit the significance of *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* to their political implications, even though he is generally in sympathy with Conrad's political thought, he likewise insists that "*Nostromo* is far more than just a novel of politics." A novel about the ways the running of a mine financed by an American investor changes, mostly for the worse, the small Latin American country where it is located seems an ideal text for the left ideologues who sponsor postcolonial ("poco") studies. Panichas, however, suggests that, although

Nostromo leaves one with no illusions about the beneficence of imperialism, the disillusionment experienced by the attentive reader is much broader and much more fundamental than the undercutting of any merely political ideology could accomplish. In *Nostromo* Conrad's goal is, as Panichas puts it, "to disabuse us of our beliefs in man's natural goodness or in any romanticist, sentimental, or utopian notion of human existence." The decline of *Nostromo* himself after he hides the cache of silver ingots from the mine is emblematic of the fate of all those who believe that the material progress promised by the mine will surely lead to a better world: "He is a broken, fallen figure whose great inner resources are rotting away as the silver progressively makes him its slave."

In the *Ion* Socrates wonders what discipline or *techne* writers are supposed to have mastered so that their writings can provide knowledge to others. He concludes that there is no special discipline that writers know or that literary critics can come to understand. Literature, it seems, does not provide knowledge at all; perhaps writers are inspired, and literary critics merely catch that inspiration and, if they are successful, pass it on to others. The most influential contemporary theorists likewise reject the humanistic tradition's claim that literature provides any sort of truth or insight; literary works are just one sort of text among others, and not a particularly distinctive or interesting variety at that. George Panichas would certainly agree that the novels of Joseph Conrad cannot be reduced to "moral or philosophical objectification or methodology," but he believes they offer something more important: a "moral vision" that is not the result of abstract thought or logical argument but instead an expression of the moral imagination.

Conrad offers a moral vision resulting not from abstract thought but from moral imagination.

This study of Joseph Conrad demonstrates again the fruitfulness of the conception of the "moral imagination" employed by such culturally conservative thinkers—"conservators," to use George Panichas's term—as Edmund Burke, Irving Babbitt, Lionel Trilling, and Russell Kirk, to whom the book is dedicated. The politics of these "conservators" was not uniformly conservative—Burke himself was a Whig, not a Tory, and Trilling was a political liberal—but their shared conception of the moral imagination is deeply conservative. In the *Ion* the poet's inspiration, even if it is thought to come from the gods, is scarcely distinguishable from

madness; it is surely an irrational enthusiasm that serves no clear purpose beyond arousing strong emotion. Romantic poets like Shelley were nevertheless happy to use Plato's authority to validate their claims to mystical insights liberating them from the prohibitions of conventional morality. The "moral imagination" of the conservators, however, is neither irrational nor mystical, nor does it overturn traditional moral standards with sweeping revelations offering unprecedented freedoms. True to his critical exemplars, George Panichas makes no claim that Conrad's novels provide us with a novel system of morality (which would only become outdated in its turn), but he does persuasively demonstrate that the great novels he discusses succeed in the much more important task of dramatizing and clarifying the moral standards affirmed by both common decency and high religion.